

OnEast

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A Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

We are delighted to welcome you to the newest volume of *OnEast, Journal of East Asian Studies*. This issue marks a particularly momentous occasion in our history: our first publication since the disruption of COVID-19.

Since our founding in 2009, our mission has always been to support undergraduate students in meaningfully engaging with the histories, societies, cultures, politics, languages, and ideas that shape our understanding of East Asia. The journal has served as both a venue for student scholarship and a collaborative project sustained by generations of authors, editors, faculty, and readers. In this way, reviving the journal after several years of inactivity represents both a return to this tradition and an opportunity to renew it.

From academic monographs to original poetry, our journal, encompassing a wide breadth of topics, highlights the interdisciplinary nature of East Asian Studies, with submissions in History, Linguistics, Literary Criticism, Film Studies, and many more. We were also especially surprised (and equally pleased) to receive submissions from eleven universities across three continents. This geographic and disciplinary breadth has allowed this issue to extend well beyond the University of Toronto.

When at first we decided to revive *OnEast*, the task before us was daunting, but we were fortunate to be blessed with a stellar editorial team to work alongside. Like a ship navigating uncharted waters, our process has had its fair share of smooth sailing and rocky stretches (intermittent with the occasional bottle of rum).

Of course, this journal would not have been possible without our authors, with whom, having taken the time to submit and share their ideas, we collaborated and discussed to polish these gems of scholarship, and we hope that the authors, who slogged the windy road alongside us, found the

journey as fruitful and as thrilling as we did. As a mountaineer would brave a peak, enduring the trials and tribulations of the ascent, to gaze upon the scenery of the vales below, so too can we, having seen this issue through to publication, take pride in our efforts.

Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to Professors Yiching Wu, Thomas Keirstead, and Atsuko Sakaki, as well as our PhD advisors, Qidi Lin, Sam Minden, and Eilis Price-Peyroux. All would truly have been lost without your advice and continued support.

On that note, we humbly present the first issue of *OnEast* Volume IX!

Lead Editorial Team

Sayaka Kusanagi

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Shari'a in Song: Jurisdiction, Legal Pluralism, and the *Fanfang* in Song China

Micah Cao

Abstract

The Song period of Chinese history saw a period of unprecedented commercial success and economic growth. In the south, the ports of Guangzhou and Quanzhou became large trade hubs that hosted various foreign merchants, some even from as far as Persia and Arabia. Many of these merchants who were Muslim stayed in ports like Guangzhou, forming a considerable Muslim community in the outskirts of the city. They even had a Chinese-appointed leader to practice Shari'a within the community. For this project, I am curious about the extent, limitations, applications of Shari'a as it was practiced under Chinese authorization, and how the Muslim community in Guangzhou may exemplify pre-modern legal encounters between Shari'a and Song Chinese law. In Western historiography, works like Routledge Handbook of Islamic Law and The History of Chinese Legal Civilization provide basic understandings of these histories. Chinese historians have worked on cases of Persian merchants in Guangzhou and the management of their inheritances according to Shari'a law. On both sides of academia, the existing scholarships are limited in addressing crucial aspects of these communities. Western Islamic legal studies do not often address Chinese sources that detail Muslim practices of law, and Chinese sources rarely apply legal historiographic approaches towards analyzing the existence of these Muslim communities and their implications. Utilizing both Song-era sources like the Song Xingtong and 9th-century Arabic sources like Accounts of China and India, this research yielded fascinating conclusions regarding how the Song period realized a legal environment in which jurisdiction followed people's own legal traditions, not the laws of the state. This research presents a premodern legal encounter that features a bureaucratic incorporation of one legal tradition by another. Hopefully, this

analysis can contribute to research into Chinese and Islamic legal histories in and across their respective fields.

Micah Cao is a fourth-year student at the University of Toronto, working towards a Specialist in History and a Major in Linguistics. His research interests are middle-period Chinese and Asian histories, especially on the borderlands where various peoples, practices, and languages coexist. He would want to further pursue historical research in graduate school in the forms of a Master's and/or a PhD. In his free time, he enjoys watching TV, going to Blue Jays baseball games, and playing grand strategy video games.

Muslim merchants have long been present in and acknowledged by their contemporary Chinese polities as well as current-day studies of Chinese-Arab commercial history,¹ but the legal dimensions of their settlement, especially that of the Tang and Song periods of Chinese history, have received relatively little attention nor sustained analysis. The Muslim merchants' place of settlement, the *fanfang* 蕃坊, has either been examined through a commercial lens or as an introductory segue for studies on later eras of Muslim presence in China, despite hosting a myriad of jurisdictional complexities and legal significance. As an institutional space in which non-Chinese legal traditions like *Shari'a* were recognized and regulated by the Chinese state, the *fanfang* deserves a closer, legalistic examination, especially for its understudied presence in the medieval periods of Chinese and Islamic history. Building on prescriptive legal codes, descriptive Chinese records, and contemporary Arabic travel accounts, this paper proposes to analyze the legal boundaries of the *fanfang* and the practice of *Shari'a* with respect to nationality, inheritance, and criminal punishment. Furthermore, this paper proposes a pragmatic approach adopted by the Song state that heavily regulated a balanced form of legal pluralism in which jurisdiction followed people rather than territory alone.

Firstly, it is necessary to discuss the background of the Chinese polities within the scope of this research. The Tang 唐 (618-907 CE) and the Song 宋 (960-1279 CE) periods saw a relatively extended time of peace and stable rule over a unified China and increased interactions with distant nations and peoples. Borne out of this increased connectedness across lands was a rise in commercialization and a flourishing of trade, especially during the Song period.² It is important to point out that although the Song period

¹ Matthew S. Eric, *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107282063>; Lu Yu 陸芸, "The Inhabitation of Foreign Muslim Merchants in Guangzhou in the Tang–Song Period (唐宋时期留居广州的外国穆斯林商人)," *Wanfang Data Knowledge Service Platform*, January 1, 2014, <https://d.wanfangdata.com.cn/Periodical/xbmzxyxb-zxshkxbw201404009>; Cai Hongsheng 蔡鴻生, "The Records of Song-Period Guangzhou Foreign Leader Xinyatuoluo (宋代廣州蕃長辛押陀羅事蹟)," *Aomen Ligong Xuebao* 澳門理工學報, no. 4 (2011).

² Jinfan Zhang, "The Legal Civilization of Northern and Southern Song Dynasties Fostered by Commercial Economy," in *The History of Chinese Legal Civilization: Ancient China—From*

can be divided into Northern (960-1127 CE) and Southern (1127-1279 CE) Song due to the Jurchen-ruled Jin Empire's invasion and conquering of northern territories in 1127, the warfare had little impact on the flourishing maritime trade. As the paper will utilize sources from both the Northern and Southern Song periods, it is important to recognize the relative continuity in the south during both of these periods.

Amid the many merchants who traded in the southern ports of China during the Song period were a significant number of Muslim merchants from the Islamic world who frequently moved between present-day Middle East and southern China via the Indian Ocean.³ Some of these merchants became more permanent inhabitants in Chinese port cities like Guangzhou and Quanzhou, with some even forming families with local Chinese people and gaining positions within the state bureaucracy. Though some scholars point to it as a racist and segregationist policy,⁴ and some others suggest that it was an act of state promotion to make trading with China more appealing,⁵ the “foreigner district” (*fanfang*) was established in port cities as a space where foreigners, including many Muslims, were allowed to practice their religions and, to a more limited extent, legal traditions amidst their own people.⁶

Many scholars, from both Chinese and non-Chinese academic backgrounds, have mentioned the existence of these *fanfang* as they discussed Chinese commercial or legal history. However, recent Chinese scholarship typically focus on the *fanfang*'s implications towards suggesting China's prosperous history and the Song's rapid commercialization, often describing in passing the practice of *Shari'a* within these communities.⁷ On the contrary, scholarship that is not based in China or Chinese academia do

About 21st Century B.C. to 1840 A.D., ed. Jinfan Zhang (Springer, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-1029-3_8.

³ Erie, *China and Islam*, 46.

⁴ Erie, *China and Islam*, 47.

⁵ Lu, “Foreign Muslim Merchants in Guangzhou,” 56.

⁶ Zhang, “The Legal Civilization of Northern and Southern Song Dynasties Fostered by Commercial Economy,” 757.

⁷ Lu, “Foreign Muslim Merchants in Guangzhou,”; Hongsheng, “The Records of Song period Guangzhou Foreign Leader Xinyatuoluo.”

mention the legal significance of the *fanfang*, often pointing to them as a strong precursor of later Chinese policies towards Muslims or the practices of extraterritorial law in China during the 19th and 20th centuries.⁸ That said, the existence of *fanfang* was often treated as a transitional segue into discussing the Ming 明 (1368-1644 CE) and Qing 清 (1644-1911 CE) periods of Chinese history whose documents are much better preserved and its impacts largely relevant to the distribution of Muslims in China's northwest today.⁹ Discussions of Song law would include the *fanfang* and its practice of *Shari'a* as a sidenote in their larger discussions of Song legal history. Thus, there is a vacuum left between the Chinese scholarship that emphasizes the *fanfang*'s commercial significance and the non-Chinese scholarship's emphasis of Islam in Ming-Qing China, where the presence of *Shari'a* in the port cities and the Chinese state's perspectives towards it is largely untouched by scholarly discussions.

Since the temporal scope of this discussion dates back a millennium, it is unsurprising that there are limited historical records and legal proceedings on the *fanfang* that survive to this day. In the Chinese context, the lack of diverse records is further worsened by the documentary dominance of the "literati" class in Chinese society—men who were educated in Confucian classics and participated in state politics through the civil service exam and the centralized bureaucracy. As the wealth of China's archives and historical documents stem from their writings—often only their writings, the major Chinese-language sources cited in this paper must take that limitation into consideration.

Despite these limitations, a careful juxtaposition of prescriptive legal codes and descriptive accounts allows for a partial reconstruction of *fanfang* jurisdiction in practice. *Song Xingtong* 宋刑統 (The Penal Code of

⁸ Gang Li, "The Modernization of Islamic Education in China: The Case of the Hui Muslims," in *Bildungskulturen im Islam: Islamische Theologie lehren und lernen*, ed. Abbas Poya et al. (De Gruyter, 2021), 223.

https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110731743-009/pdf?licenseType=restricted&srsltid=AfmBOopnO57WsZ0SrH8AbDQuj_ii42PEmqskIroDMPsTKSAezjQExkUF; Erie, *China and Islam*, 46.

⁹ Erie, *China and Islam*.

Song Dynasty), compiled and published by Dou Yi and his colleagues in 963, was the first major legal document of the Song period. It descends from the Tang Code that was practiced in the Tang period before and strengthened the authority of the central administration.¹⁰ As a prescriptive code, the *Songxing tong* denoted the legal boundaries within which the *fanfang* and its leader were allowed to practice *Shari'a*, such as cases related to marriages, inheritances, and low-level criminal offenses through their own elected leader.¹¹ Sources descriptive of the *fanfang* like Zhu Yu's *Pingzhou Ketan* 萍洲可談 (Matters Worth Discussing from Pingzhou) published in 1119 and *Song Huiyao Jigao* 宋會要輯稿 (Draft to an Institutional History of the Song Dynasty) are selected to demonstrate the reality of the *fanfang*'s practice, as well as its conflicts with the Chinese state in the centuries after the *Songxing tong* was published.

There are no surviving Arabic documents of the *fanfang* in the Song period, but Arabic sources from the preceding Tang and succeeding Yuan (1271-1368 CE) periods can shed some light on the persistence of the Muslim population in the *fanfang* system of southern China. The *Accounts of China and India* is a travelogue compiled by Abu Zayd al-Sirafi in the 10th century, in which al-Sirafi provides two separate travellers' accounts of China and India. The predominant discussion of the *fanfang* can be found in the first traveller's account, featuring one "Sulayman the Merchant" who visited the port city of Guangzhou (called Khanfu by Sulayman) and wrote of the Muslim community there during the Tang period.¹² The latter of the Arabic sources come from the famous traveller Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/69), who travelled to Yuan China and the port city of Quanzhou, a commercial hub where a Muslim community thrived.¹³ Both accounts mention the existence of a Muslim leader who led prayers and settled cases between Muslims in China, confirming what the Chinese records describe. Just like

¹⁰ Zhang, "The Legal Civilization of Northern and Southern Song Dynasties Fostered by Commercial Economy," 650.

¹¹ Yi Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, Chu ban., 初版., ed. Xiao Su (Wen hai chu ban she, 1964).

¹² Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, *Accounts of China and India*, trans. Tim Mackintosh-Smith (New York University Press, 2017), 7, <https://doi.org/10.18574/9781479862054>.

¹³ H. A. R. Gibb and C. F. Beckingham, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, AD 1325-1354: Volume IV* (Routledge, 2017), 258, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315552002>.

the Chinese sources that are limited both in number and diverse authorial perspectives, the Arabic sources come from travellers only and are both recorded by scribe or compiler who did not visit the port cities themselves. Nevertheless, the Chinese and Arabic sources can be placed together to cross-examine the accounts and its details, which will formulate the basis of this paper's analysis of the *fanfang*'s jurisdiction within the Chinese legal system and its implications on premodern perspectives on nationality and extraterritoriality.

The jurisdiction of the *fanfang*, as set out by the Chinese state, largely draws its foundations from the Song code *Songxingtong*. Firstly, there is the issue of nationality. According to the *Songxingtong*, the disputes between the same type of *huawai ren* 化外人, or “people beyond the realm,” must be settled by their own traditions, while for different types of *huawai ren*, their cases must be ruled by Song code.¹⁴ In the commentary that follows, the author clarifies that *huawai ren* all come from “their own kingdoms, rulers, and legal traditions,” and if the two parties involved in the dispute follow the same law, they must be ruled by their own.¹⁵ The author further describes that if the *huawai ren* are from different polities such as the Korean kingdoms of Goryeo and Baekje, they will be ruled by the Song code.¹⁶ This designation of jurisdiction is confirmed by the account of Sulayman the Merchant, who claimed that “a Muslim man appointed by the ruler of China [settles] cases arising between the Muslims who go to that region,” and that “the Chinese king would not have it otherwise.”¹⁷ Although al-Sirafi's account does not feature descriptions of non-Muslim Chinese merchants, it includes details that are overlooked in Chinese sources. al-Sirafi points out that the Iraqi merchants “never dispute any of the judgments issued by the holder of this office” and that this man acts in accordance with the laws of Islam.¹⁸ Furthermore, this leader “would lead the Muslim in prayer, deliver the sermon, and pray for the sultan of the

¹⁴ Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, vol. 6.

¹⁵ Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, vol. 6.

¹⁶ Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, vol. 6.

¹⁷ Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, *Accounts of China and India*, 7.

¹⁸ Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, *Accounts of China and India*, 8.

Muslims.”¹⁹ Hence, It is evident that al-Sirafi’s perspective differs from the Chinese sources in how the *fanfang* is understood: the Song sees the *fanfang* and its leader as where one turns to for the larger matters in life, such as marriages, deaths, or crimes, while al-Sirafi focuses on a leader who is involved in the daily, religious practices. Together, one can piece together a more comprehensive image of what the *fanfang* or its leader looked like in the Song period.

The comparative look at Chinese and Arabic accounts shows that the *fanfang* leader occupied a dual role as both religious authority and bureaucratic official. Professor Matthew S. Erie points out in his book *China and Islam* that this Muslim leader was essentially considered a local magistrate by the Chinese bureaucratic system.²⁰ Interestingly, even Ibn Battuta, who was travelling in the later Yuan dynasty, referred to the existence of these *fanfang* and their leaders as “*qadis*,” or, a magisterial judge.²¹ This is a crucial acknowledgement in approaching the existence of *fanfang* in the port cities: the *fanfang* leader is elected by the foreign residents then recognized by the Song officials, practicing *Shari’a* as a part of the Song legal system. In the modern understanding of law and jurisdiction, the *fanfang* would have become an extraterritorial zone within China, where a foreign people are subject to their own laws and governance as opposed to local laws. This is not accurate in the case of the *fanfang*, however, since the *fanfang* is limited in both who and what crimes it has jurisdiction over.²² Examples of these limitations would include matters of inheritance, criminal punishment, and cases involving foreigners of different backgrounds.²³ This paper will examine these limitations to discuss where the jurisdictional boundaries of the *fanfang* were, and what that may suggest about the nature of the *fanfang* within Song society and its foreign policies.

¹⁹ Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, *Accounts of China and India*, 8.

²⁰ Erie, *China and Islam*, 47.

²¹ Gibb and Beckingham, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, AD 1325–1354*, 258.

²² Yu Zhu, *Pingzhou ke tan: Si ku quan shu zhen ben bie ji* 四庫全書珍本別輯 235 (Taiwan shang wu yin shu guan 臺灣商務印書館, 1975), 50.

²³ Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, 416–20.

Inheritance law offers one of the clearest illustrations of how the Song state recognized foreign legal traditions while retaining ultimate administrative oversight. *Songxing tong* points out that when a Persian or foreign merchant dies, their properties must be first examined and confirmed by the local magistrate. Afterwards, the processing of their inheritance must be carried out according to their own traditions.²⁴ Evidently, the default procedure is for the Song official to let the *fanfang* handle their own cases, but when no immediate family—including parents, siblings, and children—of the foreigner lives in China, the local magistrate may utilize the death merchant's wealth for his own burial and a tombstone with his personal information engraved.²⁵ The burial and tombstone serves purposes beyond putting the dead to rest, as the local magistrate will then dispatch officials to look for any possible family members who would inherit the properties using the engraved information for the following years.²⁶ This prescriptive line in the Song code would suggest a great extent to which the Song government allowed the foreigners to carry out their traditions, stepping in only when the default handover cannot be properly completed. Perhaps due to its peculiarity even for its time, the records of an established Muslim leader's alleged death serves as a clear example of when the default procedure came under threat, as the *fanfang*'s jurisdiction was challenged by a Chinese merchant.

The *Song Huiyao Jigao* details the death of a prominent Muslim merchant named Xinyatuoluo 辛押陁羅 who rose to political power and accumulated immense wealth in China.²⁷ His story has been extensively studied by scholars, as he played a significant role as an envoy from Arabia to China and fostered trade between the regions.²⁸ In *Song Huiyao Jigao*, a

²⁴ Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, vol. 12.

²⁵ Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, vol. 12.

²⁶ Dou et al., *Song xing tong*, vol. 12.

²⁷ Song Xu and 徐松, *Song hui yao ji gao* 宋會要輯稿 (Guo li Beiping tu shu guan, 1936). Some scholars suggest that Xinyatuoluo is a transliteration of "Sheikh Abdullah," but since that name seems to be an honorary title and likely not his real name, this paper will continue to use Xinyatuoluo to refer to this figure.

²⁸ Hongsheng, "The Records of Song period Guangzhou Foreign Leader Xinyatuoluo," 180–89; Johannes L. Kurz, "Dashi 大食 Reconsidered," *Journal of Art Historiography* 28 (June 2023): 28-JLK1, <https://doi.org/10.48352/uobxjah.00004268>.

merchant from Guangzhou, likely Chinese, travelled to the Ministry of Personnel 戶部 in Kaifeng, the northern Song capital, and sued Xinyatuoluo's adopted son upon Xinyatuoluo's alleged death overseas.²⁹ This merchant claimed that Xinyatuoluo had taken an overseas "slave child" to be his adopted son, who has inherited and manages his properties now that Xinyatuoluo has died. He claimed that this case warrants the *Hu Jue Fa* 戶絕法 (Law of Heirless Household) within the Song code, and Xinyatuoluo's properties should be confiscated by the state.³⁰ The official at the ministry quickly dismissed his lawsuit on the grounds of Xinyatuoluo's death being but a rumor, his adopted son having no biological parents, and importantly, that this case should have gone to the regional administration instead of the central one.³¹ These three grounds are all directly described within the Song code.³²

The inheritance dispute surrounding Xinyatuoluo exposes the limits of *fanfang* autonomy and the mechanisms through which the Song state enforced jurisdictional boundaries. Given the aforementioned establishment of the *fanfang* as an integrated part of the regional bureaucracy, it is clear that the official is rejecting this lawsuit towards the illegitimacy of Xinyatuoluo's adopted son managing his property as an issue that falls under a different jurisdiction. With the merchant rejected by the Ministry of Personnel on the grounds that such a complaint should be filed for a regional administration, the account ends with no clear conclusion to Xinyatuoluo's case. The author turns to commentate on how the merchant wanted to use the central authority to pressure the regional administration to confiscate Xinyatuoluo's property, but does not further explain how Xinyatuoluo's case was resolved. Nevertheless, this record is a glimpse of how the Song state regulated and maintained the distinction between different jurisdictions, including the *fanfang* under which Xinyatuoluo, his adopted son, and his inheritance would belong.

²⁹ Hongsheng, "The Records of Song period Guangzhou Foreign Leader Xinyatuoluo," 187.

³⁰ Hongsheng, "The Records of Song period Guangzhou Foreign Leader Xinyatuoluo," 187.

³¹ Hongsheng, "The Records of Song period Guangzhou Foreign Leader Xinyatuoluo," 187.

³² Hongsheng, "The Records of Song period Guangzhou Foreign Leader Xinyatuoluo," 187.

Lastly and briefly on the jurisdictional boundaries, the severity of crime is another aspect that saw boundaries drawn between the *fanfang* and the Chinese court. In *Pingzhou Ketan*, Zhu Yu attests to the upper bound of *fanfang* jurisdiction over criminal severity, beyond which point foreign districts like the *fanfang* lost its jurisdiction. He writes that when a foreigner commits a crime and it is reported to Guangzhou's magistrate, they must transfer the foreigner to the *fanfang* for sentencing as long as it does not warrant the *tu* (forced labour) rank of punishments.³³ Zhu Yu further explains why the *fanfang* would serve a better punishment by whipping the criminal's butt: "the foreigners like to sit on the ground so they suffer from butt whips, but they do not fear the back whips,"³⁴ with the back being the common body part that gets whipped in Chinese punishments.

Taken together, these jurisdictional boundaries reveal a form of legal pluralism that was pragmatic rather than ideological, and administrative rather than theological. Unlike how al-Sirafi and Ibn Battuta described China to be a happy, flourishing place for their fellow Muslim people, the reality of the Song code-*Shari'a* coexistence was filled with limitations on what a *fanfang* Muslim leader was allowed to do. In any case, many aspects of the discussed boundaries of *Shari'a* jurisdiction can still reveal aspects of a premodern legal system that acknowledged other legal traditions and nationalities to be valid and permissible under the right circumstances. Unlike how many legal systems often associate jurisdiction with land, or how *qadis* in the middle ages only held jurisdictional power when within the assigned district, the Song government saw an association of legality and jurisdiction that followed the people who subscribed to it, regardless of where they were.

The choice of subjecting other nationals that come from different legal traditions to Song ruling is equally fascinating, as the government would then play the role of a third-party mediator between legal traditions in a world absent of an international legal order. For the Chinese, neither they

³³ Zhu, *Pingzhou ke tan*.

³⁴ Zhu, *Pingzhou ke tan*.

nor their system necessarily understand Islam very well; Zhu Yu in *Pingzhou Ketan* described in detail the Halal tradition and the right way to kill animals, but he seemed to believe that The Prophet Muhammad was a monk who had taken precepts in the Buddhist tradition and was completely ignorant to an existence like the Abrahamic God.³⁵ That aspect is precisely why the Song state's approach of associating foreigners with their own legal practices is especially intriguing. Within other contexts of legal practice, it is common that the law is heavily intertwined if not inseparable from religious beliefs. Perhaps it is precisely the absence of religious backing that grants the Song and other premodern Chinese polities the limited flexibility to integrate legal pluralist approaches to benefit expatriates within its realm.

The significance of *Shari'a* being practiced within a separate legal system that does not recognize an Abrahamic God or any deity is worth noting, too. Inside the *fanfang*, the Muslim inhabitants who, led by the Muslim leader, could pray for "the sultan of the Muslims"³⁶ and demonstrate allegiance to a different sovereign from a faraway land. One might argue that this phenomenon would not be unusual since the *fanfang* may have been nothing more than a diplomatic quarter for foreign merchants. Although it is true that these merchants often represented state interests and often served also as envoys during their trips, the considerable number of marriages between Muslim merchants and Chinese men and women would suggest a much more permanent state of inhabitation in the region.³⁷ Furthermore, Al-Sirafi's exclaiming emphasis on the Iraqi merchants' obeisance towards the *fanfang* leader is demonstrative of the *fanfang*'s significance beyond a place for state-representing envoys. For Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, it seemed shocking that Iraqi merchants, who might have been of a differing sect than the *fanfang* leader, displayed total submission to the teachings and rulings of this *fanfang* leader. Although the evidence is too thin, it is therefore plausible that the *fanfang* and the practice of *Shari'a* within it point to the alternate forms that Islamic law can assume if more documents become available.

³⁵ Zhu, *Pingzhou ke tan*, 51.

³⁶ Abu Zayd al-Sirafi, *Accounts of China and India*, 7.

³⁷ Lu, "Foreign Muslim Merchants in Guangzhou," 56.

Although there are extremely limited sources, both the Chinese and Arabic accounts of the *fanfang* and the Muslim community within it showcase a complex period where different legal traditions crossed paths and turbulently coexisted. Drawing on prescriptive legal codes and descriptive accounts from both Chinese and Muslim writers, this paper presents a cross-referenced look at the *fanfang* system that operated under strict yet pragmatic Song oversight. With *Shari'a* and other legal systems carefully regulated, particularly in matters of nationality, inheritance, and criminal punishment, the Song established an intricate system of legal pluralism embedded within the Chinese bureaucracy. Although this topic would vitally benefit from a more diverse and greater quantity of records both from the Chinese and the Muslim perspectives, the currently available sources may already point to the existence, flourishing, and persistence of *fanfang* across multiple dynasties as a uniquely intersectional segment of Chinese and Islamic legal history.

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(Chinese) Canadian (Immigrant)

Mariane Ming Cousineau Rousseau

Author's Note

“(Chinese) Canadian (Immigrant)” is a poem inspired by what I learned in HIST 442, “Asian Diaspora,” taught by Professor Jeremy Tai at McGill University. Along with my independent research on the one-child policy and my own experiences, I was able to compare the experiences of Chinese immigrants with those of Chinese adoptees. This poem explores historical events, immigration waves and the similarities and dissimilarities of these stories, all leading to the core of the poem: a question that sits deep in my heart, a question about belonging.

Mariane Ming is a fourth year McGill University undergraduate student majoring in East Asian Studies. She is a Chinese Canadian transracial adoptee, as she was adopted from China by white Québécois parents because of the Chinese one-child policy. Through her writing, she aims to amplify the voices and representation of adoptees. Her poems reflect her ongoing journey of discovery of what it means to be a Chinese transracial adoptee—by learning about her birth country's culture and history, drawing parallels with people from different backgrounds but with similar experiences, and making deep dives into learning all she can about Chinese culture through anything she can put her hands on: academia, language, books, food and even historical fashion.

They arrived by boats,

mostly men,

without their families and scared,

but ready to work

on the railway,

for meagre wages.

They created their own sanctuaries,

Chinatowns,

to survive the segregation

the hate, the violence

uniting as one family

in the same area.

They had to pay both arms and legs

for the head taxes,

to one day reunite

with their families.

Two years of hard work

for one head

but still too many Chinese
for Canada's taste.

They cried, despaired,
killed themselves,

for the Chinese Exclusion Act

meant that never again
they would see their families.

Two years of hard work

for one head

in a noose.

They rejoiced and reunited,

when finally,

their families could come

not without complications

and a lot of paper sons

at once in Canada.

This story,

It is not my story.

They fled however they could

to survive the hunger

the hunger for knowledge

To escape another's hunger

the hunger for power

a leader sacrificing its people

in the name of helping

its people.

This story,

It is still not my story.

They came by plane

to a free country

for the mind and body.

A fish swims wherever

the sea reaches

a bird flies as far

as the sky goes

a human travels wherever

there is land to stand on.

This story,

It is still not my story.

Then, what is my story?

We arrived by plane,

in strangers' loving arms,

soon to become our parents.

Paper orphans¹

spread across the globe,

adopted, assimilated,

and hopefully loved,

accepted with our differences.

¹ The term “paper orphan” refers to a phenomenon that happened during the one-child policy. Paper orphans are babies who were abducted but officially documented as orphans that were abandoned by their biological family. *Daughters of the Bamboo Grove: From China to America, A True Story of Abduction, Adoption, and Separated Twins* by Barbara Demick provides a more detailed picture of how it happened.

This is my story.

A _____ Canadian _____ story
among Chinese _____ Immigrant stories.

They came in with baggage:

clothes, papers, a language, a culture, a family, a history.

We didn't come in with any baggage:

we were the baggage.

Alone. With no past to remember.

Stories as separate

as the sky is to the sea

but far in the horizon

where the sky touches the line of the ocean

the bird and the fish meet.

They were born here

from people who weren't

living in-between two worlds

both baggage

and with baggage

with the benefits and struggles of both.

This story,

It is the story of second-generation immigrants.

A story to unite ours.

Different

but connected

stories

not one

less Chinese

less Canadian

less Immigrant

but sometimes despite

my blood

my past

I still wonder

Do I belong among the Chinese Canadian Immigrant community?

The inspiration for this poem came from the question that closes it: *Do I belong among the Chinese Canadian Immigrant community?*

As a Chinese transracial adoptee, only in recent years have I thought of myself as an immigrant within the Chinese Canadian community. Even today, I am not sure if I can claim the word “immigrant,” or even “Chinese,” as labels to describe myself, since I was adopted at nine months old and raised much like a Québécois Canadian of European descent in Canada. Therefore, the broader question of belonging became more specific; one about whether my past and experiences were too different from “real” Chinese immigrants’ experiences for me to be considered as one of them. In my “Asian Diaspora” class at McGill University, we read about the experiences of a wide range of Chinese immigrants, from first-generation experiences to contemporary ones, studying lived experiences from Canada, to Cuba, to the Philippines, from the sixteenth century to today. I realized that Chinese transracial adoptees, despite our different upbringings, endure struggles similar to those of Chinese immigrants, especially those who immigrated at a very young age and members of later immigrant generations. Struggles such as receiving racist comments, feeling like we do not fully belong in either community and being disconnected from our Chinese culture can resonate as much to Chinese adoptees as Chinese immigrants.

Although this class and talking to my Chinese immigrant friends helped me see our similarities, I still do not have an answer for the question this poem asks. For Asian transracial adoptees to belong within Asian Canadian communities, we must first be acknowledged; to be acknowledged, we must first make ourselves known.

Not Exactly a Breeze: a Translation from the Komai Ki Hokku Shū

Rita Huang

Abstract

The following preface comes from an Edo-period hokku collection published in 1793. The volume was illustrated by Komai Ki 駒井琦, widely known as Genki 源琦 (1747–1797), and features single verses contributed by a variety of predominantly little-known authors. The selected poem is authored by Nyokan 如冠. To provide a comprehensive linguistic breakdown, the translations of both the preface and the selected poem are presented in a tiered format. Each entry begins with the poem transcribed to modern Japanese orthography. This is accompanied by a word-for-word rōmaji transliteration into the Latin alphabet paired with a literal English gloss, with an English translation at the end. While the preface is presented with a single interpretation, the featured poem offers three distinct interpretive translations, each of which will be explored in detail.

Rita Huang is a third-year student at the University of Toronto studying statistics and mathematics, but is also taking a minor in East Asian Studies due to her interest in languages. She speaks Japanese, Mandarin, and Shanghainese, and is picking up Korean this year. While her academic focus is classical Japanese literature, she also reads light novels whenever she can.

Preface



Figure 1. Detail from Komai Genki, *Collected Haiku Poems (Hokku shū)*, 1793, woodblock printed book, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, image 2013_876_002, <http://library.metmuseum.org/record=b2020687>.

画は句のごとく、句は絵の実。

それは心の根ざしになるといふも人々さうなるべし。

秋なき時や咲さしむ花さへ散め、根さへかれめやということ。

菊舎のしるしは集めてむ。

ga | wa | ku | no | gotoku | ku | wa | e | no | mi

sore | wa | kokoro | no | nezashi | ni naru | to iu | mo | hitobito | sou
| naru | beshi

aki | naki | toki | ya | sasashimu | hana | sae | chirame | ne | sae |
karameya | to iu | koto

kikusha | no | shirushi | wa | atsumetemu

painting | as for | poem | [possessive] | like | poem | as for |
painting | [possessive] | fruit

that | as for | heart | [possessive] | root | becomes | to say | also |
people | like so | become | would

autumn | without | time | [emphasis] | make bloom | flower | even |
will scatter | root | even | will they wither? [rhetorical] | to say |
thing

kikusha | [possessive] | writings | as for | shall gather

A painting is like a poem, and a poem is the true fruit a painting
bears.

People would agree that this becomes the very root of the heart.

If autumn did not exist, the flowers we coax to bloom might
scatter—but would their roots ever wither away?

[Knowing they will not,] I shall gather the writings of Kikusha

Commentary

The preface specifically references poem 268 from the *Kokinshū*:

うゑしうゑば

秋なき時やさかざらむ

花こそちらめ

ねさへかれめや

If it be well set,

it will bloom as surely

as autumn arrives,

and though the petals may fall

the roots will never wither.¹

¹ Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *Kokin Wakashū: The First Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry: With "Tosa Nikki" and "Shinsen Waka"* (Stanford University Press, 1985), 67.

This poem by Ariwara no Narihira was attached to a chrysanthemum meant to be planted in someone's garden, as mentioned by the translator, McCullough. The question about autumn—"If autumn did not exist, would even the flowers we coax to bloom scatter, and would even their roots wither away?"—is a deliberate invocation of classical seasonal imagery. Chrysanthemums, kiku 菊, tend to bloom in late autumn, and are flowers celebrated for their noble fragrance and their resilience against the biting winter frost. By meditating on the existence of autumn, the withering of its flowers, and the resilience of its roots, the passage establishes a poetic setting that prepares the reader for the arrival of Kikusha 菊舎 (lit. Chrysanthemum house).

The aforementioned "Kikusha" likely refers to the renowned poet, Tagami Kikusha 田上 菊舎. Tagami Kikusha changed the writing of her name from kikusha 菊車 to kikusha 菊舎 in 1783,² and this would line up with the timing of the publication of this collection of hokku in 1793. Kikusha was known for being a traveller for most of her life, at a time when travelling solo as a woman was incredibly risky, and "writings" shirushi しるし can also be translated as "traces." In this sense, "gather[ing] the traces/writings" of Kikusha would reference not only the compilation of her literary works, but also the physical footprints and legacy of her solitary journeys across Japan. Like the autumn chrysanthemum, the wandering artist herself must eventually scatter, but the "traces" Kikusha leaves behind are the flower's unwithering roots. In gathering these traces, the author preserves her enduring "root of the heart," ensuring it continues to bear fruit long after her travels have ended.

Another important thing to consider is the connection between travel and haikai, as elaborated on by Cheryl Crowley's in *Traversing a World of Moonlight and Blossoms: Tagami Kikusha's Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō Haiga* (Haikai Paintings). Crowley states that the very success and proliferation of the haikai genre depended on travellers. While

² 公益財団法人 山口県ひとづくり財団, "田上 菊舎," 山口県の先人たち, accessed June 29, 2026, <https://heisei-shokasonjuku.jp/senjindb/tagamikikusha/>.

improved infrastructure during the early modern period made travel a practical necessity for spreading their artistic message and cultivating client networks, the persona of the “saintly” poet-traveller was deeply rooted in a much older Japanese literary tradition. Haikai poets like Matsuo Bashō, his disciples, and later Tagami Kikusha deliberately adopted the unattached, wandering persona of medieval poet-priests like Saigyō and Nōin to lend philosophical and cultural legitimacy to their art. Travelling allowed them to cultivate relationships with clients, spread their artistic message, and establish far-flung networks of poets throughout the provinces. Crowley emphasizes this deep bond by citing Bashō’s own followers, who noted that “People who do not know the Tōkaidō have no understanding of fūga [poetic elegance] and that “Travel is the flower of fūga; fūga is the spirit of the traveller.”³

In this light, the preface’s opening statement on autumn flowers and their resilient roots serves as a metaphor for Kikusha’s life as a poet-traveller. If “travel is the flower of fūga,” then the scattered “traces” Kikusha left along the roads of early modern Japan are the very blossoms the preface speaks of, coaxed to bloom despite the harsh realities of her solitary journeys.

As we move from the preface into the selected verses, the thematic threads established by this reference to Kikusha’s legacy continue to resonate, albeit in contrasting ways. While the preface celebrates the enduring strength of the chrysanthemum in the face of autumn, the featured verse turns its attention to the autumn wind itself, using the image of a fan to transform the seasonal landscape into a nuanced exploration of female agency and vulnerability.

³ Cheryl Crowley, “Traversing a World of Moonlight and Blossoms: Tagami Kikusha’s Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō Haiga (Haikai Paintings),” *Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies* 18 (2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.26812/pajls.v18i.1571>.

Selected Poem



Figure 2. Detail from Komai Genki, Collected Haiku Poems (Hokku shū), 1793, woodblock-printed book, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, image 2013_876_003, <http://library.metmuseum.org/record=b2020687>.

秋風や
式部が元の
扇かな

—

aki | kaze | ya
shikibu | ga | moto | no
ougi | kana

—

autumn | wind | [emphasis]
Shikibu | [possessive] | origin | [possessive]
fan | [exclamation]

First Interpretation

Ah, the autumn breeze,
is it from the fan by
Shikibu's side?

Commentary

This interpretation is the most literal, suggesting that the verse captures the first refreshing breeze of autumn, which Nyokan likens to the gentle air stirring from Shikibu's fan. The name "Shikibu" may refer to renowned literary figures such as Murasaki Shikibu or Izumi Shikibu, or it could serve as a generic reference, as it was a common title for Heian court women. In either case, the invocation of the name immediately evokes the refined elegance and soft grace of the Heian period, and ends in a rhetorical question; perhaps the poet is indulging in a moment of introspection. By positioning Shikibu as the source of the wind rather than its subject, Nyokan grants her a subtle but distinct agency, showing her actively commanding the seasonal shift rather than merely weathering it.

Second Interpretation

The autumn wind!
A fan lies by
Shikibu's side.

Commentary

The autumn wind often carries melancholic undertones, as while it offers welcome relief from the summer heat, it foretells the arrival of winter soon after. Viewed through this lens, Nyokan may be alluding to a famous Chinese verse by Lady Ban of the Han dynasty.⁴

⁴ Sonja Arntzen, email message to author, June 23, 2026. The suggestion that this hokku may be alluding to the Han Dynasty poem by Lady Ban was provided by Professor Arntzen in this exchange.

To begin I cut fine silk of Ch'i,
white and pure as frost or snow,
shape it to make a paired-joy fan,
round, round as the luminous moon,
to go in and out of my lord's breast;
when lifted, to stir him a gentle breeze.
but always I dread the coming of autumn,
cold winds that scatter the burning heat,
when it will be laid away in the hamper,
love and favor cut off midway.⁵

After losing the emperor's favour, she composed a poem comparing herself to a white silk fan; cherished during the summer but discarded once autumn arrived. In this way, the image of the fan lying motionless by Shikibu's side takes on an additional layer of meaning. The arrival of the autumn wind physically signals that the fan is no longer needed, mirroring the emotional reality of a lover whose time of favour has passed. The fan and the autumn wind are no longer complementary elements; instead, they exist in a state of quiet opposition, as the arrival of one necessitates the abandonment of the other.

In this context, Nyokan elegantly domesticates the role of the "autumn fan," a metaphor for a discarded woman, into a distinctly Japanese literary setting. "Shikibu" functions here not as a specific historical individual like Murasaki or Izumi, but as a localized, naturalized stand-in for a Heian court lady who shares Lady Ban's melancholy fate. The verse thus captures a moment of quiet resignation, where the shifting of the season dictates the setting aside of the fan, a marked shift from the first interpretation, which had a much lighter tone. Stripped of the power to

⁵ Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century* (Columbia University Press, 1971), 94–95.

command the breeze, Shikibu is rendered entirely passive, transforming the discarded fan into a stark emblem of female vulnerability in the face of shifting romantic tides.

Third Interpretation

The autumn wind!
Is it from that fan by
Shikibu's side?

Commentary

This interpretation regards the “Shikibu” mentioned in the poem as Izumi Shikibu, and the poem transforms from a generalized lament about the changing seasons into a highly charged commentary on romance and reputation. Although the translation closely mirrors the first interpretation, the poem's serene quality gives way to a more tumultuous, possibly judgemental undertone when associated with a woman known for her passionate, often controversial life, rather than a figure of conventional grace.

Izumi Shikibu was one of the most brilliant poets of the Heian period, but she was equally notorious for her scandalous and passionate love affairs, and there is a famous anecdote involving Fujiwara no Michinaga. As the most powerful man at court and the patron of her literary salon, Michinaga highly valued her poetic genius, even as he openly teased her about her colourful private life. When a courtier shows off a fan gifted to him by Izumi Shikibu, the powerful Fujiwara no Michinaga takes it and jokingly vandalizes it by writing *ukareme no ōgi* 浮かれ女の扇 (Playgirl's fan) onto it. Izumi Shikibu fires back on this by composing a poem:

越えもせむ越さずもあらむ逢坂の関守ならぬ人な咎めそ

In modern gloss:

男女の逢瀬の関を越える者もあれば、越えない者もいる。関守でもないあなたには関係ないこと⁶

A translation of the modern gloss would be:

Some cross the barrier of romantic rendezvous, while others do not.
You are not the gatekeeper, so it has nothing to do with you.

By employing the metaphor of a toll barrier to represent a romantic rendezvous, Izumi Shikibu cleverly asserts her autonomy and dismisses external judgment regarding her controversial love life. The verse serves as a sharp, defiant rebuttal that directly challenges Fujiwara no Michinaga's authority, asserting that as an outsider to her private affairs, he has no right to act as a "gatekeeper" policing her behaviour.

Thus, the fan is no longer a generic seasonal prop used to ward off the summer heat; it is immediately recognizable as the infamous ukareme no ōgi, the physical emblem of Izumi Shikibu's scandalous reputation and matching fierce personality. Thus, the autumn aki 秋 would serve as a kakekotoba (pivot word) for aki 飽き, meaning to grow tired of or lose interest in a lover. The autumn wind, therefore, signifies more than just a meteorological transition; it represents the chilling of a once-passionate romance. "That fan," previously an active tool of courtly flirtation and secret rendezvous, now lies idle by her side, as its purpose has been fulfilled and exhausted.

By linking resilient autumn flowers to the pioneering poet Kikusha, the preface establishes a framework of female endurance. This theme finds a human counterpart in the verse's figure of Shikibu, whose role shifts entirely depending on how the poem is interpreted. Through the layered translations of an autumn wind and a fan, Shikibu transforms

⁶ 名古屋刀剣博物館, "和泉式部と百人一首," accessed June 29, 2026, <https://www.meihaku.jp/hyakunin-issu-kajin/kajin-izumishikibu/>.

from an active force commanding the refreshing breeze to a vulnerable victim of lost favour, and finally into a defiant nod to Izumi Shikibu's infamous reputation. Ultimately, this shared seasonal backdrop elegantly connects the daring poet-traveller Kikusha with the multifaceted figure of Shikibu, turning the autumn landscape into a nuanced exploration of female agency and vulnerability. A new reader might find yet another distinct resonance within the autumn wind, drawn from their own experiences of shifting seasons or fleeting connections. That boundless capacity for personal meaning is, ultimately, the true beauty of poetry; it is not a static artifact of the past, but a living art form that continues to evolve.

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Dragon Boat Festival

端午节

Sophie Lafrenière

Author's Note

Living in China, I often ask people whether dragons still exist. Answers may vary. Mine would be: "Once you see one, you see them all. You just need to find the first one." This poem follows that idea, tracing the persistence of things that remain hidden until we know where and how to look. Good luck!

Sophie Lafrenière is passionate about the world's poetry, stories, and languages. A first-year undergraduate at McGill University, she is pursuing a double major in East Asian Studies and French Literature, with a concentration in translation. In the summer of 2026, she interned at Chinese heavy machinery factories in Shandong and Anhui, gaining firsthand insight into the dynamics of the industry. After spending four months in rural areas where English was seldom spoken, she nearly forgot she was not Chinese. She is now heading to Hong Kong, where she will pursue an exchange semester at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

As I usher forth the race - at the
pace of the past

Silver floods slip from my scales

Until the wind sets to the West

Crimson wishes and lanterns
follow the men

我冲龙舟赛

以旧日之速

银激流鳞间滑落

长风破浪向西方

红灯笼承载心愿而行

誓言使人的脚步高昂

I feint their steps out the vessel- I
may just dance

Though we all swim - there was a
time when

They hurried to throw rice balls at
the flow

Like vows wounded in bamboo
leaves

As so the goldfish won't eat their
memory

我模仿他们的步伐

但更擅长翩然起舞

众生游于水中

那段摸着石头过河的岁月里

人们匆匆将粽子投入江流

仿佛包裹在粽叶里的诺言

不让游鱼吞没他们的记忆

The shore sways, catching rain
with its sleeves

岸边摇曳于细雨中

衣袖轻承接天之泪

Whether I wag rivers and heaven,
streams go astray

Mugwort bundles stay still at
every entry

Then hopes for a blessing chase
my shadows away

无论我如何搅动天地江河

门口悬挂的艾草仍然

于是人们祈福的心愿

驱散了我的影子

Are dragons used to human
customs?

龙是否早已习惯了人间的风俗?

This poem was inspired by my experience of the Dragon Boat Festival (端午节, Duānwǔ Jié). Rain in Nanjing this year led to the cancellation of the boat races, prompting me to reflect on the festival beyond its most visible tradition.

My experience revealed a contradiction at the heart of tradition. Customs are meant to preserve memory, yet their meanings can fade when repeated without reflection. At the same time, traditions endure precisely because they are continually reinterpreted and adapted by younger generations. I am fascinated by how cultural symbols remain alive through both continuity and change. My writing explores this tension between remembrance and renewal.

Sameness and Ephemerality in “The Chrysanthemum Vow” and “The Blue Hood”

Henry Loomis

Abstract

“The Chrysanthemum Vow” and “The Blue Hood” in Ueda Akinari’s eighteenth-century collection of tales, *Ugetsu Monogatari*, evaluate male-male relationships in the context of the Edo period to examine ephemerality and interconnection. Drawing from Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory, this essay argues that the idea of “young man” functions both as a symbol of boundless potential and an impossible aspiration toward eternity. In “The Blue Hood,” a Shingon Buddhist abbot’s fetishization of a young man as a sexual object and possessor of a phallus leads him to cannibalism and debasement. His eventual enlightenment comes with a realization that he cannot be separated from the rest of the world—his perceived separation from “young man” was illusory. On the other hand, “The Chrysanthemum Vow” emphasizes the need for a complete and self-contained subjectivity, as well as the necessity of fulfilling social roles in maintaining societal harmony and personal coherence.

You’re forever talking of differences—I’ve finally recognised a pet theory of yours. When you speak of the great difference that is supposed to exist between you and me, for instance, it seems to me that this difference is nothing but your strange determination to establish differences.

—Hermann Hesse, *Narcissus and Goldmund*.

Henry Loomis is a recent graduate from Grinnell College’s class of 2026 with a degree in Studio Art and Japanese. He is currently enrolled in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s Post-Baccalaureate program in painting and drawing. He is interested in birds, pools of water, and human alienation from the infinite.

Ugetsu Monogatari, Ueda Akinari's eighteenth-century collection of folk tales, features two stories—"The Chrysanthemum Vow" and "The Blue Hood"—which include notable depictions of male-male relationships utilized by Ueda to examine a shuttle between sameness and difference, ephemerality and eternity, and how each of these relate to social/cosmic stability from Confucian perspectives in "The Chrysanthemum Vow," and Mahayana Buddhist perspectives in "The Blue Hood." Each of these relationships involves one older and one younger man, and each has an implicit age hierarchy between the elder and younger partners, in each case with the elder taking a superior role over their subordinate partner—in "The Blue Hood" a superiority that becomes predatory.

In order to understand these age hierarchies it is important to examine the concept of "young man"—a thematic focal point for both "The Chrysanthemum Vow" and "The Blue Hood." Psychoanalysis, as a field, is, in part, concerned with the associations we place on concepts like the feminine, the masculine, youth, "mother," "father," "brother," etc. in order to build stable and coherent psyches and societies. Many psychoanalysts see these concepts, which at their most basic are broken down into "woman," "man," "self," and "other," as fundamental building blocks of human mental reality. Julia Kristeva is a psychoanalyst who writes extensively on "man" and "woman" as oppositional forces in dialogue, assigning "man" the role of the symbolic order and "woman" the role of the abject.¹ Kristeva's work has been productively used by many authors including both Barbara Creed in her article "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection" and Steven Bruhm in his book *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* to examine fiction.

The symbolic order (i.e., the "man"-ish) is symbolic in that it is defined and upheld by systems of abstractions—especially language and religion—that allow society to function and beings to define self against

¹ Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (University of Texas Press, 2015), 38-39.

other, and other against myriad different others. If a society did not have language it would, presumably, not have a way to articulate the difference between woman and man, king and farmer, human and animal, therefore rendering these differences more ambiguous. Likewise without religion it would be more difficult for a society to determine its place in the cosmos. In this way, order is created: everything is separated, defined, and given a role.

To create society the symbolic order defines the category of the abject (i.e., the “woman”-ish) which is everything the symbolic order rejects: the bodily, the deathly, the ambiguous, and the chaotic.² The abject is synonymous with “woman” because “woman” gives birth—a physical rather than cognitive process that in creating life creates death.³ The fundamental fear of the symbolic order is that it will fall back into the darkness from which it emerged—that it will return to a state of undifferentiation in the womb, where the line between self and other is ruptured and language is useless. In other words, the symbolic order (“man”) creates society and the self by using abstract systems (systems thought up by humans) of language and religion which categorize and separate beings into roles but must, to do this, also create the abject (“woman”) who represents the physical reality that we must all die.

Because “woman” is societally rejected, individual women sometimes seek to join the symbolic order. This leads some women to become overly attached to their sons—fetishizing their phallus (becoming fetishistic mothers)⁴—potentially pulling their sons with them into the abject, an act “that threatens to collapse into psychosis (where the other is never established) or effect a ‘perverse dodge’ into homosexuality”⁵ in their sons.

² Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 38.

³ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 38–40.

⁴ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 63–64.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1982), 5, quoted in Steven Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 160.

Psychoanalytically, the concept of “young man” holds a complicated position. Following a Kristevan framework, “woman” represents the biological, the cyclical, the defiled, and the deathly, while “man” represents systems of language, religion, and differentiation that construct conceptions of purity and eternity. While “woman” signifies the inevitability of death through her association with birth, “young man,” then, signifies limitless potential and eternal life in the symbolic order as a version of “man” who is distant from death. However, the abject and the symbolic order are not actually separate from each other.

Barbara Creed, in her article “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” writes, “The subject, constructed in and through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness—thus, the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation.”⁶ If meaning is constructed based on meaninglessness, then meaninglessness becomes an integral part of meaning. The abject must always exist in the mind of the symbolic order—its call must constantly be rejected—for the symbolic order to maintain coherence.

The symbolic order is characterized by separation. It requires clear boundaries between word and word, between sacred and profane, between one person’s body and another person’s body. At its core, this separation is enforced toward the end of maintaining a unified, coherent, and permanent self, which is in turn picked apart in various ways by the abject. For example, open wounds indicate that the membrane separating a body from another body can be breached, thereby calling into question the integrity of certain boundaries needed to construct a coherent self. Creed writes, “deliberat[e] pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order in the domain of the body [i.e., a work of art depicting a wound, a wounding, or the expulsion of some bodily fluid] ... never ceases to signal the repressed world of the mother.”⁷ The abject, the mother in particular, represents a collapsing of

⁶ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 42.

⁷ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 46.

boundaries, especially in regard to the body. The mother recalls our time in the womb, a time when self existed within other.

The mother gave us our bodies, bodies in which we are in a state of constant decay. Because we were born, we must die. This is what is intoxicating to the symbolic order about “young man.” “Young man” puts himself into things rather than absorbing or integrating and therefore cannot represent the reabsorption the symbolic order fears; rather, he spreads the symbolic order via injection. “Young man” is in a state of growth toward an even more ordered and permanent state, not decay toward death and reabsorption.

This state of growth is exemplified in the social expectation for “young man” to provoke change. Leo Spiegel, in his article “Youth, Culture and Psychoanalysis,” notes that “culture with susceptible faultlines will either integrate its leavening youth through a modification of its culture or suffer minor and major earthquakes. Youth constitutes a request, at times a demand and a pressure for change in beliefs, codes and institutions.”⁸ The older generation relies on youth to generate culture that, it believes, will save it from the state of stagnation within which it finds itself. In “The Chrysanthemum Vow,” we see this role fulfilled by Samon and his interest in philosophy. He is interested in how the world works and how to alter it. In “The Blue Hood,” the abbot’s perceived lack of youth drives him to a state of animalism and stagnation, searching frantically for youth.

“The Blue Hood” follows the abbot of a Buddhist temple who falls so deeply in love with a doomed youth that, when the doomed youth dies, the abbot eats his corpse. Developing a taste for the dead, he begins raiding local graveyards, stoking fear of Buddhist monks in local populations. In seeking oneness with his young man, the abbot takes on the role of a predatory, fetishistic mother who seeks oneness with her son. Creed writes that “What is horrific is [the fetishistic mother’s] desire to cling to her

⁸ Leo A. Spiegel, “Youth, Culture and Psychoanalysis,” *American Imago* 31, no. 2, (1974): 220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26302979>.

offspring in order to continue to ‘have the phallus.’”⁹ The abbot enacts this desire by literally eating his fetish-object. It is, in effect, a reverse birth.

Interestingly, within the story necro-cannibalism is an action associated almost solely with women. Ueda writes, “these stories are all of women; I have never heard one of a man. It is, after all, because of their perverse nature that women turn into shameless demons.”¹⁰ Women are supposedly liable to be taken in by the allure of the phallus, seeking it at the expense of their respectability. Men are supposed to be immune from this because they already possess a phallus. The abbot’s philosophical mistake is in his construction of difference.

From a Buddhist point of view, the separation between things is arbitrary—the result of processes enacted upon things rather than the things in themselves. Within this framework there can be no lack. Everybody already has everything that exists within them and is inextricably connected to all existence. The abbot does not lack youth or beauty, but he feels he does because he has not let go of his conception of himself as a delineated, unique, and permanent subjectivity. His consumption of his fetish-object is an act of supreme delusion. The story ends with the abbot being redeemed through Chan/Zen practice, realizing his delusion, and, upon gaining enlightenment, dissolving. His dissolution reflects his realization that he is not in fact a clearly delineated subjectivity: he literally becomes inextricably integrated within the world around him.

This ending does not make sense from a Kristevan psychoanalytic perspective. In “The Blue Hood,” the symbolic order is maintained—a feminine-coded evil defeated—through dissolution of boundaries and destruction of subjectivities. This indicates both the limitation of Kristevan psychoanalysis as a way to understand philosophies and religions founded in non-Abrahamic, non-Platonic frameworks and how the ending of “The Blue Hood” is more subversive than it may originally appear. Chan/Zen

⁹ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 63.

¹⁰ Ueda Akinari, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, trans. Anthony H. Chambers (Columbia University Press, 2008), 194.

Buddhism is explicitly patriarchal—Chan/Zen lineages are traced through men and founding Chan/Zen figures are called Patriarchs. The abbot’s defeat is symbolically a defeat of the feminine and the abject but it is not necessarily a reification of the boundaries between the symbolic order and the abject. A reaffirmation of the symbolic order (religion) causes the abbot to physically merge with the abject (nature).

This is exemplified by the mantra the abbot is told to repeat: “The moon glows on the river, wind rustles the pines / Long night, clear evening—what are they for?” 江月照松風吹 / 永夜清宵何所為.¹¹ This passage is from the “Song of Enlightenment” 證道歌 (Japanese: Shōdōka; Chinese: Zhengdao Ge), by the seventh-century monk Yongjia Xuanjue, a disciple of Huineng, the famed Sixth Patriarch of Chan/Zen. The ending question “何所為” (Japanese: nann no shoizo; Chinese: he suo wei)¹² is rhetorical; the long nights and clear evenings—which, as natural phenomena, fall under the category of the abject—are not for human use, or, necessarily, human understanding. To use other translations of “何所為,” they do not require any action¹³ and nothing in particular can be expected to happen as they occur.¹⁴ The world simply exists as it is without the need for

¹¹ Ueda, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 197.

¹² The passage from the “Song of Enlightenment” that Ueda uses in “The Blue Hood” appears to be identical to the original Chinese composition attributed to Yongjia Xuanjue (see Ueda Akinari 上田 秋成, *Ugetsu Monogatari* 雨月物語). We can see that in a Japanese copy of the “Song of Enlightenment” published by Tahara Jinzaemon ca. 1631 that it was standard to leave the Chinese “Song of Enlightenment” untranslated into Japanese. Tahara indicates some pronunciations of kanji characters using kana characters (pronunciations which seem to roughly align with modern “on-yomi” Chinese readings of kanji) but uses no Japanese punctuation or conjugation with kana (see “Yōka Genkaku Daishi Shōdōka 永嘉眞覺大師證道歌 [The Song of Enlightenment by Great Master Yongjia Xuanjue],” in *Shiburoku* 四部録 [*Four-Part Record*]). For this reason I have chosen to include both the “on-yomi” readings of and pinyin for characters from the “Song of Enlightenment.”

¹³ John Balcom, trans., “Song of Enlightenment,” by Yongjia Xuanjue, in *After Many Autumns: A Collection of Chinese Buddhist Literature* (Buddha’s Light Publishing, 2011).

¹⁴ Yongjia Xuanjue, “The Song of Experiencing the Tao,” trans. Robert Payne, in *The White Pony: An Anthology of Chinese Poets from the Earliest Times to the Present Day Newly Translated* (George Allen & Unwin, 1947), 154–57; Yongjia Xuanjue, “Yung Chia’s Song of Enlightenment,” trans. Charles Luk, in *Ch’an and Zen Teaching—Third Series* (Rider & Co., 1962), 116–48; Yongjia Xuanjue, “Song of Realizing the Way,” trans. Kazuaki Tanahashi and Peter Levitt, in *Zen Chants: Thirty-Five Essential Texts with Commentary* (Shambhala, 2015), 73–84.

human rationalization or delineation. This is presented not as horrifying, but as enlightening.

An integration between two seemingly separate existences also occurs in “The Chrysanthemum Vow,” but in a very different way. This story follows Samon and Sōemon, a young scholar and a slightly older samurai who form an ambiguous relationship, beginning with Samon caring for a sick Sōemon and developing into a mutual vow of brotherhood. Samon and Sōemon’s similarity and closeness are emphasized: Ueda writes, “Finding that their thoughts and feelings were in harmony on every subject, the two were filled with mutual admiration and joy, and finally pledged their brotherhood.”¹⁵ Their subjectivities are already roughly aligned; however, even given this similarity, they have to reaffirm social hierarchy. To this end, they become complements of each other: Sōemon is elder, principled, and motherless, symbolically lacking the feminine/abject, while Samon is younger, nurturing, and sensitive, his motherfulness indicating his enduring connection to the abject. Even as intellectual equals, Sōemon and Samon’s relationship is still defined by hierarchy, with Samon taking the subordinate role as “younger brother,” while Sōemon takes the initiative as “elder brother.”

In this way, they mirror the roles that would be expected of a normative Edo-Period heterosexual relationship. Gary Leupp, in his chapter “Tokugawa Homosexual Culture,” views this age hierarchy as the defining guideline of Edo-Period homosexual relationships. Leupp writes, “even relationships between adults of equal status ... took the form of a ‘brotherhood bond’ ... entitl[ing] Akana [Sōemon], as the elder partner, to various courtesies and deferential treatment from his ‘younger brother’ and ‘establish his role as the active partner in their sexual relations.’”¹⁶ Laying aside Leupp’s assumption of a sexual relationship in “The Chrysanthemum Vow”—evidence for which he finds in the title “菊花の契り (Kikka no

¹⁵ Ueda, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 81.

¹⁶ Gary P. Leupp, “Tokugawa Homosexual Culture,” in *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in Tokugawa Japan* (University of California Press, 1995), 141.

Chigiri)” which, rendered as “菊の契り (Kiku no Chigiri),” could be read as an Edo Period euphemism for gay sex where the chrysanthemum stands in for an anus and vow becomes tryst—this shows how, even as sameness is emphasized, difference is mandated. The symbolic order requires the boundary between Samon and Sōemon to be maintained.

In another sense, this is similar to notions espoused by Hermann Hesse—the Nobel Prize-winning German-Swiss author of *Siddhartha*, *Steppenwolf*, and *Demian* among others—in his 1930 novel *Narcissus and Goldmund*. Steven Bruhm in his book *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* describes the Hessean phenomenon of anacletic narcissistic desire (i.e., desire for a complementary self-completing same-sex lover; someone who is both the same [in terms of gender] and opposite [in terms of temperament]) writing that “Hesse portrays ... the primacy of the homoerotic in the complete soul ... [T]he ascetic [Narcissus] in Hesse needs to desire the erotic, carnal [Goldmund] as *his* other half; he must not only identify with male desire but also desire it and desire the person who embodies it.”¹⁷ Samon and Sōemon represent a different duality from Narcissus and Goldmund. Samon has a mother and is feminine like Goldmund but is highly cognitive, like Narcissus, while Sōemon is motherless and masculine like Narcissus but focused on practice like Goldmund (battle for Sōemon—art for Goldmund). In this way they represent one splintered psyche that needs to be reintegrated through an idealized homosexual relationship.

In both *Narcissus and Goldmund* and “The Chrysanthemum Vow” this reintegration is begun with a relationship, and only completed when one half of that relationship dies. In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Goldmund dies, exhorting Narcissus to rediscover his lost mother (i.e., the lost half of his psyche represented by Goldmund). In “The Chrysanthemum Vow,” Sōemon leaves Samon to return to his homeland but vows that he will return at the next Chrysanthemum Festival (early September). The day of the Chrysanthemum Festival comes and Sōemon—held captive by his cousin

¹⁷ Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus*, 100.

and physically too far away to return on time—kills himself and travels to Samon instantaneously as a ghost in order to fulfil his vow. Afterward, Samon leaves home and, in exacting murderous revenge upon the people who held Sōemon captive, takes on Sōemon's traits. Samon says, "since childhood I have devoted myself to the writing brush and ink, but I have neither made a name for myself in public service nor have I been able to discharge my filial duty to my family ... My brother Akana [Sōemon] gave his life for loyalty."¹⁸ Sōemon becomes the standard of character and achievement against which Samon holds himself and others. In this way Samon and Sōemon fuse, like how the abbot fuses with the rest of the world. Hierarchy is transcended as Samon becomes both younger and elder brother.

In "The Chrysanthemum Vow" and "The Blue Hood" we see two different ideas of fusion and of wholeness. One is intellectual while the other is visceral and physical. In "The Blue Hood" the abbot's physical form literally dissolves into the world around him through a realization of his own intellectual incapacity regarding nature. In "The Chrysanthemum Vow" Samon and Sōemon's fusion is intellectual. The spirit of Sōemon is immaterial; he is reduced, essentially, to an image; a purely optical being able to travel with light. He cannot eat, in stark contrast to the ghoulish abbot who cannot do anything but eat. Yet, unlike the dissolved abbot, he maintains his subjectivity. In short, "The Chrysanthemum Vow" argues for something like a soul, while "The Blue Hood" does not. If "The Blue Hood" posits that the main delineation between forms is physical—represented by the abbot eating the flesh of his fetish-object in an attempt to fuse with him, and later fusing physically with the world—in "The Chrysanthemum Vow" the delineation is intellectual. Our subjectivities/souls divide us from the world. This is why it is significant that the abbot has a physical relationship with his fetish object while Samon and Sōemon have no explicit physical relationship with each other. "The Blue Hood" argues that there are both deluded and enlightened ways to become one with the world, and

¹⁸ Ueda, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 86.

demonstrates both. The abbot misunderstands the doctrine of physical fusion and eats his fetish-object in an act of extreme delusion before fusing with the world in a moment of enlightenment. Samon and Sōemon’s relationship is intellectual, mirroring the story’s larger disinterest in the physical.

As an extension of this, “The Chrysanthemum Vow” has a very Confucian concern with social harmony, while “The Blue Hood” has a more Buddhist interest in harmony with the cosmos writ large. In other words, because it thinks of people as having clearly delineated subjectivities, “The Chrysanthemum Vow” argues humanistically that people need to reintegrate their subjectivities and reify the social order in order to maintain human harmony (i.e., the symbolic order). “The Blue Hood” does not believe that people’s subjectivities are clearly delineated, rather arguing that all that separates forms from one another are arbitrary physical boundaries, therefore insinuating that a focus on humanity is petty compared to the vast natural world which is beyond our use and understanding.

Both stories, toward the argument of these points, contain divergent conceptions of justice. “The Chrysanthemum Vow,” in advocating fusion of fractured subjectivities into one whole subjectivity, affirms difference. To live correctly in society and be able to enact justice for the betterment of that society one must become like one’s opposite (exemplified by gentle Samon committing philosophically and legally justified murder to avenge Sōemon).

However, the object of justice is not the feminine/the abject—which in this almost entirely male narrative seems to warrant little consideration and pose little threat—instead, evil comes from within the symbolic order: it is primarily a misguided focus on the larger picture of society over individual relationships. Sōemon’s captor—his cousin—should have prioritized his personal, familial relationship to Sōemon over his societal duty to his lord (who orders Sōemon’s capture). In Confucius’s *Analects* we see the philosophical justification for this. *Analect* 13.18 reads, in part, “The just in our community are quite different. A father will cover for his son, and the son for his father, and to my mind in this there is

justice.”¹⁹ Social harmony goes from in to out. It begins with the individual’s subjectivity, travels to those closest to them, and eventually reaches the edges of society. Harmony is achieved when everyone is loyal to those closest to them. Thus, justice is exacted upon those *within* the symbolic order who confuse hierarchies of loyalty. The good audience understands this order, and is separate from those who do not. Harmony in “The Blue Hood” moves from out to in. It comes from a realization that everything is made of the same stuff; that distinction is useless. The abbot is not punished for his crimes but redeemed because there is no real difference between the abbot and anyone in the audience.

What both “The Chrysanthemum Vow” and “The Blue Hood” advocate is that the path to harmony is wholeness—though wholeness means different things to each. This wholeness in each case comes at a loss and, in each case, is in a constant state of change. Samon loses Sōemon, the object of his longing, and his nurturing nature changes, while the abbot loses his physical form along with his subjectivity. Samon’s subjectivity is delineated but it is not permanent—he changes when he integrates Sōemon—metaphorically, he becomes Sōemon’s age and becomes the active partner. Leupp writes, “references to ... youths often contain melancholy overtones; the poem on a Toyonobu portrait of a beautiful youth holding a small flower cart runs, ‘The days of young men are as numbered as those of the cherry blossom.’”²⁰ The problem with “young man” as a concept is that he quickly becomes just “man.” “The Chrysanthemum Vow” and “The Blue Hood” both recognize this inevitability, and both rationalize it in the same way: the fetishized “young man” must be abandoned.

Returning to the passage “The moon glows on the river, wind rustles the pines / Long night, clear evening—what are they for?” 江月照松風吹 / 永夜清宵何所為,²¹ we see the eternal and the ephemeral purposefully

¹⁹ Confucius, *The Analects: Conclusions and Conversations of Confucius*, trans. Moss Roberts (University of California Press, 2020), 109.

²⁰ Leupp, “Tokugawa Homosexual Culture,” 124.

²¹ Ueda, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 197.

contrasted. In the first line we have images of the moon reflected in the rushing, ever-changing river and of wind blowing intermittently through pine trees. In the second line we have the image of a “long” night 永夜 (Japanese: eiya; Chinese: yong ye” can also be translated as “eternal night”—the character “永” can mean either very long or endless)²² placed before the image of a “clear” 清 (Japanese: sei; Chinese: qing; can also mean pure) evening.²³ This temporal confusion creates the image of an eternal night happening simultaneously with an evening. There is a juxtaposition between the momentary and the persistent. Robert Wicks, in his article “The Idealization of Contingency in Traditional Japanese Aesthetics,” writes that a central conceit of Japanese aesthetics is that “a polished, rational, idealized background is constructed for the purposes of calmly accentuating the presence of accidents and contingen[cy].”²⁴ For example, a purposefully imperfect teacup against the meticulously and minimalistically constructed tea-ceremony chashitsu or a performatively hasty literati painting on a sliding door against perfectly regular tatami mats. Similarly, the simultaneous night and evening sky in the above passage serves as an eternal background to the descriptions of the ephemeral physical world.

Both stories use this contrast to illustrate grief. The abbot goes mad at the death of his fetish-object; Samon changes irreversibly with Sōemon’s

²² Yongjia Xuanjue, “Yung Chia’s Song of Enlightenment,” 116–48; Yongjia Xuanjue, “The Song of Experiencing the Tao,” 154–57.

²³ Suzuki, Balcom, Luk, Payne, and Tanahashi omit “evening” altogether in their translations, instead translating “清宵” (Japanese: seishō; Chinese: qing xiao) to mean quiet (Payne, Balcom, Suzuki) or simply clear/pure modifying night (Luk, Tanahashi) seemingly dropping “宵” altogether. I do not understand the basis for this choice in the original text. “宵” even archaically can basically only mean evening and “清” is clearly modifying “宵.” Tanahashi also inexplicably translates “永夜” as “winter” rather than “long night.” Aitken omits “night” in favour of “evening,” an equally strange choice. The only justification I can imagine for these omissions is the confused temporality in the passage resulting from “evening” following “night,” but I can only assume this juxtaposition was intentional on the part of Yongjia Xuanjue for reasons explained in the paper. Therefore—regarding this translational choice specifically—I am deferring to Chambers.

²⁴ Robert Wicks, “The Idealization of Contingency in Traditional Japanese Aesthetics,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 3 (2005): 98. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/186248>.

death. The hope of eternity is the background to the reality of ephemerality. The figure of the abbot dissolves “like ice melting in the morning sun.”²⁵ The eternal night/evening ends, and the ephemerality of phenomena is revealed. In essence, the eternal background is a lie forged to emphasize the foregrounded truth of impermanence. The chashitsu or tatami are just as vulnerable to the elements as the teacup or sliding door.

Each story ends with this realization; each realization is a rejection of “young man” as a concept. In “The Blue Hood,” to reach enlightenment the abbot has to let go of the idea of his young man. Samon must grow to be just “man,” like Sōemon. The fetishization of “young man” leads to stagnation in Samon’s case as he devotes himself to cognition over practice with few results, and, in the abbot’s case, to monstrous lust. Trying to preserve or regain youth is toxic. Likewise, “young man” insofar as it—as an emissary of the symbolic order—implies strict separation between bodies and minds is, at least in part, rejected. To some extent a dissolution of boundaries, physical and mental, is required for necessary change to occur.

“The Chrysanthemum Vow” rejects complete dissolution of boundaries found in “The Blue Hood,” but it nevertheless recognizes the symbolic order as something in constant flux, which requires select moral people to maintain it (or even alter it as necessary). The preeminence that “The Chrysanthemum Vow” places on the soul and on complete subjectivities points to its understanding of the world as based on the fickle thoughts of men. People’s minds are changeable; our thoughts and feelings ebb and flow. We need equanimity to be maintained as our brains change and we age. Samon needs a change in mindset in order to escape a state of stagnant scholarship, and in turn to try to right a world gone astray because of unjust beliefs and actions. “The Blue Hood” is interested in the danger of the changing body. In “The Blue Hood” the world is one whole chopped up into physically differentiated pieces. The abbot believes he is separate from his fetish-object because the membrane of the body separates them; he desires his fetish-object because he feels he has grown to lack the phallus

²⁵ Ueda, *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*, 199.

that his fetish-object represents. Ueda posits that if we mistake this physical differentiation for meaningful difference (allow our aging to make us jealous of youth) we become monstrous. The abbot must learn to accept change and accept that he lacks nothing. In both stories, the inability to recognize ephemerality and interconnection as the fundamental truths of existence causes personal, societal, and worldwide suffering.

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The Ainu People throughout the Nara Period and the Issue of Identity

Nikolija Panić

Abstract

This essay explores the historical relationship between the Yamato state and northern communities, focusing on the Emishi and their debated relationship to the later Ainu. It examines the social and cultural characteristics of northern communities, the development of Ainu identity, and the political and military expansion of the Yamato state during the Nara period. Particular attention is given to cultural exchange, trade, political incorporation, and military conflict.

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Introduction

The late Yamato period in Japan (c. eighth century) was marked by significant political and cultural change as the Yamato state sought to centralize government and extend its authority over local communities. This process was particularly contested in northeastern Honshu, where the Emishi inhabited communities that differed politically and culturally from those under direct Yamato control. The term Emishi did not denote a clearly defined ethnic group; the central government used it for northern communities that remained outside, or resisted, imperial authority. Their relationship with the Yamato state therefore involved not only military conflict but trade, cultural exchange, negotiation, and varying degrees of political incorporation.

Examining the Emishi is important for understanding the later development of Ainu identity since the relationship between these northern communities and the expanding Japanese state contributed to the transformation of political, cultural, and social identities in northern Japan. At the same time, the precise relationship between the Emishi and the later Ainu remains debated, and the Emishi should not be treated simply as an early name for the Ainu. This paper argues that the relationship between the Yamato state and the Emishi was a complex and gradual process of resistance, political incorporation, cultural exchange, and assimilation rather than a straightforward process of conquest. By examining the life and culture of the Emishi, the historical development of Ainu identity, the political context of the Nara period, and the conflicts that followed, this essay aims to demonstrate how interactions between the central government and these northern communities shaped the development of their identities while gradually transforming the political and cultural landscape of northern Japan.

Life and Culture of the Emishi

Although the northern provinces were in close proximity to the Yamato state, the culture of the Emishi differed greatly from that of the Japanese. To understand this difference and its significance for the

relationship between the Emishi and the expanding Yamato state, it is first necessary to consider the social and cultural characteristics of the northern communities. The nobility of the Nara court saw the inhabitants of what later became Mutsu and Dewa as borderland peoples, settled by “barbarians.” These people were not only beyond the control of the court but also outside the social and political order associated with what was perceived as a civilized society. The *ritsuryō* codes, the legal and administrative framework of the Japanese state,¹ referred to this territory as *kyōgai*, meaning “beyond the border,” or *kegai*, meaning “beyond the transformed” or “beyond the realm civilized by the court’s power.”²

While the origins of the Ainu remain debated, some scholars argue that their ancestors originated in northern regions of the Japanese archipelago and were gradually displaced further north as the Yamato state expanded its influence. The findings of Batchelor, an Anglican missionary who studied the Ainu in the nineteenth century, support this “northern theory,” citing the Ainu’s body hair as an indication of their northern origins. As one of his informants put it, “why would we be covered in hair all over our bodies if we had not come from a cold country?”³ The gradual movement of these communities toward the north may have been influenced by the expanding political and territorial control of the Yamato state.

Economic and cultural differences shaped the relationship between northern communities and the Yamato state, while trade and cultural exchange also created points of continued contact. The influence of Kofun culture⁴ in the north was felt after northern communities adopted some of the practices in Japan via trade. Although the Emishi and later Ainu adopted certain agricultural practices through contact with the Japanese, they

¹ A term referring to a legal and administrative system adopted in the seventh and eighth centuries. The imperial government had power over the civilized authorities that ruled Japan until the Heian period.

² Karl F. Friday, “Pushing beyond the Pale: The Yamato Conquest of the Emishi and Northern Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/133122>

³ John Batchelor, *Ainu: Starosedeooci Japana* (Kokoro; Binder Digital, 2014), 129.

⁴ The Kofun period (c. 250-538) was an early period in Japanese history, preceding the Asuka period (c. 538-710).

remained more dependent on hunting and fishing, particularly in the northern and mountainous regions where large-scale agriculture was less developed. These differences in subsistence contributed to distinct patterns of economic interaction between northern communities and the Yamato state. Trade provided an important means of contact, with northern communities exchanging products such as fish and deer antlers for household tools, footwear, and other goods. In some cases, however, their economic relationship with Japanese authorities was marked by unequal forms of exchange. A similar pattern can be observed in later periods, when Ainu who worked for Japanese officials were reportedly compensated with *sake*,⁵ which was referred to by the Ainu as “official milk.” Such practices illustrate the unequal conditions under which some forms of economic interaction took place. At the same time, cultural differences remained evident in religious practices and attitudes toward nature. Among the Emishi, hunting practices, for example, were closely connected to beliefs that animals were gifts from the gods and that proper rituals were necessary to ensure continued access to game. Thus, economic and cultural differences contributed to the perception of northern communities as distinct, while continued trade and contact demonstrate that their relationship with the Yamato state involved not only conflict and political pressure but also economic and cultural exchange.

Contact with these people of the north and with the Hokkaido population became increasingly intense from the Nara period into the early Heian period. The *Satsumon* culture (c. 600–1200) developed in Hokkaido from local traditions and cultural influences from Honshu, including those associated with the Emishi and Japanese populations. Its development reflects a period of cultural interaction that contributed to the formation of later Ainu culture. Its material culture reflects these encounters, particularly in its decorative motifs. The cold climate in the north prevented rice cultivation, so settlers grew grain. Ceramics from this period, found in Kushiro, are unique for their carved motifs, made using wooden plates. They

⁵ A Japanese rice-based alcoholic beverage.

produced relief decorations typical of the northern communities' ceramics, as well as various other ornaments. The sites were mostly located in the lower reaches of rivers, on the river terraces or dunes along the riverbanks. The Ainu culture inherited many elements of the Satsumon material culture, but the process is not fully understood. Satsumon culture relied more heavily on salmon and trout fishing than later Ainu culture. As Munro notes, the lower river reaches were not as typical for the Ainu, who also had sites located more in the middle and upper river areas.⁶ The development of Satsumon culture therefore illustrates that the emergence of later Ainu culture was not an isolated process but was shaped by interaction between different northern populations and cultural influences.

The identification of the Emishi as a distinct cultural group and the subsequent development of Ainu identity emerged through centuries of interaction between the descendants of Jōmon and Satsumon cultures and the expanding Yamato state. One important factor in this process was language. As Hudson points out, “the presence of interpreters in the eighth-century campaigns suggests that the Emishi spoke a language distinct from Japanese.”⁷ This linguistic difference contributed to misunderstandings and difficulties in negotiations between the Emishi and the Yamato court. *fushu*⁸—Emishi who had submitted to the Yamato state without being fully assimilated into Japanese society—provided a means of communication between the northern communities and the court and helped strengthen Japanese control over the northern frontier. Communication also relied on a limited number of bilingual individuals. Some Japanese migrated north during the Nara period, possibly in response to financial pressures caused by taxation and large government projects.⁹ These encounters brought the two

⁶ Kirsty Munro, “The Satsumon Period” (Japan Tourism Agency, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2013), <https://www.mlit.go.jp/tagengo-db/common/001564141.pdf>.

⁷ Mark J. Hudson, *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 232.

⁸ The term literally means “submitted people” (See Friday, ‘Pushing beyond the Pale,’ 8).

⁹ Temples such as Tōdai-ji, as well as other government projects and the relocation of capitals during the Nara period, led to increased strain on the peasantry and taxation above usual fiscal rates. See Tōdai-ji Temple, “History,” accessed August 10, 2026, <https://www.todaiji.or.jp/en/history/>.

populations into closer contact while also highlighting their cultural differences. Hudson argues that the misunderstandings arising from these interactions contributed to the development of a distinct Ainu identity, as northern communities differentiated themselves from Yamato society.¹⁰ These differences also shaped how northern communities were perceived and incorporated by the expanding state, raising the broader question of how the Emishi became connected to the later history of the Ainu.

The Nara Period: The Country's Development and the Position of the Northern Communities

The Nara period (710–794) provides the political context in which the relationship between the Yamato state and the northern communities became increasingly structured by centralized government. Intensifying contact with China and the Korean Peninsula provided the Japanese with greater insight into foreign models of political ideology and administrative organization. The city of Nara was constructed after the model of Chang'an, the Chinese capital during the Tang period.¹¹ The planned layout of the city and the construction of the imperial palace reflected the growing centralization of the Japanese state, as political and administrative authority became increasingly concentrated around the imperial court.

The adoption of Buddhism and Confucian ideas contributed to the development of a more centralized political and ideological system in Japan. This growing centralization also influenced how the imperial court represented populations living beyond its authority. The compilation of the *Kojiki* (712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720), initiated during the reign of Emperor Tenmu, contributed to the establishment and legitimation of the imperial line and provided historical narratives centred on the authority of the Japanese court. The *Kojiki* combined mythological and historical accounts, while the *Nihon Shoki* was written following the Chinese historiographical model and was intended in part for an external, diplomatic audience. Within these texts,

¹⁰ Hudson, *Ruins of Identity*, 226–30.

¹¹ Lucien Ellington, *Japan* (ABC-CLIO, 2009), 28.

northern populations were represented as peoples living outside the imperial order. The *Kojiki* states: “go forth from there and subdue the Emishi, a wild people.”¹² It records an episode in which Yamato Takeru, a legendary prince and son of Emperor Keiko, was sent to subdue them.

This depiction is significant for understanding how northern populations were represented in early Japanese historical texts. The term 蝦夷 (Emishi), which drew on the Chinese concept of the “barbarian,” helped construct a distinction between Japan as a “civilized centre” and the Emishi as an external, “uncivilized” population, the latter portrayed as disobedient and outside imperial authority, a representation that helped legitimize military intervention and the expansion of administrative control into northern territories. Such depictions reflect the perspective of the imperial court and provide important evidence for understanding how the northern populations were represented in early Japanese historical texts, alongside references to the Emishi found in Chinese sources from the Tang and Song periods.

The term Emishi usually appears in sources from before the fourteenth century, reflecting the perspective of the central government regarding northern communities, whereas the term Ainu is more commonly used in subsequent periods when a clearer identity of the Indigenous population of Hokkaido and northern regions emerged.¹³ The Emishi were perceived as politically and culturally distinct communities, a perception that was also reflected in how they were presented to foreign powers. During the Tang dynasty (618–907), China’s highly developed administrative and bureaucratic systems served as an important model for the Japanese. One mission to China in 659, as described in the *Nihon Shoki*, records an event in which a man and a woman from the Emishi were presented at the Chinese court. The Chinese emperor viewed them with curiosity because of their appearance and hairy bodies. The Japanese envoys explained that the Emishi

¹² Ō no Yasumaro, *Kojiki, Yodai Kayo*, trans. Danijela Vasić (Rad, 2008), 156.

¹³ Evelyn Rawski, *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia: Cross-Border Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 205.

people were not part of Japan, that their diet mostly included meat, that they lived in huts near forests and mountains, and that they refused to pay taxes to the Japanese emperors. These conflicts and processes of incorporation also shaped the longer-term development of northern communities.

The Historical Context of the Ainu

The question of how the Emishi were connected to the later Ainu remains a subject of scholarly debate. From a cultural perspective, some scholars place the emergence of a distinct Ainu ethnic identity around the thirteenth century CE.¹⁴ Although the Ainu began as a unique cultural group during this period, some trace their ancestry in part to the Emishi communities of northeastern Honshu, linking the development of Ainu identity to earlier interactions with the Yamato state.

Prior to the thirteenth century, northeastern Honshu was inhabited by the Emishi. Territorial and cultural marginalization led to successive waves of displacement and assimilation, raising enduring questions about the origins of the Ainu, their relationship with the Emishi, and the formation of their ethnic identity. Their ancestors settled on the Japanese islands during the Jōmon period (c. 14,000–300 BCE), a period that played an important role in the development of early societies in the Japanese archipelago.¹⁵ The expansion and consolidation of Yamato political authority led to centuries of territorial expansion, displacement, and assimilation of peripheral communities. As Yamato authority expanded northward, Ainu communities became increasingly concentrated in the northern regions of the archipelago, particularly in present-day Hokkaido, referred to as Ezo in Japanese sources from the time. The term Ezo is significant because the Chinese characters used to write it carried derogatory connotations. Ezo was written using the same Chinese characters associated with Emishi, illustrating the close terminological relationship between the two terms and reflecting the

¹⁴ Noboru Adachi, “エミシの遺伝子系を探る (Emishi no idenshi-kei o saguru; In Search of Emishi Heredity),” in *Kotsu kōkogaku to Emishi, Hayato* (骨考古学と蝦夷・隼人), ed. Wataru Takigawa (Dōseisha, 2012).

¹⁵ Brett L. Walker, *A Concise History of Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 10–15.

marginal position assigned to populations living beyond the areas under Japanese political control. In the earliest records the term Emishi was written with the characters 毛人, literally meaning “hairy people”—an expression the Chinese tradition used for peoples living beyond the boundaries of the civilized world.¹⁶ The derogatory connotations of this term were likewise adopted in Japan. The term Emishi itself did not carry any specific ethnic meaning and was sometimes applied to certain local families depending on their political stance toward the imperial court.

In the early Nara period, the term Nihon did not denote the Japanese archipelago as it is understood today. At the time, it denoted only territories under the control of the imperial court, whose authority expanded gradually beyond central Japan.¹⁷ Even in the centuries that followed, some Emishi communities defied the central government, while many others underwent gradual assimilation. The relationship between northern communities and the expanding Japanese state was characterized by prolonged contact, conflict, and gradual processes of incorporation rather than a single uniform pattern of forced assimilation.¹⁸

Scholars have turned to DNA evidence to examine the origins of, and the relationship between, Japanese and Ainu populations in northeastern Japan. Genetic studies indicate a persistent Jōmon presence in the populations of northern Japan. The frequency of the haplogroup N9b was high (around 60%).¹⁹ During the Heian (794–1185) and medieval (1185–1603) periods, the frequency of this haplogroup decreased following the arrival of Japanese settlers.²⁰ Nonetheless, Jōmon-related ancestry remains prevalent among the modern population of the Tōhoku region in northeastern Honshu.²¹ These genetic findings provide evidence of continuity

¹⁶ Haruhito Kochi, “The Emishi through the T’ang Sources,” *Shigaku Zasshi* 113, no. 1 (2004): 43–45.

¹⁷ George Sansom, *A History of Japan to 1334* (Stanford University Press, 1958), 41–50.

¹⁸ Donald L. Philippi, *Songs of Gods, Songs of Humans: The Epic Tradition of the Ainu* (University of Tokyo Press, 1979).

¹⁹ Wataru Takigawa, ed., *Kotsu kōkogaku to Emishi, Hayato* (骨考古学と蝦夷・隼人) (Tokyo: Dōseisha, 2012).

²⁰ Takigawa, *Kotsu kōkogaku to Emishi, Hayato*.

²¹ Takigawa, *Kotsu kōkogaku to Emishi, Hayato*.

between ancient populations of northern Japan and later populations in the region. At the same time, the genetic relationship between these populations does not by itself establish a simple or direct ethnic continuity between the Jōmon, Emishi, and Ainu. Instead, it supports the view that the development of northern identities was shaped by a complex history of population interaction and change.

The history of conflict, discrimination, and assimilation had long-term consequences for Ainu identity. Many descendants of Ainu communities no longer identify as Ainu, or are unaware of their Ainu ancestry.²² During the twentieth century, the Japanese state pursued assimilationist policies aimed at incorporating the Ainu and other populations of the empire into a unified national identity. Ainu populations were presented as “children” of the Japanese emperor, a designation also used to describe ethnic Japanese. These policies contributed to a decline in distinct Ainu identification and affected the preservation and transmission of aspects of Ainu cultural heritage, including written records and elements of material culture. These differing experiences of incorporation and autonomy also shaped the conflicts that emerged as the Yamato state continued to expand its authority over northeastern Japan.

Subjugation

As the Japanese military presence in northeastern Honshu strengthened, Emishi communities increasingly resisted attempts to bring their territories under Yamato authority. This resistance led to a series of conflicts as the Japanese government sought to expand its control over the region.

However, complete assimilation did not follow, and the Emishi organized and strengthened their resistance. Japanese expeditions were presented as efforts to enlighten the “barbarians” and as an opportunity for

²² Naohiro Nakamura, “Being Indigenous in a Non-Indigenous Environment: Identity Politics of the Dogai Ainu and New Indigenous Policies of Japan,” *Environment and Planning A* 47, no. 3 (2015): 660–75, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a130003p>.

Japanese settlers to establish communities in the north. The sources record little military activity in the northeast during the 740s, 750s, or 760s. The exception is an order from 759 instructing the eastern provinces to raise a thousand soldiers and send them to Mutsu should reinforcements be needed.

The imperial edict from the seventh month of 774 stated that the court intended to avoid further warfare on the northeastern frontier to spare the Japanese population from suffering.²³ Nonetheless, according to the army commanders, the Emishi continued to resist, raid border territories, and disregard imperial authority. Therefore, it was concluded that military intervention was inevitable, and the suppression of the resistance was ordered. Although Emishi forces were smaller, they continued to resist until 811. They were aided by Japanese settlers who had moved north to free themselves from paying taxes. Their persistence demonstrates that the Emishi were capable of actively opposing the expansion of Japanese authority into their territories.²⁴

Ukanume Ukutsunamio, an Emishi chieftain, left the areas under Japanese control with his followers, announcing the creation of an alliance to strike the Yamato fortifications. As a result, the government forbade the subjugated groups to appear at court. The tensions continued for months until a new imperial edict was issued, announcing another military action. These measures illustrate the continuing tensions between the imperial court and the Emishi.²⁵

In Mutsu Province, the Emishi managed to block bridges and roads, stopping transportation and cutting supply lines. They continued to resist imperial expansion through repeated uprisings and other forms of opposition, demonstrating their resilience. Despite the gradual expansion of Japanese authority, the continued opposition of the Emishi illustrates the difficulty the imperial court faced in establishing lasting control over the northeastern

²³ *Shoku Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan, Continued, from A.D. 697 to 791 A.D.*, trans. and annot. J. B. Snellen (Asiatic Society of Japan, 1934–), book 7, chap. 2.

²⁴ *Shoku Nihongi*, book 7, chap. 2.

²⁵ *Shoku Nihongi*, book 7, chap. 2.

frontier. The contemporary description of the Emishi reflects the perception of their resistance within the imperial court: “The barbarians dig in like wasps and gather like ants. They are always at the head of disturbances. When attacked, they flee to the mountains and bushes; when left alone they plunder the forts. They cover their tracks in the mountains and fields and, though they look for opportunities and seek openings, they fear our military power.”²⁶

After 811, Japan no longer referred to the Emishi as “foreign enemies” but increasingly treated the northern territories as part of its internal administrative sphere. However, this did not mean that resistance and political tensions disappeared entirely, as conflicts involving northern elites continued into subsequent periods. In subsequent centuries, powerful regional families such as the Abe, Kiyohara, and Northern Fujiwara exercised substantial authority in northeastern Honshu, demonstrating that the expansion of Yamato authority did not result in complete or uniform centralization.

Conclusion

The history of northern Japan demonstrates that political authority and cultural identity did not map onto the same boundaries. Although the Emishi can be understood as among the ancestors of the later Ainu population, they cannot be considered the direct cultural predecessor of the Ainu as a distinct ethnic group. Rather, Ainu ethnogenesis was a long and complex process shaped by interaction between northern communities and the expanding Yamato state. Political incorporation, cultural exchange, resistance, migration, and changing patterns of contact all contributed to the formation of an identity that developed over time.

The expansion of Yamato authority altered political relationships in northern Japan, but it did not immediately eliminate the autonomy or cultural distinctiveness of the communities living there. Instead, the relationship

²⁶ *Shoku Nihongi*, book 6, chap. 1.

between the northern communities and the Japanese state involved both conflict and forms of political, economic, and cultural interaction. These encounters contributed to the gradual transformation of northern societies while also shaping how they were represented by the central government. The distinction between the Emishi of earlier periods and the later Ainu therefore reflects not a simple change of name, but a broader process of ethnogenesis.

The case of the Emishi furthermore demonstrates the limitations of understanding early Japanese history through a simple centre-and-periphery model. Northern Japan was not merely a peripheral space waiting to be incorporated into an already unified Japanese state. It was a region in which different communities responded to, negotiated with, and resisted expanding political authority, while also participating in cultural and economic exchange. Viewing the history of the Emishi in this way provides a more nuanced understanding of the formation of Ainu identity and shows that the development of Japan itself was shaped by interactions between its political centre and the diverse communities at its northern frontier.

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Japanese *Sugoroku* Games in Homefront Mobilization and Manipulation

Jerry Shang

Abstract

This essay analyzes the role of Japanese *sugoroku* board games from 1930 to 1945 as both imperial propaganda tools and instruments of social control through self-control. By drawing on Michel Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon, I move beyond a purely ideological reading to contend that the ludic nature and inherent sociality of *sugoroku* games enabled the internalization of authority, mapping identities aligned with the imperial war effort onto their players. Through close readings of game boards as spatial and narrative maps, I demonstrate how board games normalized state authority in the domestic and private space—emerging as crucial sites where ideology, power, and propaganda converged, consequently producing subjects who embodied and reproduced imperial ideology.

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Introduction

On special occasions and select days of the month, countless children all across Japan received beautifully drawn *sugoroku* board games that promised hours of endless fun. This paper presents *sugoroku* games from the period of 1930 to 1945 not only as imperial propaganda tools but also as instruments of social control through self-control, using Michel Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon as a theoretical framework. I contend that by exploiting the ludic nature and inherent sociality of *sugoroku* games, governmental agencies induced the internalization of their ideology and authority, mapping onto millions of Japanese players an identity amenable to the imperial war effort through three layers of social engagement: the individual, collective, and institutional layers.¹ I intend to offer a multifaceted analysis of power by bringing *sugoroku* games into examination as a critical site where ideology, power, and propaganda converged, were negotiated, and were mutually constituted amongst various groups. This includes the publishers who acquiesced—whether willingly or under pressure—to incorporate state propaganda in their games; players, both parents and their children, who exercised agency and expressed a desire to be good Japanese citizens in wartime Japan while subjecting themselves to social discipline even in the absence of direct state compulsion; and the state, whose wartime agencies actively exerted control over published materials through censorship and coercion for the express purpose of rallying sustained support for wartime aspirations under the command of the emperor.

As ephemera, *sugoroku* games have typically received less attention from historians of Japan covering the period from 1930 to 1945. I limited the temporal scope of my analysis of *sugoroku* games to a span of roughly fifteen years as most of the extant propagandistic games I had access to dealt with Japanese military conflicts that dated to said period. The start of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Second World War

¹ Ludic describes something that relates to play or is characterized by play, especially referring to game-based activities.

(1939–1945), as well as past Japanese victories in China and Southeast Asia, provided historical and ideological material that was drawn upon as themes for *sugoroku* games. This paper’s goal is to contribute to scholarship on *sugoroku* games and their function as propaganda tools by analyzing two heretofore unexamined examples of *sugoroku* games from this period, examining both a war-themed and a gender role-themed game to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of *sugoroku* games as propaganda tools.

Theoretical Framework

While *sugoroku* games can be understood as imperial propaganda, I maintain that a purely ideological and propagandistic reading is insufficient to wholly capture their social function. *Sugoroku* games operated through interactive, collaborative, repetitive, and socially embedded practices that had the faculty to shape how individuals understood and regulated themselves. This section employs Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power, particularly the model of the Panopticon, as a framework to understand how a technology of social control could have diffused state authority into intimate domestic and communal spaces.

Power, as Foucault posits in *The History of Sexuality*, is not defined as “a group of institutions and mechanisms that ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state,” nor is it something that is “acquired, seized, or shared.”² Rather, Foucault argues that “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”³ In that regard, power is neither a zero-sum force dominated exclusively by the state nor its institutions, but a dynamic and relational process constituted through everyday practices, interactions, and forms of knowledge.⁴ Power flows through individuals and circulates through institutions as much as it has the capacity to constrain them, thereby producing subjects who embody, enact,

² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 83.

³ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 84.

⁴ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 84.

and reproduce its logic.⁵ *Sugoroku* games exemplify this diffusion and circulation of power; while their design and logic were shaped and dictated by state interests and institutional collaboration, their efficacy was not dependent solely on a top-down imposition. The act of play itself constitutes repetition, participation, and social interactions grounded in imperial ideological messages, which is followed by their internalization as part of their own self-regulation. In this sense, *sugoroku* games served as a site or a conduit through which power was produced, circulated, and exercised. Therefore, the historical agency amongst the Japanese people, as well as the degree of control the Japanese government exerted over its subjects, cannot be simply understood as total submission or overt resistance to state authority. Conversely, agency exists and is formed within the interconnected networks of power that concomitantly shape the conditions of actions, perception, and self-understanding.

Sugoroku games—under the supervision and guidance of the government—functioned as a tool for social control through self-control or “Panopticon.” The Panopticon is a metaphor describing power, control, and discipline through which people internalize surveillance, policing and regulating themselves accordingly. Jeremy Bentham’s original notion of the Panopticon featured an architectural vision that constituted a tower in the middle, adorned with wide windows and surrounded by an annular building on the periphery in which cells, divided in a way where each person in a cell is unable to see others, are constructed. A single guard in the central tower can observe and supervise each inmate without being seen themselves.⁶ The guard does not need to be in the tower and yet the prisoners self-regulate, controlled and repressed by the potentiality of being watched.⁷

The product of the “panopticon” is, as Foucault terms, the docile body—individuals who are submissive, productive, and self-regulating. Foucault elaborates: “they [the docile bodies] may operate as one wishes,

⁵ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 85.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1995), 203.

⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 202.

with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines.”⁸ The process, as Foucault outlines, is that “the human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it.”⁹ The prison acts as the machinery of power, slowly breaking down and rearranging, through discipline and training, the individual’s will. The machinery of power in question need not be a prison but can constitute other seemingly benign cultural forms, such as *sugoroku* games.

Additionally, Foucault emphasizes how institutions such as schools or prisons train individuals to become docile bodies and internalize certain norms. These institutions, however, render power from above visible and can thus become sites of resistance or disengagement. Using the Panopticon as an allegorical example of disengagement, despite the actual or implied presence of the prison guard, prisoners may still offer modes of resistance, or obedience may only be superficial. However, *sugoroku* games, unlike state-sponsored or state-controlled institutions such as prisons and schools, were not incorporated in the formal education of children. Instead, as a game fundamentally predicated on the action of dice-rolling or dice-throwing, *sugoroku* games belonged to the realm of popular culture.¹⁰ While Foucault’s theory of the internalization of state authority in disciplinary bodies privileges formal state institutions, the informal and populist nature of *sugoroku* games renders them more effective in cultivating the same kind of social control through self-control.

Sugoroku games, disguised as innocuous objects of pure entertainment, possess a similar capacity to produce docile bodies through repetition, observation, and normalization. Players willingly engage *sugoroku* boards embedded with social and moral messages, aligning themselves with encoded values as they progress toward the final square through established frameworks and life maps. Although dice rolls create an appearance of freedom by making movement contingent on chance, this

⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

¹⁰ Minjie Chen, “Japanese Board Games at the Cotsen Children’s Library,” Cotsen Children’s Library, December 16, 2013, <https://cotsen.blogs.princeton.edu/2013/12/japanese-board-games/>.

freedom remains carefully staged: advancement, setbacks, and even in-game death occur only within predetermined rules and paths. Crucially, children are not externally compelled to participate; through enjoyable, voluntary play, they repeatedly rehearse and internalize the norms embedded within the game board, which often embed internalized social or moral messages.

Imperial Propaganda Tools

The Japanese board game *sugoroku* 双六—translated literally as “double six”—traces its origins to the Nara period (710–794).¹¹ Throughout Japanese history, *sugoroku* games experienced booms in popularity, especially during the seventeenth century and the Meiji period (1868–1912).¹² It was during these two booms that the variety of *sugoroku* games diversified and flourished, evolving from a game that originally espoused moral didacticism in Buddhism to one that embraced numerous themes, including war, literature, and travel. As the rules of *sugoroku* matured, the games also became more structurally diverse, with increasingly elaborate rules, the possibility of losing progress, and more intricate board paths and illustrations.¹³

Sugoroku games, printed primarily in monthly children’s magazines, were circulated on a nationwide scale between the 1920s and 1960s.¹⁴ The magazine *Shōnen Kurabu* 少年クラブ, or Boys Club, issued roughly 750 thousand copies of the 1936 New Year’s issue with a *sugoroku* supplement; the *Shōjo Kurabu* 少女クラブ, or Girls Club, distributed 450 thousand copies in the same year.¹⁵ The game’s unique capacity to address a variety of themes has allowed *sugoroku* games to remain in vogue among evolving Japanese audiences throughout the transwar period. During the Second Sino-Japanese War and World War II, as the Japanese government

¹¹ Colin Mackenzie and Irving L. Finkel, eds., *Asian Games: The Art of Contest* (Asia Society, 2004), 32.

¹² Mackenzie and Finkel, *Asian Games*, 79.

¹³ Mackenzie and Finkel, *Asian Games*, 80.

¹⁴ Sabine Frühstück, “Paper Battles,” in *Playing War: Children and the Paradoxes of Modern Militarism in Japan* (University of California Press, 2017), 62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pwtegx.7>.

¹⁵ Mackenzie and Finkel, *Asian Games*, 86.

mobilized troops for the war in China and later in Southeast Asia, governmental agencies sponsored a variety of propaganda tools, including *sugoroku* games, to influence the Japanese populace into supporting the war effort. This section examines two *sugoroku* games: *Capturing Hankou Sugoroku* published in 1939 by the Shōgakukan company, and *Patriotic Women Sugoroku* published in 1934 by the Patriotic Women's Association. Both games were designed and published through the collaboration between government agencies and commercial publishers.¹⁶

Fundamentally, most *sugoroku* games from the 1930–1945 period featured a basic “map” with numerous paths and routes that had seemingly endless possibilities for their young participants to engage with—allowing them to place themselves within the game’s narrative and experiment with adult identities and fates.¹⁷ The following *sugoroku* game (Fig. 1), titled *Kankō Kōryaku Dai-Sugoroku* (漢口攻略大双六) or *Capturing Hankou Sugoroku*, was part of a New Year’s bonus supplement on the back of an educational magazine published by the Shōgakukan company marketed specifically to sixth graders.¹⁸

¹⁶ Frühstück, “Paper Battles,” 65.

¹⁷ Charlotte Eubanks, “Playing at Empire: The Ludic Fantasy of *Sugoroku* in Early-Twentieth-Century Japan,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 2, no. 2 (2016): 39.

¹⁸ As Professor Noboru Tomonari has noted, Shōgakukan and other publishers, including Ōbunsha, were similar in that they were publishing a different magazine for each of six grades in elementary school, three grades in middle school, and the three grades in high school. Their overall sales figures were not tremendous, which is reasonable given their marketing strategy catering to a grade-based level. However, I contend that this in fact reflects the attention and care paid towards the developing stages of children, that artists and publishers recognize the differences and nuances between, say, a first-grader and a fourth-grader, and thereby labour to adapt both language and content for the intended audience.



Figures 1 (left) and 2 (right). *Kankō Kōryaku Dai-Sugoroku* 漢口攻略大双六 (*Capturing Hankou Sugoroku*), Shōgakukan, Tokyo, 1939. Front and back of a single item. From the *sugoroku* collection at Princeton University's Cotsen Children's Library.

As children imagined themselves within a narrative map informed by current news and events, the ludic nature embedded within the game's structure enabled them to mirror the military achievements and progression of the Japanese army through play. Published in 1939, the game features a full page of recent wartime developments located on the back of the game board. The acts of playfully conquering Hankou and annexing the capital of Nanjing were rendered all the more realistic through vivid illustrations, representing simulations of real-life military actions such as army reconnaissance. Combined with the didactic nature of such maps, it framed the appreciation of Japanese activities overseas as liberating oppressed Asians under the banner of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere in the minds of young children.¹⁹ This is evident when the game is read alongside the news section on the opposite page (Figure 2), which linked Japanese military advances and mapping with children's war-themed *sugoroku* play.

Yet the most apparent disconnect between simulation and real-life—and perhaps most critical for its propagandistic purpose—is the absence of permanent death. While players can face misfortune and lose

¹⁹ Frühstück, "Paper Battles," 63. The "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" was an ideological concept created by the Japanese colonial empire that claimed to free Asia from Western powers. In reality, this served as a front for brutal Japanese conquest, colonial domination, and resource extraction of its neighbours.

in-game progression, they can never truly be eliminated from the game, allowing players to continuously replay the game until they win. While news reports detail the deadly battles fought against the Chinese, there is a stark absence of death in the actual game board. For example, the news entry for 8/13/1937 printed on the back of the *Capturing Hankou Sugoroku* game reported the beginning of the Battle of Shanghai, one of the longest and bloodiest military engagements of World War II. Nevertheless, this *sugoroku* game published two years after that battle did nothing to reflect wartime realities. Other battles infamous for their ferocious fighting such as the 1938 Battle of Xuzhou and the 1938 Battle of Wuhan were portrayed similarly, with the Japanese army imagined as invincible and undefeatable, sanitizing the gruesome reality of the war.

On the other hand, the *Aikoku Fujin Sugoroku* (愛國婦人双六), or *Patriotic Women Sugoroku* imparted to its players the appropriate wartime roles of the ideal Japanese woman by using a life-course map rather than a literal cartographic map. Edited, published, and distributed as a magazine supplement for girls in 1934, this *sugoroku* game encouraged the exploration of a social identity aligned with Japan's war aims, as part of the Patriotic Women's Association's (PWA) greater mission of homefront mobilization.²⁰



Figure 3. *Aikoku Fujin Sugoroku* 愛國婦人双六 (Patriotic Women *Sugoroku*), Aikoku Fujinkai, Tokyo, 1934. From the *sugoroku* collection at Princeton University's Cotsen Children's Library.

²⁰ Ryoko Okamura, "Making Patriotic Mothers—愛国の母をつくる: Images of Motherhood and the Role of Government-Sponsored Women's Organizations in Japan's Home Front," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, no. 55/56 (2019): 55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27159886>.

Targeting young girls and adult women, the PWA published this *sugoroku* as a life map in which they could visually experience their gendered expectations, encouraging social values amenable to the Japanese war effort.²¹ Square six introduces the role of motherhood to children by teaching healthy dieting while square ten encourages mothers to maintain children's health with regular doctor examinations. As the player progresses, their in-game identity slowly evolves; the game pushes them to fully embrace a mature, motherly role as they participate in more and more patriotic activities specifically in relation to their gender.

Square twenty-eight emphasizes the traditional role of women caring for newborns and square forty-one illustrates the significance of mothers as children's educators through daily readings of patriotic magazines and literature. Eventually, the players reach the lone geographical feature, located at the top of the *sugoroku* game board: the magnificent Mount Fuji, illuminated by the rising sun, whose centre is represented by the words “教育教化” (*kyōiku kyōka*), “Education and Moral Enlightenment.” Its brilliant rays all reflect the elements that together mould and create the ideal woman, exemplified by attending girls' schools that emphasized moral education and training in domestic skills as well as participating in various courses offered by women's organizations in topics ranging from hygiene to patriotic service.

During this period, Mount Fuji was used in wartime propaganda as an emblematic bearer of Japanese imperialism in its alleged liberation of Asians from European colonization for the creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.²² The rising sun was featured prominently in mainstream propaganda as the product of the intersection between imperial

²¹ As a *sugoroku* game, the *Aikoku Fujin Sugoroku* was disseminated through freebies handed out during various events or delivered to members and friends of the organization. While I have not been able to find specific data that details the exact number of games were dispensed to the Japanese public, especially with regards to the female sphere, the PWA was a major organization during its heyday and possessed widespread support and membership—illustrating the numerous networks this game could have travelled to reach large numbers of people.

²² Byron H. Earhart, “War and Peace,” in *Mount Fuji: Icon of Japan* (University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 170, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6wgfmng>.²³

Japanese mythology, divine destiny, and militaristic nationalism. Posters, films, and cartoons commonly displayed themes in which the sun's scorching rays defended against Allied nations or showed Allied leaders futilely defying the sun—reflecting Japan's modern strength and the Japanese people's divine status as descendants of Amaterasu, the sun goddess.²³ When evaluated collectively within the context of the *Patriotic Women Sugoroku*, the PWA attempted to internalize the imperial expectations of the ideal woman within its players, rooting this social identity deep within Japan's mythical past, contemporary political symbolism, and national identity. Just as the rays from the divine sun can scorch and burn Japan's enemies, the work done by women on the homefront too can protect Mount Fuji, and by extension, Japan.

At this stage, players become the ideal Japanese woman wholly aligned with imperial expectations, one whose social identity embodied the notion of “good wives, wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母). First appearing in the Meiji era, the “good wives, wise mothers” educational ideology emerged as part of the government's efforts to regulate women's roles in society by framing domestic labour, including caregiving and childrearing, as key to the nation's progress and stability.²⁴ Yet, wartime gender ideology differed from pre-war gender ideology; whereas social values primarily concerned domestic life in the pre-war era, wartime gender ideology pushed for women to be active participants in wartime public spheres as patriotic mothers. In the latter stages, women become increasingly involved in the war effort, actively taking part in the making of care packages for soldiers on the front, going to shrines to pray and pay their respect to dead soldiers, and embarking on comfort visits to console bereaved families. By the fifty-sixth square, the player attains the qualifications required to participate in the *Honbu Sōkai* (本部総会) or Headquarters General Assembly, a meeting where PWA members continue

²³ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (Pantheon Books, 1986), 222.

²⁴ Shizuko Koyama, “The ‘Good Wife and Wise Mother’ Ideology in Post–World War I Japan,” trans. Gabriel A. Sylvain, *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*. English Supplement, no. 7 (1994): 31–52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42772075>.

to express their devotion to the imperial Japanese mission through the organization of nationwide activities and mobilization of volunteers. While *sugoroku* games are, at their core, board games for entertainment, they possess a fundamental capacity for didacticism by permitting their authors to embed ideologies and messages in the game's very structures, illustrations, and captions.

The cheap cost, beautifully illustrated game boards, and varied replayability enhance both the reach and legitimacy of *sugoroku* games. Unlike elite or institutional settings, these games were widely circulated amongst common people, most often in domestic and private spaces, allowing them to permeate aspects of daily life. Importantly, the authority or surveillance intended to be internalized appears not as explicit state power, but as entertainment and tradition. At a time when resources for formal education were stretched thin, *sugoroku* games represented a compelling and influential medium because they could be disseminated widely in popular culture and appeared distinct from the strict confines of state institutions.

Building off my previous analysis of select *sugoroku* games, I further contend that the tripartite social layers inherent in the nature of the games—the individual, collective, and institutional layers—reflect how the power in *sugoroku* games operated through players' imaginations and play. *Sugoroku* games, while ostensibly just board games, universally penetrated the homes of millions of Japanese people across the country in an unprecedented fashion. Their presence as alleged educational material to be hung up on walls or repeatedly studied and played, as encouraged by some *sugoroku* games, served as perpetual reminders of the imperial agenda, and subconsciously, of state surveillance—as images of Japanese troops or the powerful naval fleet could be both a source of pride and constant notice of what the proper attitude ought to be.²⁵

This individual ludic experience constitutes the first step in how *sugoroku* games moulded their players, as while several players interacted

²⁵ Eubanks, "Playing at Empire," 39.

with the same landscape and illustrated actors, the experience was ultimately individual, isolated, and unique due to the unpredictable roll of the dice. Fundamentally, the *sugoroku* game invites its participants to embark on a spatial journey, one replete with imaginary landscapes, a set narrative, and a framework for processing these geographies. The imagination component is essential within this ludic framework; as participants envision themselves as conquerors and builders of empire, they are simultaneously internalizing the ideologies and messages embedded within the game's framework. These same ideologies are meant to serve as the guide to how participants are expected to respond to select situations and symbolisms.

The second social layer comprises the players as a collective: *sugoroku* games were intended to be played within a social setting that may include younger kids and with the general supervision of parental or elderly figures. As Eubanks understands, the act of playing these games and imagining oneself as a fictional figure was often a source from which elders and peers elicited pride and patriotism.²⁶ Therefore, for the players themselves, the need for both familial and social acceptance and cohesion propels them to engage with the *sugoroku* game's framework, and by doing so, safeguards the game's propaganda from any potential deviation or questioning on the part of its participants through social pressure. Consequently, the state's authority flowed into the homes of private citizens in the form of cherished educational materials meant to be enjoyed by young children, their peers, and even adult figures.

Further broadening the scope, the final layer involved the dissemination of *sugoroku* games and their influence on major social settings, including special family gatherings and the everyday life of ordinary people. *Sugoroku* games were distributed to countless families all around Japan, allowing young children and adults to play the same games, cultivate similar experiences, and engage in homogeneous spatial journeys.²⁷

²⁶ Eubanks, "Playing at Empire," 39.

²⁷ As mentioned earlier, according to data from two magazines, one for boys and the other for girls, hundreds of thousands of games were issued as supplements to children across Japan. These are just two outlets for the dissemination of *sugoroku* games, without taking into account

As a result, internalization occurred on a nationwide scale, whereby even when, for instance, young children leave their homes, the experience and impact of playing *sugoroku* games remain with them and are applicable at schools or other social settings they may find themselves in. The invisible power of the state now flowed from individuals' bodies outwards and into various social situations, radiating their internalized ideology outwards, policing and monitoring both the individual and those around them.

Conclusion

During the postwar period, a devastated economy, impoverished population, and struggling industry made the publication, circulation, and sale of monthly children's magazines difficult—and with it the sales of *sugoroku* games declined dramatically.²⁸ Additionally, with the rise of online video games globally and the ability to now enjoy games on a mobile device seemingly anywhere and at any time, the board game industry as a whole has experienced a reduction in both playership and sales. Nevertheless, a quick search on popular retailer platforms or a stroll in a Japanese board game shop will reveal the enduring presence of *sugoroku* games.

My principal historiographic contribution lay in analyzing *sugoroku* games from 1930 to 1945 not only as propaganda tools for the imperial war cause, but also as a powerful instrument of social control through self-control informed by Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon. To that end, I drew upon the methodology developed by Eubanks and Frühstück to examine two examples of wartime *sugoroku* games featuring imperial propaganda. Following that analysis, I posit that the ludic nature of the *sugoroku* games allowed both governmental agencies and publishers to actuate the internalization of authority, so as to impress upon players identities aligned with imperial goals, through three layers of social engagement. In conclusion, under a Foucauldian framework, I present *sugoroku* games as a conduit that normalized state authority within the

other magazine publications let alone more grassroots efforts from door-to-door salesmen who sold special editions of *sugoroku* games during holidays.

²⁸ Mackenzie and Finkel, *Asian Games*, 79.

domestic space, demonstrating how the game board acted as a significant site where ideology and power converged.

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The Synergy between the Relationally Fluid Nature of Selfhood and the Japanese Pronominal System

Andela Stepić

Abstract

The main hypothesis of this work is that languages such as Japanese, which use nominal rather than determiner pronouns, conceptualize and linguistically express the *self* and *other* in a fundamentally different non-dichotomous way. One of the assumptions is that Japanese pronouns do not merely serve a semantically neutral deictic, in other words referential, function, but also function as lexical expressions that encode identity, social role, status, the relationship with the *other* (usually the listener), and much more within the very act of reference. If we consider Japanese first-person pronouns (*watashi*, *boku*, *ore*, *watakushi*, etc.), they do not simply mean “I” (as an index finger pointing toward oneself); rather, they convey “I am this,” and not only that, but also “I am this in relation to you,” as well as “I am this in relation to you under these particular circumstances.” This work will try to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to demonstrate the notion of a fluid non-static self viewed through theories of social modeling and the relational nature of the Japanese language. Particular attention will also be devoted to the role of pronouns in discourse and to the question of whether this role changes when a lexical (N-pronoun), rather than determiner (D-pronoun), unit is in use. Although Japanese is not the only language that uses N-pronouns, its tendency to encode subtle semantic distinctions directly within the linguistic structure, rather than relying on extralinguistic means, makes it particularly well suited for in-depth analysis.

*“All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.”*

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1599).

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I. About Pronouns

What are pronouns? Why do they exist and what is their role in conversation? Can a language exist without pronouns? What do pronominal systems look like in Indo-European languages and how do they differ from those in Japanese? Is there a tangible reason within Japanese society that correlates with its referential system?

Before we delve into the different conceptualizations of the *self* and the *other* associated with the use of N-pronouns, let us first break down and clarify the core element of this study: pronouns themselves. The term pronoun already carries, in its etymology, the idea of substitution. The Latin *pronomem* literally means “that which stands in place of a noun” (*pro* = “instead of,” *nomen* = “name, noun”). This understanding of pronouns is entirely clear, direct, and obvious in languages such as English. Under Noguchi’s framework, pronouns in those languages function as *determiner pronouns* (D-pronouns)—a distinct, functional grammatical category designed primarily for structural substitution.¹

The primary function of pronouns is anaphoric, which falls under the underdeterminancy characteristic of language.² *Anaphora* is a term that describes referring to things and entities that have already been introduced or are identifiable to the speech participants.³ Instead of repeatedly saying, for example, *that man called Yamada who came to the konbini yesterday with a dog*, we can simply say *he* (provided that the referent is sufficiently clear from the context). Pronouns simplify and enhance conversation by making utterances less bulky and reducing unnecessary repetition. Once a particular element has been established in the discourse, there is no need to name it repeatedly; it can instead be referred to by using pronouns. This phenomenon

¹ Noguchi, Tohru, “Two Types of Pronouns and Variable Binding,” *Language* 73, no. 4 (1997): 783.

² Daniel L. Everett, *How Language Began: The Story of Humanity’s Greatest Invention* (Profile Books, 2017), 3.

³ Keep in mind that anaphora in linguistics is different from the anaphora in rhetorics.

is called *cognitive deload*.⁴ Human cognitive capacity is limited and language must rely on mechanisms that reduce processing demands. Pronouns allow us to compress information into concise, cognitively economical expressions, which enables complex meanings to be communicated without overburdening the participants.

Underdeterminancy is a term coined by Daniel Everett. He described it as “saying less than what is intended to be communicated and leaving unspoken assumptions to be figured out by the hearer in some way.”⁵ He also adds that underdeterminancy has always been a part of language. Not only is the usage of pronouns part of this feature, but I would also add the *pro-drop* feature, sometimes called *deletion*, to be the sub-category of this characteristic.

In Japanese, however, a syntactic problem arises. According to Kuroda,⁶ pronouns in Japanese do not replace nouns; rather, they are nouns that have taken on the function of reference, or self-reference. In other words, they do not stand in place of a noun, but they themselves belong to the nominal category. Japanese pronouns are therefore not merely substitutes for nouns, rather, they possess a naming function themselves, which makes their nature closer to that of nouns. This is precisely why they are classified as N-pronouns. Whereas D-pronouns serve merely as empty structural placeholders in a sentence, N-pronouns function as full lexical nouns, carrying rich semantic meaning and relational nuance directly within themselves. Nevertheless, it is inarguable that they still fulfill the same function of cognitive deload. By using a lexical expression, the function of pronouns is not narrowed, but rather expanded. In Japanese, the act of reference incorporates not only cognitive deloading, but also additional semantic and social connotations, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

⁴ Martin P. J. Edwards, *The Origins of Self: An Anthropological Perspective* (UCL Press, 2019), 124.

⁵ Everett, *How Language Began*, 3.

⁶ Sige-Yuki Kuroda, *Generative Grammatical Studies in the Japanese Language* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1965).

II. Defining Japanese Language through the Social Lens

How do linguists today view the Japanese language? How does it differ from English? How does the sensibility of English and Japanese speakers differ? Are certain features of the language responsible for the emergence of an N-pronoun system?

Before we begin closely examining the system of pronouns in Japanese, we must first address the overarching system within which they operate—the Japanese language and the society itself.

It is well known that Japanese society is regarded as more group-oriented than the predominantly self-oriented societies of the West.⁷ It also is rigidly structured by hierarchy and the concept of *wa* (和, English: *harmony*), that emphasizes the need to maintain interpersonal balance and avoid unnecessary conflict, is still considered fundamental in contemporary society. What I want to highlight here is that I do not condone the notion that Japanese and Western societies are dichotomously opposed. Rather, in a Weberian sense of ideal types, are located at a certain position along the continuum.

Japanese language is also highly contextual and affective, and it shows strong features of what Maynard calls *relationality*.⁸ She describes it as one of the frameworks for understanding the Japanese sociocultural context and gives the following definition:

“Relationality” refers to the reciprocal influence exerted by two different elements that are reflexively characterized by each other. More specifically, it refers to the mutual relationship that language—as well as thought—comes into contact with in sociocultural and situational contexts. For example, linguistic strategies and social context are interrelated; the use of linguistic

⁷ Senko K. Maynard, *Japanese Communication: Language and Thought in Context* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), 19.

⁸ Maynard, *Japanese Communication*, 17.

expressions (e.g., politeness strategies) is determined in part by the context in which they are used. In turn, the use of linguistic expressions itself determines in part the changing and mutually renewing social context.⁹

Maynard also identifies five key features of Japanese relationality:

1. Styles change depending on interpersonal, social, and situational context. This shows the language's overt response to the relation it holds to context, for example, politeness, honorifics, masculine/feminine speech, and so on.
2. Certain phrases express the speaker's personal and often emotional attitude toward the information and the addressee. These phrases reveal meaning that is motivated and/or encouraged by interpersonal relationality cues, for example, adverbs, interactional particles, sentimental words, and swear words.
3. Rather than prioritizing information only, the speaker's perspective toward that information is overtly expressed, always taking the addressee's point of view into account. Examples include topic-comment structure, sentence-final manipulation, verbs of giving and receiving, and passive sentences.
4. Rather than prioritizing the specification of who-does-what-to-whom, the event as a whole is presented first in a nominal clause; then personal attitudes are added. This structural preference contributes to the rhetoric of commentation shown by topic-comment structure, nominalization and nominal predicates, and rhetorical structures.
5. Strategies abound to avoid unratiſed confrontation, and verbal expressions are constrained by interpersonal relationality cues, which the speaker recognizes. Speech styles that encourage interpersonal rapport reveal the importance of monitoring and

⁹ Maynard, *Japanese Communication*, 17.

collaboratively responding to others, for example, collaborative strategies, listener responses, joint head movement, silence, and ratified conflicts.¹⁰

From now on, mainly this framework will be employed as the primary analytical lens through which the actualization of identity in discourse is examined.

III. Identity Formation and Transformation

What is identity? Is it really crucial to human beings? What is the correlation between the sense of wholeness and self-identity? Who is in charge of identity formation? What are the different levels of identity? Do they all exist simultaneously or do they appear, disappear and reappear in response to different stimuli?

One of the first psychologists who dealt with identity was Erik Erikson (1902–94).¹¹ For him, the idea of ego identity (often referred to as the *self*) is described as an individual's personal sense of continuity. When we think of our body as a system of cells, its survival depends on the integration and coordination of trillions of cellular units. Each cell, although a living entity in itself integrates into a larger system—tissues, organs and ultimately the organism as a whole. If we observe living organisms in such a reduced, biological way, a question naturally emerges: is wholeness actually a functional illusion,¹² and what evolutionary purpose does it serve for the organism? The most obvious one is coordinated decision-making which makes survival and reproduction more probable. In the theory of evolution, traits that enhance reproductive success have a chance to become selectively advantageous and, if they are heritable and stable enough, can be reinforced.

If, in addition to an organism's capacity to perceive itself as a unified whole, we consider the emergence of consciousness that reaches the

¹⁰ Maynard, *Japanese Communication*, 17.

¹¹ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1968).

¹² Edwardes, *The origins of Self: An Anthropological Perspective*, 49–51.

level of reflexive self-awareness, then self-identity appears as a natural progression of this development. Furthermore, if we take into account that humans are social beings who tend to thrive the most in social integration and collective belonging (with certain pathological exceptions), we can better understand the importance and functional necessity of identity formation. Self-identity helps individuals find their place within a social structure and orient their behavior accordingly within a community, and by doing so they can facilitate social coordination and integration.

Now let us have a look at Bandura's social cognitive theory, often referred to as *social modelling*. According to Bandura,¹³ humans can learn a skill or acquire knowledge not only through direct experience, but also by observing others. He claims there is a dynamic loop between the environment, the self, and behaviour. Therefore, the self is not fixed, nor something construed solely from within, but is instead shaped through third-person self-reflection and social feedback. Individuals perceive the actions of others and, by integrating that input, act in a certain way. This process is directly connected to self-identity, as people often identify themselves with what they do and the manner in which they do it. It is one of the more straightforward ways in which we perceive ourselves within a social context.

This aspect of identity can be observed for example, in families that have practiced the same craft for generations. If the Yamada family has been producing finely crafted kimono for generations and is known for this profession, the family is socially recognized primarily as kimono makers. In this way, occupational practice becomes a central component of their social identity. Moreover, the skill of kimono production is transmitted across generations. Younger members first learn the craft by observing older members before gradually transitioning into direct practice. At first, making kimono is not yet part of the child's identity. However, if the child grows up in a social environment that imposes certain expectations, then through observation and later participation, the child eventually becomes a kimono

¹³ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Prentice-Hall, 1977), 22.

maker, and somewhere along the way, they have internalized a socially transmitted identity of being a kimono maker.

From this, we can conclude that identity is not something we are born with, but rather a construct that gradually emerges and transforms through interaction with the social world. The fact that every individual is given a name at birth demonstrates the importance of identity for everyday social interaction. A name functions not only as a referential label and a sign of continuity but also as a base for social modelling, through which individuals become the objects of others' perceptions. These externally constructed models of ourselves, when internalized, are shaping one's self-perception in a recursive process of identity formation.

If we think of identity and a sense of self as something multifaceted, the self discussed so far is mostly what Lebra calls an *interactional self* —“that is a self that is keenly aware of the partner and acts accordingly, and it is foregrounded in the interactional place. ... Linguistic expressions chosen when presenting an interactional self follow social conventions and expectations most diligently.”¹⁴ Lebra also suggests that, regarding specifically Japanese senses of self, at least two other different aspects are recognized: the *inner self* and the *boundless self*. The inner self is the hidden, private self that resides in the heart and spirit, while the boundless self is the “empty self, non-self, non-thinking, mindless, or nothingness.”¹⁵

My own extension of Lebra's framework would be the addition of a Freudian id-like self. Another perspective of self that occupies the liminal space between the interactional self, the inner self, and the boundless self, representing the continual negotiation between internalized social norms and instinctual drives—a tension that can be understood through Bakhtin's notion of *centripetal* and *centrifugal forces* operating within the individual.¹⁶ Centripetal force is a force that pulls an object inward toward the centre of

¹⁴ Lebra, *Self in Japanese Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 115.

¹⁵ Lebra, *Self in Japanese Culture*, 115.

¹⁶ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981), 271.

rotation. In this context, it represents social conformity, institutional norms and the preservation of group harmony (*wa*). Conversely, centrifugal force pushes an object outward away from the centre—corresponding to authentic self-expression, personal agency and or even rebellion. This elusive and largely instinctive dimension of the self is rarely perceived consciously as part of one's identity, yet it manifests itself in the gaps of selfhood and in the seemingly inexplicable decisions individuals make.

IV. The Perception of Selfhood in Japanese

Now that we have defined the principal components of this study, we can turn our attention to how they interact, shape one another, and transform through their mutual interplay. The N-pronoun system in the Japanese language has certain specific features that are not present in languages with D-pronoun systems, such as English.

Comparing the N-Pronoun system to the D-Pronoun system

The fundamental difference between these two systems can be viewed from two perspectives, the first being word origin. In English, pronouns have historically operated as pure deictic¹⁷ placeholders with variable binding functions, rather than evolving from nouns that extended their nominal use into indexical and substitutive roles.¹⁸ In Japanese, however, we observe a gradual evolution of lexical nouns into pronouns. For example, *watashi* originally carried the meaning of a “private/personal matter,” whereas *boku* referred to a “manservant.”¹⁹ Comparable semantic transformations seem to find no equivalent within European pronominal systems.

The second distinction lies in their functional usage in discourse. While D-pronoun systems employ pronouns primarily as structural units, N-pronoun systems perform this referential task while carrying deep,

¹⁷ Deictic: relating to a word or phrase whose meaning depends on who is speaking, who is being addressed, where they are, etc.; for example, *me* and *here*.

¹⁸ Noguchi, “Two Types of Pronouns and Variable Binding,” 777–79.

¹⁹ Osamu Ishiyama, *Diachrony of Personal Pronouns in Japanese: A Functional and Cross-Linguistic Perspective* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2019), 15.

embedded semantic meaning due to their nominal origins. The Japanese language closely reflects Japanese society. In a culture that is distinctly group-oriented and driven by the preservation of *wa*, it is fitting that the referential system has integrated such subtle yet profound social connotations. Actively referring to another participant or even oneself is a delicate act in Japanese. Addressing someone directly projects one's utterance into another's personal territory. Reference is thus simultaneously an intimate, potentially intrusive act and an inescapable necessity of discourse. Consequently, Japanese speakers rely on N-pronouns as dynamic relational tools that allow them to continually negotiate social distance, hierarchy, and context rather than deploying static structural placeholders.

First person pronouns and selfhood

To examine how first-person N-pronouns function and how they are being pragmatically negotiated in the moment of speech, let us consider an example of conversation from the film *Your Name* 君の名は (Japanese: *Kimi no Na wa*, 2016).²⁰ The context is as follows: Mitsuha, a high school girl from a rural area, and Taki, a high school boy from Tokyo, mysteriously swap bodies one morning. Mitsuha wakes up in Taki's body and goes to school. During lunch, while sitting with Taki's friends, she behaves in an unusual manner (for Taki).

友達: お前さー、どうやったら通学で道に迷えるんだよ。

(Tomodachi: Omae saa, dō yattara tsūgaku de michi ni mayoeru n da yo.)

三葉: えっ、えーっと、わたしー、(Mitsuha: E, eetto, watashi ...)

友達: わたし? ! (Tomodachi: Watashi?!)

三葉: えっ、わたくし... 僕! (Mitsuha: E, watakushi... boku!)

友達: は? ! (Tomodachi: Ha?!)

三葉: 俺? (Mitsuha: Ore?)

²⁰ *Your Name* (*Kimi no Na wa*), directed by Makoto Shinkai (CoMix Wave Films, 2016), Netflix.

友達: (うなずきながら) うん。(Tomodachi: (unazukinagara) Un.)

三葉: (ほっとして) はあっ... 俺、楽しかったやよ! (Mitsuha: (hottoshite) Haa ... Ore, tanoshikatta yayo)²¹

The following is the Netflix dubbed version:

Tomodachi: How did you wind up getting lost on your way to school?

Mitsuha: Hmm, well ... a girl ...

Tomodachi: A girl?!

Mitsuha: A! A gal ...

Tomodachi: Hm?!

Mitsuha: I ... I mean ... a guy

Tomodachi: (*nodding*) Yeah.

Mitsuha: (*sigh of relief*) Phew ... You know, guys just wanna have fun.²²

The pronouns, which are key to the dialogue here, can be classified as shown in Table 1. In the given example, we observe significant discrepancies between the Japanese and English versions, which is entirely expected in translation cases like this. The translator had relatively little quantity of content to work with, yet faced a substantial dilemma: How should all these first-person singular pronouns be translated? In English, there is only one “I.” In the end, the translator opted for lexical expressions. *Watashi* was translated as *a girl*, *watakushi* as *a gal*, *boku* was preserved

Table 1: Japanese First-Person Pronouns and Their Translation in the Netflix Dub

²¹ *Your Name (Kimi no Na wa)*, directed by Makoto Shinkai, Netflix, 0:21:18

²² *Your Name (Kimi no Na wa)*, directed by Makoto Shinkai, Netflix dub.

Pronoun	First axis: Politeness	Second axis: Gender Identity / Social Role	Usage Context in Daily Life	Word Choice in the Netflix Dub
Watashi (私)	Standard / Polite	Female (casual); Neutral (formal)	Standard self-reference for women in daily speech; neutral/polite for all in business/public settings.	"a girl"
Watakushi (私)	Hyper-formal	Gender-neutral (formal/corporate)	Used in high-level business, formal speeches.	"a gal"
Boku (僕)	Soft / Informal to Semi-formal	Young Male / Boyish	Used by boys/young men in daily life; mild, polite, or boyish male self-reference.	(Preserved through context)
Ore (俺)	Informal / Rough	Masculine	Standard among male peers, close friends, or inferiors; connotes casual assertiveness and intimacy.	"a guy"

without explicit lexical substitution in this segment, and *ore* was rendered as *a guy*. Some pairs are indeed close to actual contemporary usage (*watashi*—*a girl*), while others are merely conveniently placed in order to create the impression of a coherent and meaningful flow (*watakushi*—*a gal*). The realization of the self in Japanese is to a large extent reflected in the use of pronouns. This does not refer only to the self-proclaimed use of pronouns; rather, they must be used in accordance with the surrounding social environment. Mitsuha, who had previously lived using *watashi* (we may assume this was her default self-reference, given that it appears as her first instinct), encounters an uncomfortable situation in which she is forced to abandon this self-perception. This does not occur because she no longer experiences *watashi* as part of her inner sense of self (recall Lebra's notion of the *inner self* that lives within us regardless of our physical manifestation),²³ but rather because her social environment can no longer accept her as *watashi*.

Discrepancies in translation highlight the fundamental difference between D-pronoun and N-pronoun systems. To better understand the translator's dilemma, one must first examine the sociolinguistic parameters governing Japanese first-person pronouns in use (four that appear here are just a part of it). They operate along two main axes: Politeness (polite vs. casual) and gender identity/social role.

While English relies on a single first-person D-pronoun ("I") devoid of gender or social register, Japanese has a lexically rich set of N-pronouns. They function as full nominal items that encode gender, social status, and relative intimacy within the very act of reference. The English translator was forced to use full lexical nouns (*girl*, *gal*, *guy*) to convey what Japanese naturally encodes directly inside its N-pronoun system.

Moreover, this part of the dialogue can be described as a kind of a rapid social modelling and instantaneous negotiation theory.²⁴ This situation resembles a form of identity "bargaining"; Mitsuha unconsciously attempts

²³ Lebra, *Self in Japanese Culture*. (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 115.

²⁴ Senko K. Maynard, *Linguistic Creativity in Japanese Discourse: Exploring the Multiplicity of Self, Perspective, and Voice* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 13–16.

to preserve as much of her feminine identity as possible, as she is not yet accustomed to being perceived as male. Starting from the most feminine first-person pronoun *watashi*, she gradually shifts toward increasingly masculine forms such as *boku*, and ultimately *ore*. She attempts to maintain in the social world the femininity that still exists within her inner self, yet she gradually loses this negotiation game, as her environment quickly models her as a male who would appropriately use *ore*. Ultimately, she is implicitly pushed beyond her inner self-identity in order to maintain *wa* (harmony) and the pre-established social framework. Within only a few moments, she is re-modelled by her social environment and loses the negotiation game, being forced to adopt the most masculine first-person form in this interactional context—*ore*.

The same process occurs in everyday life as well, although it is then much more spontaneous, slower, less noticeable, and more natural. In Maynard's words, *communication is not merely the transmission of meaning, but a dynamic process of negotiation between speakers*²⁵. In this sense, we are constantly engaged in a struggle to simultaneously conform to social standards (a centripetal force),²⁶ while also deviating from them in order to express our "true" inner identity (a centrifugal force).²⁷ Naturally, in different individuals different forces prevail. Likewise, in certain situations conformity will dominate, whereas in others resistance and assertive self-expression will become more prominent. However, both situations nonetheless reflect negotiation happening in the moment.

If we want to discuss self-identity within a community that is considered group-oriented and that values *wa*, we must not forget the role of hierarchy and its influence on language. If we observe socially organized animals, this trait contributes, once again, to improved coordination and alignment in the execution of complex tasks, leading to better species

²⁵ Maynard, *Linguistic Creativity in Japanese Discourse*, 13–16.

²⁶ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 271.

²⁷ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 271.

survival and increased safety.²⁸ Humans, especially those who belong to communities that are group-oriented (as opposed to self-oriented), are always organized so that each individual has a specific role. These roles can be distributed along a vertical (hierarchical) or horizontal (specialized) axis. Japanese society values hierarchy, and since language is always a reflection of society, this vertical social dimension cannot be neglected when discussing the expression of individual identity in Japanese.

According to Nakane's *Japanese Society*,²⁹ because of hierarchical organization, Japanese people often do not see themselves as a set of their own attributes, but instead describe themselves in terms of a *frame*. A Japanese person would often identify himself or herself as a member of a particular organization or company. For example, a person named Yamada working for Nintendo would typically introduce himself by saying 「任天堂の山田です (*Nintendoo no Yamada desu*)」 (English: *I am Yamada from Nintendo*), or if we shift the stage to the internet space and our hypothetical Yamada becomes a youtuber, he would describe himself often as 「〇〇チャンネルの山田です (*〇〇channeru no Yamada desu*)」 (English: *I am Yamada from the XX channel*). In both cases, the speaker's identity is presented primarily through their affiliation with a social group or an occupation rather than as an individual with their own attributes in the centre. Within group-oriented and hierarchical societies, the perception of one's social identity tends to accommodate this. Of course, this does not mean that Japanese people do not see themselves as autonomous individuals; rather, we can say that in certain circumstances they may set aside their autonomy in order to maintain group harmony and facilitate easier and clearer social identification.

When someone from a so-called self-oriented society observes this, it may appear as though the individual's sense of self is diminished, or as if their "I" is somehow suppressed or pushed into the background. However, we must also remember that every community, just like every individual,

²⁸ Terrence P. McGlynn, "How Does Social Behavior Evolve?," *Nature Education Knowledge* 1, no. 8 (2010): 33.

²⁹ Chie Nakane, *Japanese society*. (University of California Press, 1970).

possesses its own identity. When we act within a group, we become part of a larger system which, if sufficiently well-coordinated, can once again be perceived as a single functioning body. This is precisely why harmony is so important. The sense of wholeness is thus realized through two dimensions: the self as an individual and the self as part of a community. These two “selves” exist in parallel and mutually influence one another.

Second/Third Person Pronouns and Perception of Otherhood

Continuing the discussion of Japanese society and the perception and expression of the self, we now turn to the *other* as its conceptual counterpart. Second and third person are grouped into a single category here because Japanese speakers frequently avoid using second-person pronouns and instead employ nominal or role-based address forms, which can resemble third-person reference structures.

When addressing someone in the third person such reference is most commonly realized through the use of an individual’s position (professional domain), relational role (private domain), or last/first name (professional/private domain). In professional settings, interaction is typically characterized by a strong sense of hierarchy. The identity of the interlocutor is thereby often foregrounded through their institutional or occupational position.

In Japanese, various linguistic strategies are employed to convey politeness. Just as there is a feminine-to-masculine gradation in first-person reference, there are also gradations of social proximity and interpersonal distance in private life in second and third person forms. The usage of excessively intimate pronouns/names/expressions may evoke discomfort, as it can be perceived as an intrusion into personal space, while excessively polite ones may produce a sense of estrangement and resentment. As interpersonal relations develop and stabilize, the forms of reference used between interlocutors gradually transform as well—from professional titles or surnames with honorifics (most often *-san*), to given names without honorifics, and even to nicknames.

In everyday interaction, this gradual shifting occurs naturally through what Maynard describes as a process of ongoing negotiation.³⁰ The relationship between participants is continuously reestablished and subtly adjusted in response to situational and interpersonal changes. This represents yet another manifestation of relationality in the Japanese language.³¹

As both selfhood and the perception of otherness shift across different contexts, the referential forms we gravitate toward shift as well. Japanese society and language have evolved to attend to subtle social distinctions. Given the emphasis on hierarchical structure and social orientation, it is only natural that each interaction with another individual encodes these principles, embedding them directly into linguistic expression.

We should also not overlook direct second-person forms such as *anata*, *omae*, *kimi*, *anta*, and *sochira*, among others. The use of direct second-person reference is often perceived as very intimate or borderline intrusive, although its pragmatic value varies according to the interpersonal relationship. Close friends, for instance, may comfortably address one another as *omae* or *anta* and at the same time feel a certain sense of closeness, while even the relatively neutral *anata* may nevertheless be regarded as overly direct and very inappropriate, when used to address a superior in a professional setting. Consequently, the choice of a second-person form functions as a linguistic negotiation of interpersonal distance, hierarchy, intimacy, and social alignment. In this sense, second-person expressions in Japanese do not simply answer the question of who is being addressed; I would propose that they simultaneously answer all these questions (and much more):

1. What is the relationship between a speaker and an interlocutor;
2. What social roles do the participants occupy;

³⁰ Maynard, *Linguistic Creativity in Japanese Discourse*, 13–16.

³¹ Maynard, *Japanese Communication*, 17–45.

3. How does the speaker feel towards the interlocutor in the moment of utterance;
4. How much interpersonal distance there is;
5. What emotion does the speaker want to evoke in the interlocutor;
6. Is their relationship stagnant, or is their closeness slowly progressing;
7. Are they on good/bad terms;

When interacting with another individual, we often initially perceive them through their social identity. Because social positions in Japanese society are highly differentiated and finely nuanced, speakers must carefully select forms of address that correspond appropriately to the interlocutor's socially recognized role. As interaction gradually moves beyond the level of social identity and develops into a closer interpersonal relationship (one in which the interlocutors' *inner selves* communicate directly) many of these referential markers become unnecessary. This progression can also be described as a shifting from the *soto*³² (outside) sphere, where communication is primarily mediated through social identities, to the *uchi*³³ (inside) sphere, where communication usually reflects the interlocutors' inner identities.

It is equally important to recognize that no interpersonal relationship is ever completely stagnant. Rather, it is continuously reestablished and renegotiated with every new interaction. Forms of reference, together with numerous other linguistic and non-linguistic cues, function as tools through which this negotiation takes place. They enable speakers to continually recalibrate interpersonal distance, social hierarchy, intimacy, and mutual expectations. In this sense, reference in Japanese is not merely a mechanism for identifying another person; it is one of the primary means through which the fluid, ever-changing identities of both (or more)

³² Maynard, *Japanese Communication*, 32-33.

³³ Maynard, *Japanese Communication*, 32-33.

interlocutors are negotiated and brought into alignment within the interaction itself.

V. Conclusion

This study has examined the relational and fluid nature of both selfhood and the Japanese pronominal system, arguing that the two are fundamentally interconnected. In Japanese, these concepts cannot be understood independently of one another. As different aspects of identity come to the forefront in different interactional contexts, the choice of referential expression changes accordingly. By using N-pronouns instead of D-pronouns, speakers introduce social context, identity, interpersonal relationships, and subjective perspective directly into the act of reference. They can create, try to deepen, or reduce interpersonal distance, establish strictly professional interaction, or signal intimacy and allow the interlocutors' inner selves to emerge. In this way, reference becomes a means of negotiating interpersonal space, reshaping social relationships and continuously constructing identity through interaction.

If we consider language as something that exists only within interpersonal space and as a medium of communication, then every utterance is necessarily infused with context as well as various interpersonal tones and nuances. The act of self-reference, but also the reference of others, is only one way of actualizing identity into something that can be defined.

Every society contains different systems of values and sensibilities that determine which aspects of communication are foregrounded. By examining the unique characteristics of individual languages, we can often sense what is valued and to what extent within a given social context.

From this study, we can conclude that in Japanese society, attention to ever-changing identity is crucial for the maintenance of harmony. The perception of self shifts and transforms together with every scene. And just as the scene can model the self, the self can also model the scene. The participants are never passive agents, and the outcome of communication is

never fully predetermined. The interlocutors, the interactional frame, and external social factors all work together to cohesively construct context.

Every utterance is therefore always contextually embedded, while the speaker, often unconsciously and empirically, selects which aspect of the self to project into this constantly shifting social configuration. Thus, this study will conclude where it began:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.³⁴*

³⁴ Shakespeare, 139–143.

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Takeuchi Yoshimi and the Global Interwar

Jingren Sun

Abstract

This essay reads Takeuchi Yoshimi's 竹内好 early method by inter-reading him with two contemporaries, Tosaka Jun 戸坂潤 and Antonio Gramsci. It argues that behind Takeuchi's critique of Kangaku 漢学 and Shinagaku 支那学, and behind Tosaka's critique of "literaturism" and religious idealism, lies a shared target: the interpretive, spectatorial stance that fails to "confront the turbidity of reality." What both summon in its place is a spirit of ketsudan 決断, the intense involvement and decisive action of the subject. Tracing this current through Takeuchi's wartime "determination" and his dissolution of the Chinese Literature Research Society over the loss of "partisanship," and Gramsci's theory of the party, this essay shows that a single decisionism animated thinkers on opposite ends of the political spectrum and on either side of the "East" / "West" divide. The aim is less to add depth to existing readings of Takeuchi than to widen them, situating him within the "global interwar," which is an age that called its subjects to decide.

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Takeuchi Yoshimi 竹内好 was one of the most intellectually demanding Japanese thinkers of the 20th century. His style of writings are often considered to be obscure and difficult, as he would constantly avoid explicit definitions, nor would he attempt to make his arguments more digestible for the common reader. This obscurity is no affectation. For Takeuchi, it is the only adequate way to say what he means. Perhaps one of his critics, Yoshikawa Kōjirō 吉川幸次郎 gives the most apt description of Takeuchi's intellectual project: "I too happen to respect the child-like mind ... but what I am trying to say is that presuming the universality of such mindset can be troublesome ... for us academics, is it not time for us to acquire the lenses of an adult?"¹ Here, Yoshikawa describes the "child-like mind" as Takeuchi's approach towards his subjects, while Yoshikawa champions a much more mature and scientific one. Yoshikawa then accused Takeuchi, along with his colleagues in the Chinese Literature Research Society (CLRS) of "slapdash-ism," as a criticism of his methodology.

This essay is an analytical reading of Takeuchi's "child-like mind" approach. Over the years, various scholars have already provided excellent analyses of Takeuchi's philosophy, and this essay intends not to bring more depth into the discussion. Instead, I wish to explore the breadth of Takeuchi's early ideas by relating and "inter-reading" him with his contemporaries, such as Tosaka Jun 戸坂潤 and Antonio Gramsci. By doing so, we can begin to better understand the intellectual landscape of the "global interwar" period, where an intellectual current that calls for the intense involvement and decisive actions of the subject is revealed not only across the spectrum of ideology, but also across the geopolitical distinction between "east" and "west." Although an incredibly original thinker, Takeuchi belonged to this wider intellectual struggle of the early 20th century.

Yoshikawa's portrayal of Takeuchi's methodology is rather insightful, but it is not explained in Takeuchi's own terms. Takeuchi himself tends to use the term "literature as attitude" 文学の態度 (or

¹ Sun Ge 孙歌, *Zhuneihao de beilun* 竹内好的悖论 [The paradox of Takeuchi Yoshimi] (生活·读书·新知三联书店, 2023), 27–28.

“literature’s attitude”). This is deeply tied to his roots in literary criticism, and stems from his criticism of *Kangaku* 漢学 and *Shinagaku* 支那学, the two major camps of “China studies” of early 20th-century Japan. Despite having its core sets of discourse entrenched in Chinese Confucianism, *Kangaku* really Japanized the Confucian classics, and serves as an ideological tool for the Japanese ruling class.² Sun Ge characterizes *Kangaku* as a subject concerning Japan rather than a cultural import from China and is certainly not a subject that studies China ethnographically. On the other hand, *Shinagaku* emerges from the attempt to transform *Kangaku*’s traditional approach to China, as well as the knowledge it provides, into an empirical and scientific modern subject, where China would be understood as the “other.” Takeuchi was heavily dissatisfied with both tendencies. To him, *Kangaku* was problematic for its rigid conservatism, but *Shinagaku*’s approach was no better, as it lacked the active involvement of the subject (using the word in its more philosophical definition), which would result in the absence of self-reflection and critical thinking. For Takeuchi, this would only cause *Shinagaku* to become the next *Kangaku*. Both are academic attitudes that not only distance themselves from reality but also lack basic passion for human experience. In Takeuchi’s own words, neither are able to “confront the turbidity of reality,” and in the end, can only produce mere accumulation of knowledge rather than real thought. Instead of the rigidity of *Kangaku* or *Shinagaku*, Japan’s China studies required “a bracing, playful spirit.” To remedy the issues he identified, Takeuchi engages in a series of intellectual gambits he coins as “literature as attitude.”³

Reading Takeuchi’s criticism of the two cliques of Japanese China studies can be confusing, especially when his arguments are framed in literary rather than logical terms. His hostility towards

² For the Japanization of Confucianism, see Maruyama Masao 丸山眞男, “The Sorai School: Its Role in the Disintegration of Tokugawa Confucianism and Its Impact on National Learning,” in *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Mikiso Hane (Princeton University Press, 1974).

³ Sun, *Zhuneihao de beilun*, 21–24.

Kangaku is understandable; that approach towards knowledge was indeed outdated for the people of the 20th century, who developed a particular endorsement for scientific positivism and empiricism. But where does Takeuchi find fault in *Shinagaku*'s pursuit of empirical and scientific methods? To better understand his criticism, we may turn our eyes to his contemporary, Tosaka Jun, who had also offered excellent criticism towards the "scientific method," and did so in a profoundly (and strangely) analogous way to Takeuchi. In *The Japanese Ideology: A Marxist Critique of Liberalism and Fascism*, not only does Tosaka offer an analysis of the problems of the "scientific method," but also reveals the ideology that lies behind such a method.⁴ This act of "inter-reading" is not a superfluous move for shallow analytical sophistication but a necessary step to reach the crux of Takeuchi's intellectual project. To solve a Rubik's Cube, an observation of all sides is indispensable, although these sides may contain vastly different colours and patterns. The same rationale applies here, as one great thinker may complete the puzzle of another, no matter how distant they are in the greater scheme of political taxonomy. Upon grasping the similarity between the essence of his criticism and Tosaka's, we may begin to see Takeuchi not as an isolated figure in his time, but as part of a much wider intellectual current of the interwar period in Japan.

Tosaka, like Takeuchi, was a witness to the Japanese intelligentsia's effort to develop a methodology that revolves around the "philosophical and logical systematization" of their academic subject. Despite decorating their idealist philosophy with scientific terms of modernity, to Tosaka, these scholars had only "set out on the path toward religious idealism." "Religious idealism," to Tosaka, is not just an academic stance but a position to be understood with totality, that is, an attitude towards life itself, especially towards political affairs. Politics and scholarly works are not separate issues; the latter are a branch of the former's attitude and will inevitably inherit that attitude. Tosaka

⁴ Tosaka Jun 戸坂潤, *The Japanese Ideology: A Marxist Critique of Liberalism and Fascism*, trans. Robert Stolz (Columbia University Press, 2024), 9.

identifies the core ideology of Japanese academia as liberalism and argues that it is rooted in idealistic philosophy. The liberty being discussed here is really the liberty from “social and political ideas,” as they are considered obstructions to a “scientific conclusion,” as well as the objectivity of the scholarship that the intelligentsia wished to produce. Without the active engagement with the socio-political base that governs the tensions, limits, and methodology of their subject of study, science becomes the study of symbols (hermeneutics), rather than a critical intellectual activity, hence a type of religious consciousness. The religious idealist “speaks only of the world of meaning,” and the world itself “becomes merely an object of interpretation.”⁵ This is particularly apparent in literary criticism: “With art for art’s sake, the arts and ‘literature’ were explicitly independent of life and reigned above it.”⁶ Tosaka describes this attitude as an ideology of “Literaturism” 文学主義, although its symptoms are certainly not limited to literature or literary criticism.⁷ As a result, literaturist criticism appears in the form of “criticism of pure literature,” an amputation of real criticism. Criticism is constrained to the realms of hermeneutics and interpretation, rather than the active involvement (praxis) of the critic (subject).

This, of course, stems from Tosaka’s Marxist stance. As early as 1845, Marx had criticized Feuerbach for his approach to the scientific method, as the latter treats “the Object [der Gegenstand], actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object [Objekts],” rather than conceiving “human activity itself as objective [gegenständliche] activity.” Marx would ultimately point out that “philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁸ Therefore, through reading what’s absent in Tosaka’s criticism, as he is often criticizing instead of proposing, we may

⁵ Tosaka, *Japanese Ideology*, 9–11.

⁶ Tosaka, *Japanese Ideology*, 191.

⁷ Tosaka, *Japanese Ideology*, 11–13. Tosaka also criticizes how literary critics at the time treated history in a similar fashion.

⁸ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” trans. Cyril Smith, Marxists Internet Archive, accessed June 19, 2026, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/>.

understand the alternative to literaturism which he argues for that was restricted by the heavy censorship on public publication at the time. In Tosaka's opinion, criticism should mediate and unify literature and philosophy under its compass, while placing itself "in relation to its social and journalistic function." In other words, one "must search for the essence of literature (and in the same way of philosophy) not within the literary work but outside of it." That is in material life, rather than the idealist world fabricated by hermeneutics.⁹ Here, Tosaka demonstrates his masterful understanding of dialectical materialism. Tosaka is conducting a "criticism of criticism" 批判の批判 of his time. Unlike the idealist interpretational stance that the latter takes up, Tosaka's criticism is a type of praxis, as he would not have identified the hollowness of the latter if he had not himself engaged in the text, as well as the political-economic conditions that gave birth to these criticisms—a quality that they did not bear. In short, Tosaka's criticism is praxis itself, as it mediates and unifies both literature (the superstructure) and philosophy (the "economic" base). By seeing the unrepresented, Tosaka curbs his criticism from the criticism that he critiques.

Indeed, on the surface level (especially through the lenses of brusque philology), it would be easy to mistake Takeuchi's "literature's attitude" as a type of "literaturism" that Tosaka rejects. However, Takeuchi is, in fact, criticizing the same thing as Tosaka from a different angle. Takeuchi and Tosaka both see the lack of subjective involvement (or engagement) and sharp self-criticism in "science" as products of an interpretive attitude that fails to confront reality. To Takeuchi, the flaw of "science" lies in its inability to "confront the turbidity of reality," and his "literature's attitude" is the only way to do so; to Tosaka, he explains this inability as a result of religious idealism, and the solution to its weakness would be praxis. Of course, neither discuss "reality" 現実 or involvement in the precise context of the other, but their subject of criticism is nonetheless identical.

⁹ Tosaka, *Japanese Ideology*, 188.

By identifying the sameness between the two attitudes, we can also grasp the same spirit they summon, that is the spirit of *ketsudan*, resolution, or decisive actions to be taken. Such *ketsudan* for Tosaka can be straightforwardly expressed as praxis (involvement of the subject) under a Marxist context leads to decisive actions, or more specifically, class struggle as political resolution rather than escaping from it, as Marx suggests changing the world rather than interpreting it. Yet for Takeuchi, this could be much more abstract and ambiguous. Takeuchi had read the Japanese translation of Marx's *The Capital* and even praised it for its rigorous logic and insights, but he was never a Marxist and had never argued for class struggle. Just as Tsurumi Shunsuke 鶴見俊輔 has observed in his biography of Takeuchi, it was during this period that Takeuchi had made his transformation from a nihilist to a romanticist.¹⁰ It is through this transformation perhaps that we can come to understand Takeuchi's spirit of *ketsudan*.

The problem that lies here is why involvement necessarily leads to decisive action in Takeuchi's philosophy. That is because when observation and interpretation are no longer valid options for the subject, it is forced to enter a rootless state and "confront the turbidity of reality." The situation Takeuchi depicts here is very much inspired by (and identical to) the "formation of nothingness" that Lu Xun had described in his poem.¹¹ In Takeuchi's words: "for someone who feels desperate about desperation, they have no other options but to become a "literatus" 文学家. They must not rely on anything, nor can they use anything as their support, but to turn everything into a part of themselves." Lu Xun exemplifies this attitude by "refusing to become himself, or anything other than himself"; he "does not step back, nor does he follow. He first forces himself to duel with the new age, and cleanse himself through

¹⁰ Tsurumi Shunsuke 鶴見俊輔, *Zhengzha zhong de juejuan: Zhunehao zhuan* 挣扎中的决：竹内好传 [Resolution within struggle: A biography of Takeuchi Yoshimi], trans. Liu Feng 刘峰 (上海人民出版社/光启书局, 2025), 117.

¹¹ Lu Xun 鲁迅, "Zheyang de zhanshi 这样的战士" [A warrior of such], in *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集 [The complete works of Lu Xun], vol. 2 (人民文学出版社, 1996), 219–20.

‘struggle,’ then he would pull this cleansed self from the midst of it.”¹² Takeuchi finds the “scientific” attitude of *Shinagaku* unreliable, as the latter relies on the reliability of words, but he himself has always struggled to find the reliable words.¹³ When everything that the subject is involved with (even the subject himself) falls short, the subject is forced to create something new, and to do so requires actions. Sluggish actions are not enough; it is only decisive actions that count. “Either erupt in the silence or perish within it.”¹⁴ This is how Takeuchi perceives this quote of Lu Xun, that is to struggle and take decisive actions, just like the warrior decides to throw his javelin towards the “formation of nothingness” in Lu Xun’s poem.¹⁵

This attitude is why Takeuchi wrote with great passion, his notorious manifesto, “the Greater East Asian War and Our Determination” 大東亜戦争と吾等の決意. To Takeuchi, the attack on Pearl Harbor, accompanied by the Japanese Empire’s decision to declare war on colonial empires like the United States and the British Empire, was the decisive action he had longed for. Invading China only puts the Japanese Empire in an ambiguous position: “We have always questioned: is our Japan really just bullying the weak under the justification of constructing East Asia?!”¹⁶ By waging this war on Anglo-American imperialist forces, Takeuchi believes Japan had proven that:

“We of Japan are no cowards who cower before the strong! When the sword was raised against a mighty enemy, everything stood proven. As a member of the nation, could there be anything more exhilarating than this? It is precisely now that all stands revealed before the world. Our doubts have scattered like clouds and mist. Fine words may delude the multitude, but deeds can never

¹² Takeuchi Yoshimi 竹内好, “Lu Xun 鲁迅,” trans. Li Dongmu 李冬木, in *Jindai de chaoke* 近代的超克 [Overcoming modernity], ed. Sun Ge 孙歌 (生活·读书·新知三联书店, 2016), 85.

¹³ Sun, *Zhuneihao de beilun*, 28–30.

¹⁴ Lu Xun 鲁迅, “Jinian Liuhezhen jun 纪念刘和珍君” [In memory of Miss Liu Hezhen], in *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集 [The complete works of Lu Xun], vol. 3 (人民文学出版社, 1996), 292.

¹⁵ Lu Xun, “Zheyang de zhanshi,” 219–20.

¹⁶ Takeuchi, *Jindai de chaoke*, 240.

deceive the world. The true meaning of building a new order in East Asia and of national liberation has now been transformed into a determination carved into our very bones. This is a determination that no one can alter.”¹⁷

In other words, the “holy war” for East Asia resolved the ambiguous state of the “*Shina Incident*” 支那事變 (Japan’s invasion on China in 1937, which Takeuchi deems as “bullying the weak”). The Japanese Empire, along with its people, has now embarked on the task of creating “new history”:

“History has been created! The face of the world has changed overnight! We have witnessed it all with our own eyes ... To you, the thousand members of the Chinese Literature Research Society: today we stand within an extraordinary state of affairs, and we are resolved to strive together with you in this difficult, constructive struggle. The road ahead is long, and a bright hope calls to us. Let us join hands and press forward toward the realization of our ideal. Listen closely—can you not hear the roar of distant thunder splitting the night sky? Before long, the dawn will break. Our world will be built before our very eyes, by our own hands. My friends, now we shall fight under a new determination. My friends, let us fight side by side!”¹⁸

Although Takeuchi did not formulate what the decisive action should be before the war, neither did he initiate this war (he was but a regular soldier during his time in the Imperial Japanese Army),¹⁹ but without doubt, his satisfaction and joy shown in the tone of this manifesto (“as a member of the nation, could there be anything more exhilarating than this?”) comes from the Greater East Asian War. Takeuchi had longed for this type of decisive action, yet it was hardly a true decision of his. The romantic style that Takeuchi employs also deserves attention, as it signals his

¹⁷ Takeuchi, *Jindai de chaoke*, 240.

¹⁸ Takeuchi, *Jindai de chaoke*, 240, 242.

¹⁹ Tsurumi, *Zhengzha zhong de jueguan*, 141–42.

transformation from a nihilist to a romanticist.²⁰ The transformation itself is an apparent result of decisive action.

Now that we see Takeuchi and Tosaka's attitudes and isomorphic theory towards knowledge and *ketsudan*, we may see that Takeuchi is not as unique a figure as Tsurumi or Sun Ge would suggest. Indeed, Takeuchi's ideas are profoundly original, but he also shares a similar problem awareness under the influence of a similar *zeitgeist* as his contemporaries. Here, a "ketsudan-ism" 決断主義 and negligence towards "hermeneutic approach" to thought are shared between two thinkers who had been positioned on opposite sides of the political spectrum (a romanticist who supported the fascistic cause and a communist), therefore revealing a different dimension of interwar Japanese thought. They are vastly different parts of a picture, but in the end, they share the same canvas.

A year after the publication of Takeuchi's fanatic "determination," the CLRS was disbanded. This decision was primarily made by none other than Takeuchi himself. In his essay clarifying the disbandment, Takeuchi diagnoses the lack of "partisanship" 党派性 as the primary reason:

"The primary reason for the dissolution is that today we have lost our partisanship. The Chinese Literature Research Society has lost the very character that made it the Chinese Literature Research Society ... At its founding, there did indeed dwell within the Chinese Literature Research Society that originary contradiction indispensable for determining and generating a self out of chaos; we argued without cease, gradually separating ourselves out from our environment, and through that very separation we sought, in turn, to set ourselves in a position that commanded it."

The issue of partisanship is perhaps one of the most significant themes of political philosophy of the interwar period. For instance, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia sparked a series of revolutionary parties that

²⁰ Tsurumi, *Zhengzha zhong de jueduan*, 117.

differed from political parties in the past in terms of their structure and organization.²¹ Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci makes his famous remark about political parties in his *Prison Notebooks*:

“The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognized and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form. History has already provided this organism, and it is the political party—the first cell in which there come together germs of a collective will tending to become universal and total. In the modern world, only those historico-political actions which are immediate and imminent, characterized by the necessity for lightning speed, can be incarnated mythically by a concrete individual.”²²

To Gramsci, political parties (here we should at least interpret it as a Leninist-esque vanguard party) are a subject of collective will, are the only political organisms that may provide the “actions which are immediate and imminent, characterized by the necessity for lightning speed” under the interwar circumstances Gramsci was facing, in which he describes as a time when “the old [order] is dying and the new cannot be born.”²³ Witnessing the rise of fascism (as well as being a victim of fascism during the Mussolini regime),²⁴ Gramsci not only recognized that the time called for decisive action, but also formulated a theory of how this might happen. Now, if we return to the seemingly completely unrelated event of the dissolution of the

²¹ Lenin’s vanguard party would later go on to influence political parties from left to right, including the various communist parties that participated in the Comintern, as well as the Kuomintang in China. See Wang Qisheng 王奇生, *Dangyuan, dangquan yu dangzheng: 1924–1949 Zhongguo Guomindang de zuzhi xingtai* 党员、党权与党争: 1924—1949中国国民党的组织形态 [Party members, party power, and party struggles: The organizational structure of the KMT, 1924–1949] (社会科学文献出版社, 2018).

²² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (International Publishers, 1992), 129.

²³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 276.

²⁴ For the life of Gramsci, see Antonio Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, ed. David Forgacs (New York University Press, 2000), 17–25.

CLRS, we may begin to see that Takeuchi, in fact, shared similar notions. It was because the CLRS was not capable of “determining and generating a self out of chaos” as it lacked partisanship, a way to organize (or structure) itself to not only maintain its militancy towards the old (*kangaku*, *shinagaku*), but also defend its revolutionary character and the momentum to push its revolution against its subjects of criticism:

“For me, the Society ought to be ceaselessly growing. It must forever be negating itself, without cease. A life that contains no death, a thought that raises no questions, a culture that does not accomplish its own genesis and development by its own power—all of this is, to me, utterly without meaning.”²⁵

It would be an understatement to say that Takeuchi was disappointed in the CLRS’s decay in its revolutionary characteristics. As he watched the CLRS gain fame and recognition, he only saw the rise of another *Kangaku* or *Shinagaku*, an intellectual tradition that was full of itself rather than the negation of the self. Takeuchi had attempted to reform the society so that it may become independent without his aid, but his efforts were not successful. In other words, Takeuchi had turned to organizational methods when it came to redeem the CLRS, and he concluded that the dissolution happened due to the lack of partisanship. Takeuchi did not use Gramsci’s discourse, but we may see that he had also sought “partisanshipness” as a way to preserve a revolutionary attitude, as well as the *ketsudan* that the CLRS had promised with this attitude. Through Takeuchi’s theoretical resonance with Gramsci on the case of partisanship, we can understand Takeuchi in the global scheme of things for the interwar period. Both saw the necessity of partisanship and its role in taking decisive actions, despite discussing the same issue in vastly different ways. This reminds us that Takeuchi is not only a thinker of issues of Japan, but his theories possess universality through the similitude he shares with Gramsci, emancipating him from the geopolitical categorization of East and West.

²⁵ Takeuchi, *Jindai de chaoke*, 245.

Of course, when speaking of decisive political actions, Nazi theoretician Carl Schmitt cannot be ignored. His ideas around political theology and the state of emergency bring more substance to the discussion and further break the given dichotomy of the political “left” and “right,” as well as the geographical “East” and “West” in the interwar period, without falling into the vulgar conclusion of horse-shoe theory. That, however, falls beyond the scope of this essay. In the end, this essay would like to briefly touch on the drive to these theories of decisive actions, or *ketsudan*. To do so without drowning ourselves in long-winded socio-political analysis (despite its absolute necessity), we may have to employ Takeuchi’s “child-like mind.” The subjects of history are not senseless subjects. Just like ourselves, their view of reality is often a mix of the perceived and the imagined. One cannot help but project their knowledge of the past to the future—that is how Gramsci sensed “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.” It would be hardly possible for Tosaka or Takeuchi not to capture a similar notion based on their observation, and we cannot capture what they captured unless we begin to feel what they felt. Christian Apocalypticism is perhaps the most notable example of this type of phenomenon; the fear and hopes for a final reckoning (a revelation, as well as apocalyptic events) served as significant drives to not only the birth of Christianity, but also to the revolutions of the 15th to 16th centuries.²⁶ When an old order is slowly collapsing, historical subjects, the people who lived history itself, are not numb. This also applies to Takeuchi, Tosaka and Gramsci, who read history and the present as both at the same time, hence formulating their isomorphic theories of criticism, decisive actions and partisanship.

²⁶ On this point, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (Oxford University Press, 1970).

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The Legacy of Xinhai: A Primary Source Analysis on Early Republican China

Jackie Wang

Abstract

This essay explores the sentiments in early Republican China, specifically focusing on the year 1913. In analysing two primary source newspapers, I seek to investigate the aims of the 1911 Revolution and examine the attitudes Chinese had toward the young democracy and its ability to deliver on these goals. I find that many felt China's democratic experiment, and the instability that came with it, clashed heavily with Confucian and nationalistic expectations Chinese revolutionaries had post-1911—a tension that threatened the legitimacy of the democratic Republic in the eyes of many.

“It is the common wish of the people that the autocratic rule of the Manchu government be overthrown, that the Republic of China be strengthened, and that people's livelihood and welfare be pursued.”

—Sun Yat-Sen, 1912.

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Introduction

On October 9, 1911, a Xinhai year in the Chinese calendar, several explosives detonated in the Russian concession of Wuhan, Hubei Province. Upon arriving at the scene, police found a treasure trove of documents revealing a revolutionary plot across China, including membership lists for military sympathizers.¹ Qing officials, alerted, began to crack down. And revolutionaries, panicking, decided it was now or never for their planned revolt. And thus, the end begins for two thousand years of imperial rule.

To replace the monarchical system, the revolutionaries looked to the Western-educated democrat Sun Yat-Sen—the founder of the Kuomintang 中国国民党 (KMT; English: Chinese National People's Party)—and his republican model of government. In its embrace of a democratic system, characterized by an elected legislature, institutional checks and balances, and—at least nominally—constitutional government, the early years of the Republic of China remain the most liberal era of Chinese history, in contrast to the monarchy that preceded it and the one-party Communist autocracy that succeeded it. Thus, I ask: how did post-revolutionary Chinese view the new liberal democratic system of governance in Early Republican China, specifically in the context of political life?

In this essay, I explore this question by analyzing two primary sources, *Shi Shi Xin Bao* 時事新報 (SSXB; English: The China Times) from March 21st to April 10th, 1913. I examine prominent political issues at play during 1913—Year 2 of the Republic—noting the sentiments of educated Chinese during this time. Ultimately, I argue that nationalism and Confucian political philosophy were the primary drivers of Chinese political sentiments during the early Republican era. Early power struggles, however, quickly diminished confidence in the new system, as political strife—associated with democratic processes—was seen as contrary to nationalistic goals and

¹ James Carter, “Double 10: The Wuchang Uprising and the End of the Qing,” *The China Project*, October 11, 2023, <https://thechinaproject.com/2023/10/11/double-10-the-wuchang-uprising-and-end-of-the-qing/>.

Confucian ideas of stability and moral governance. The conclusions reached in this article thus align with Lucien Bianco and Martin Jacques' arguments of a nationalism-fuelled 1911 Revolution, of Confucianism as a driving ideology post-Qing due to the persistence of powerful traditionalists, and Chinese nationalism as a driving force in 20th-century political debate.

Methodology and Limitations

In this study of historical attitudes, I focus my analysis on the time period March 21st, 1913, to April 10th, 1913. This date range was chosen to coincide with the opening of the national assembly on April 8th and with the assassination of prominent KMT politician Song Jiaoren on March 21st. Both represented significant events in the course of early Republican history, with the former event generating much discussion on the future course of the country, while the latter was a significant blow to democratic reform. This period also represents the middle ground between the post-declaration Republic in 1912 and the end of the Republic in mid-late 1913, thus representing a period of “democracy in practice” rather than democracy as an ideal or a dying idea.

For the primary sources analysed, I chose the *Shi Shi Xin Bao*, one of the few publications that ran during the time period and readily available from archival sources. However, SSXB, as was all Chinese-language newspapers at the time, was restricted to the literate, which constrains the perspectives of this essay to those of educated elites. It also suffers from systematic editorial bias: SSXB is noted to have an anti-Kuomintang bias in favour of their rival, the Republican Party.² The following analysis thus should be read with the limitation of an educated-elite and anti-KMT bias. But in general, SSXB had writers and readers from a wide range of intelligentsia opinions, and thus can be used to draw historical analysis for elite perspectives during this period.

² 時事新報 (*China Times*), June 6, 1926, Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/shishi-xinbao-1926.06.06>.

The Xinhai Revolution

In October 1911, an accidental explosion cascaded into a revolution that toppled the centuries-old Qing Empire in favour of a (nominally) liberal democratic republic. However, the desire for modernising change began much earlier. Bianco, in *The Origins of the Chinese Revolution*, argues that the push towards a new, modern China had been gaining ground since the end of the Opium Wars, when Western interventions forced humiliating concessions.³ In response, Qing reformers battled with conservative elites to attempt limited modernization. The reform movement was shaped by a powerful Confucian ideology that guided Chinese policymaking. Jacques, in *When China Rules the World*, argues that the Imperial Chinese system was dominated by the need to ensure social harmony. It did so by applying Confucianism as the guiding ideology of its government: moral instruction, an Emperor-led hierarchy, and “the importance of good governance,” which is attached to “the moral responsibility of the rulers.”⁴ This last phenomenon, which Lu and Shi associate with *Minben* 民本 (peoples’ primacy) or “guardianship discourse,” can be described as governance for the people but not by the people, preferring to conduct policy under a paternalistic meritocracy “under the steady hand of elites according to Confucianism.”⁵ That sentiment, meant to safeguard social harmony, drove the rise—and fall—of Chinese dynasties, and remained an enduring influence in Chinese governance right up to the 1911 Revolution.

The result was a top-down, conservative regime which derived its legitimacy from the “Mandate of Heaven,” or the following of “moral behaviour” in governance.⁶ In practice, this meant that the state felt “obliged to intervene in ecological and economic questions and also in ensuring the

³ Lucien Bianco, “The End of a World,” in *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915-1949*, trans. Muriel Bell (Stanford University Press, 1971), 2.

⁴ Martin Jacques, “China’s Ignominy,” in *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (Penguin Press, 2009), 84–85.

⁵ Tianjian Shi and Jie Lu, “The Meanings of Democracy: The Shadow of Confucianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (2010): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2010.0012>.

⁶ Jacques, “China’s Ignominy,” 84–85.

livelihood of the people,” in exchange for legitimacy.⁷ This served as the guiding light for Chinese governance even throughout the reform period, even when adopting Western technologies and ideas was seen as paramount to preserving sovereignty.⁸ The result was a modernization effort characterized by both the preservation of state Confucianism and the adoption of Western-style industrial and military development, a hint to how much this mindset dominated political thought.⁹

The traditionalist attitude lost some credibility after the overthrow of the monarchy, but maintained a powerful hold over Chinese governance. Bianco, in his interpretation of the 1911 Revolution, argues that the anti-Qing discontent that fuelled the revolution also drew in the traditionally privileged under the Qing order—intelligentsia, civil servants, landlords, and military officials.¹⁰ The maintenance of traditionalist power, therefore, ensured that conservative Confucianism remained a powerful guiding ideology in the young Republic and continued to hold considerable sway over attitudes towards the new regime and its governance.

What united modernists and traditionalists against the Qing was nationalism—a desire to take a stand “against imperialist expansion and a government that was ‘selling out the country’ to foreign interests.”¹¹ For instance, cross-class anti-Qing agitation in Sichuan was united by a desire to prevent the nationalization of the projected railroad from Wuhan to Sichuan, seen as both an encroachment by the Manchus—the ruling ethnic minority during Qing China—and foreigners, who were bound to invest in the Qing-owned railroad. Railroads, in particular, are a highly symbolic feature, given that many saw railroads—a Western import—as “the most obvious sign of the imperialist penetration of China.”¹² Thus, Bianco argues that the Revolution extended beyond purely “simple parliamentary agitation” but

⁷ Jacques, “China’s Ignominy,” 84–85.

⁸ Jacques, “China’s Ignominy,” 90.

⁹ Jacques, “China’s Ignominy,” 90.

¹⁰ Bianco, “The End of a World,” 17–18.

¹¹ Bianco, “The End of a World,” 17.

¹² Bianco, “The End of a World,” 19.

was instead “anti-Western in intent, anti-Manchu in fact.”¹³ Therefore, the 1911 Revolution was characterized by two overarching themes. The first was the convergence of traditionalist and revolutionary attitudes, which fostered a hybrid ideology combining traditional Confucianism and liberal democracy. Secondly, there was, and continued to be in 1913, an expectation for the new republican regime to uphold Chinese anti-foreign nationalist causes.

Democracy in a Confucian China

The early Republic was dominated by many of the same pressures that the Qing faced—maintaining Confucianism-based moral government and protecting Chinese sovereignty—except in the context of a new political system. This section focuses on the former, exploring how the rhetoric of Confucian moral government interacted with the development of democratic institutions.

The early Republican era is known as the first (and arguably only) experiment in Chinese liberal democracy.¹⁴ Chinese political life began to take on a nascent democratic culture as institutions familiar to representative democracies—such as political debate, constitutional government, suffrage, and free press—began developing throughout the early Republic. The March 26th issue of SSXB, for example, references the “increasingly developed” and diverse newspaper industry in Hangzhou.¹⁵ Frequent debates occurred regarding what shape democratic institutions should take: a sizable number of SSXB articles of this period included editorials on political parties, electoral laws, local autonomy and other political questions.

Closer inspection reveals, however, that this “democratic culture” never dropped the pre-revolutionary Confucian ideals of governance,

¹³ Bianco, “The End of a World,” 16–17.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that “liberal democratic” in this context is highly relative. During the early Republic, suffrage was restricted to males over 21 who either had formal education or paid property taxes, which, at its peak, only enfranchised an estimated 4–6% of the population. While significantly higher than the approximately 1% during the late Qing, this proportion is extremely low, and political participation was limited mainly to military leaders and the educated elite.

¹⁵ “杭垣報業日見發達” [The newspaper industry in Hangzhou is increasingly developed], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 26, 1913, sec. 專電 [Special telegrams].

especially the discourse surrounding social stability and paternalistic governance. Discourse among educated elites supported the traditional democratic selection insofar as it did not interfere with the guardianship discourse they were used to: a March 22nd SSXB editorial, the author questions how dedicated local officials are to upholding moral, public-serving behaviour:

“Are these administrative officials truly patriotic and beneficial to the people, or are they driven by greed and use their careers as a gambling game? ... They spend the wealth of tens of thousands of families, and then [vomit when they] think of the residents ... How can they have time to plan for the major national agenda?”¹⁶

The editorial then discusses the appropriate methods of selecting local officials, doubting the ability of democracy to select virtuous individuals.¹⁷ Similar journalistic discussions surrounding political parties, voting laws, presidential vs. parliamentary systems, and others also took place around this time.¹⁸ It becomes quickly apparent that almost all debates surrounding Chinese democracy were judged by their adherence to Confucian ideas of governance, one dedicated to preserving the traditional paternalistic “benevolent governance” based on “moral behaviour.” Chinese citizens, as in imperial China, expected the same performance from the Republic, even if the political system was completely different.

Yet this vision of a stable, “moral” China began to heavily clash with political realities, specifically the unstable environment of the early post-revolutionary Republic. The March 21st issue of SSXB highlighted such unrest in the Hubei Provincial Assembly. During the election of the speaker and deputy speaker, the KMT fully expected to win the vote. But when the

¹⁶ “中央與地方之關係” [The relationship between the central and local governments], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 22, 1913, sec. 社論 [Editorials].

¹⁷ “中央與地方之關係.”

¹⁸ Xin Chao, “敬告政黨及政黨員” [A warning to political parties and members], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 22, 1913, sec. 專論 [Special commentary]: “A political party is one that is united with the goal of the country in mind. Cronyism is one that is united with the goal of personal gain.”

opposition Republican Party won the vote, the KMT accused the Republican Party of coercion and led “more than a hundred people ... into the parliament ... [scolded] the secretary-general Cheng Xian ... [and] beat him recklessly.”¹⁹ Various acts of political violence—for example, the assassination of the Magistrate of Su County on March 25th or, more prominently, the assassination of prominent KMT politician Song Jiaoren on March 20th—also took place during this time.²⁰ This process of democratization also, unhelpfully, took place under a divided administration, with the legislature dominated by the KMT while the Presidency was controlled by the former warlord Yuan Shikai. In classic guardianship discourse rhetoric, the faults of governance quickly generated negative opinions on the political structure of the country, with most of it falling on the opposition KMT, as seen in this article from March 22nd:

“Whenever [the KMT] claim to ‘uphold the constitution,’ they use it as a pretext to attack [others]. When their attacks prove ineffective, they then claim [constitutional violations] exist where none do. Their so-called concern is not truly about whether the constitution is being violated or not. Rather, [their concern is] whether they themselves benefit or not—this is all. If such [factional politics] is not quickly stopped and [instead] is allowed to develop freely, then our Republic—established with such difficulty—will certainly perish because of it.”²¹

This particular article highlights the dissatisfaction of the Chinese educated elite and political media toward contemporary political struggles, and in particular, the factionalism and perceived lack of social harmony. In their eyes, the democratic order either could not resolve these instabilities or

¹⁹ “鄂省會成立日之怪現狀” [Strange state of affairs on the day of the establishment of the Hubei Provincial Assembly], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 21, 1913.

²⁰ “宿縣長被刺之又一說” [Another account of the assassination of County Magistrate Wang Junxin], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 25, 1913, sec. 地方時事 [Local news].

²¹ “再讀查拿梁平治之命令” [Read again the order to arrest Qiu Pingzhi], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 22, 1913, sec. 時評一 [Current affairs commentary 1].

might even have caused them, a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the democratic system.

Nowhere is this sentiment clearer than in the Song Jiaoren assassination episode. A personal friend of Sun Yat Sen, Song was a prominent KMT politician and was widely seen as the most likely Premier following the 1912-1913 election. On March 22nd, Song was assassinated at a train station.²² The murder shocked the nation, and coverage of the event and its subsequent investigation spanned the entirety of late March 1913. Interestingly, however, the first party that was blamed was the KMT, with its tendency towards factionalism as the cause of the violence.²³ The KMT, the party most associated with democracy, were seen to be failing the morality and stability required for a good government in Confucian eyes. There was, in other words, the beginning of an association among Chinese between KMT-led democracy and disorder.

The Reorganization Loan Affair

The other major issue that dominated coverage during this period was the proposed Reorganization Loan. The loan was a project among several banks of major powers—Great Britain, France, Japan, Russia, the US (which withdrew before signing), and Germany—to provide a large loan to the Chinese government. This financial aid was essential to the early Republic as post-revolutionary China faced severe financial troubles.²⁴ But the loan was highly controversial. To ensure the return of the loaned amounts, the Six-Nation Consortium attached several conditions to the issuing of the loan, including some that further eroded Chinese sovereignty.²⁵ These conditions ignited the same nationalistic sentiments that drove the 1911 Revolution, resulting in broad hatred from the Chinese public towards

²² “宋教仁被擊之情形” [The circumstances of Song Jiaoren’s attack], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 21, 1913, sec. 報時事 [Current affairs].

²³ “如何” [How?], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 23, 1913.

²⁴ “憲法起草委員會” [The constitution drafting committee], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 21, 1913, sec. 電 [Special dispatch].

²⁵ Among the conditions attached were bans on taking other foreign loans before the Reorganization Loan was issued and demands for control over salt tax revenue. Understandably, the Chinese delegation rejected these conditions.

the terms of the loan. A SSXB article on March 25th claimed that the “Six-Nation Banking Group ... intended to control China's finances and use economic power to blackmail the country,” which is why “the conditions [of the loan] have been harsh and various demands have been made.”²⁶ The Reorganization Loan represented a general paradox that confronted the early Republic: how to balance the need to resolve practical issues—which often required foreign help—while striving to protect Chinese sovereignty against foreign imperialism.

Anti-foreign nationalism thus exerted a strong influence on political life and debate, and going against that was seen as politically taboo. That sentiment, however, bled into discussions surrounding democratic institutions and the spirit of free debate, something which should be standard in democratic cultures. One example was a political commentary on March 22nd that criticized the promotion of anti-government rhetoric, seeing it as inciting anti-sovereigntist sentiments. The primary argument of the critique was directly related to the sovereignty concerns from 1911:

“Given the state of the Republic today, even if we united all our strength to resist foreign aggression, we still fear it would not be enough. Yet, instead of acting against external threats, we fight amongst ourselves internally, leading to our own destruction.”²⁷

This argument, perhaps unsurprisingly, further questions the ability of democracy to stand up to the issues of the day, and instead points to these processes as a potential (if actual) source of societal disorder. All of these serve as a reminder that the legacy of the Xinhai Revolution was never a democratic one, but more of a nationalistic one. That presents a clear threat. While prominent proponents of liberalism did exist among the Chinese intelligentsia, most elites accepted democracy with the expectation that the Western-adopted system could provide the strength necessary to combat

²⁶ “銀行團把持無效” [The banking consortium’s attempt at control proves ineffective], 時事新報 (*China Times*), March 25, 1913, sec. 社論 [Editorials].

²⁷ “再讀查拿袁平治之命令.”

foreign encroachment and restore Chinese sovereignty. But the instability of the democratic system dampened confidence among Chinese elites in the Republic's ability to do so. The blending of Confucian attitudes combined with nationalist sentiments thus placed great pressure on the young Republic, resulting in the legitimacy of the democratic system coming under great strain even before Yuan's eventual anti-democratic crackdowns.

Conclusion

In examining the 1911 Revolution and news coverage from March 21st to April 10th, 1913, we observe several significant patterns. The Revolution left a legacy of anti-foreign nationalism while maintaining strong ties to Qing-era Confucian thinking. These sentiments were reflected in 1913 by debates on democratic topics influenced by Confucian ideas of moral governance. However, the instability and power struggles of the early Republic severely strained the legitimacy of the democratic system, as a perception of inability and Confucian "immoral" governance began to take hold. These doubts, combined with the strong residual influence of post-1911 nationalism, fostered a view that democracy—with its potential for instability—could neither guarantee the Confucian notion of "good government" nor protect Chinese national interests.

These conclusions represent trends felt during later Chinese history. The skepticism toward democracy to resolve the goals of the Xinhai Revolution would push future Chinese regimes—including the KMT—toward authoritarian rule. The pervasive influence of Confucianism in governance continued to persist, with ideas of "guardianship discourse" and performance legitimacy influencing Chinese political legitimacy even today.²⁸ It also encouraged cultural counter-movements against Confucian political structures, which would come to greatly influence Chinese political history, such as the May Fourth Movement. Finally, the debates over

²⁸ Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi, "The Battle of Ideas and Discourses Before Democratic Transition: Different Democratic Conceptions in Authoritarian China," *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 1 (2015): 20-41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512114551304>. This article discusses the Chinese notion of democracy and its influence from guardianship discourse.

nationalism still continue to be a defining question for Chinese regimes, with national protection continuing to define Chinese domestic and international political behaviour today. The legacy of 1911, a century later, continues to define the shape of modern China, even if the democratic dreams of Sun Yat-Sen ended in disaster.

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Love Letters and Landscapes: Diaspora Nostalgia and the Cultural Work of Innocence

Qi Wu

Abstract

Two of contemporary China's biggest cultural phenomena appear unrelated. *To the Wonder* (2024) follows a Han woman who finds belonging among a Kazakh community in northern Xinjiang, while *Dear You* (2026), a low-budget Teochew-dialect hit, traces the bonds between Chinese emigrants and the families they left behind. This article reads the two works as complementary instances of a single endeavour, the manufacture of Chinese national belonging across two contested peripheries; the ethnic frontier and the overseas diaspora. *To the Wonder* naturalizes Han settlement by recasting colonization as healing, its protagonist arriving as a wounded outsider whom the grassland rejuvenates. *Dear You* incorporates the overseas diaspora by rendering a political history of dispersal as the endurance of kinship, the *qiaopi* letters standing in for familial and national ties amidst Cold War separations. Every state edits its past, and the modern Chinese state that inherited the Qing empire's conquered frontier and emigrant Nanyang is no different. What distinguishes the Xi Jinping-era project of telling China's story well is the instrument, since it works through effect rather than assertion and produces belonging in audiences who experience it as love, memory, and family—hollowing out the political content of both histories in the process. Han innocence governs the frontier and diaspora Nanyang reaches its outward-facing counterpart, where together they compose a structure of national innocence in which the nation appears to expand through love, not power. *Dear You*'s reception in Singapore, where decades of the Speak Mandarin Campaign had displaced the very vernacular the film restores, and the audiences' reaction reveals the reach of these narratives and the point at which they meet an audience whose belonging is already

established elsewhere. What neither work permits its audience to ask is whose belonging this is and whose nostalgia has been sacrificed to build it.

“Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance).”

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995)

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Introduction

In May 2024, the state-funded television series *To the Wonder* (我的阿勒泰, *Wo de Aletai*) debuted in China and quickly topped domestic viewing and rating charts, becoming one of the highest-rated Chinese-language dramas of the year on Douban.¹ Adapted from Li Juan's award-winning essay collection *My Altay* (2010), the eight-episode series follows a young Han woman who leaves urban life in Ürümqi for the pastures of Altay in Northern Xinjiang and gradually learns to cherish the Kazakh community her mother's small shop serves.

Two years later, a very different production became one of the most discussed cultural events in the country. *Dear You*, literally "Love Letters to Grandma" (给阿嬷的情书, *Gei ama de qingshu*), directed by Lan Hongchun and released in April 2026, was a low-budget film with a non-professional cast, filmed largely in the Teochew dialect.² It went on to earn one of the highest Douban ratings (a 9.3) that any mainland Chinese film has received in a decade, and surprised the industry at the box office, grossing more than two billion yuan.³ The story follows Zheng Musheng 郑木生, who has gone *xia nanyang* 下南洋—"down to the Southern Seas"—for work. Across decades of separation, emigrants like Zheng sustained the families they left behind through *qiaopi* 侨批, the bundled remittance letters UNESCO

¹ *To the Wonder* topped China's most-watched lists in 2024. See Guldana Salimjan, "The Dream of Han Innocence," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 27, 2024, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-dream-of-han-innocence/>.

² Li Xin, "An Indie Drama About Leaving China Finds an Audience at Home," *Sixth Tone*, May 12, 2026, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1018522>.

³ 给阿嬷的情书 [Dear You], Douban, accessed July 3, 2026, <https://movie.douban.com/subject/37116446/>. On the box office, see "《给阿嬷的情书》打赢成龙梁志强 晋升本地上座亚洲电影20大 [Dear You beats Jackie Chan and Jack Neo, entering Singapore's top twenty Asian box-office films]", *Lianhe Zaobao* [联合早报], August 20, 2026, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/entertainment/story20260820-9547559>.

inscribed on its Memory of the World Register in 2013.⁴ They also became a vital source of foreign exchange for the People's Republic after 1949.⁵

At first glance the two works share little in common. *To the Wonder* unfolds at a continental crossroads, whereas *Dear You* focuses on international migration. One dramatizes the integration of an ethnic minority into Chinese national space, while the other concerns the emotional bonds that tie overseas Chinese to the mainland. Yet the two can be read as complementary projects engaged in a single endeavour, each working on a periphery of the nation—the ethnic frontier and the overseas diaspora—to make it belong.

The two peripheries are not arbitrary. Xinjiang 新疆 became part of Qing 清 China (1644-1912) through military conquest, and Chinese communities in Nanyang formed from traders in coastal provinces who had gone overseas, which the Qing initially criminalized.⁶ Emperor Yongzheng (r. 1723-1735) warned that “most traders who travel overseas are not law-abiding subjects,” for they may collude with foreigners.⁷ He was not so wrong in that regard. Modern Chinese history is indispensable from emigration; for the 1911 Revolution that toppled the empire was led by overseas connections and Western-educated revolutionaries like Dr. Sun Yatsen. The Republic and later the People's Republic inherited those imperial formations, and both have had to argue continuously for their sovereignty over the disputed Qing territories that they claim.

What links them lies less in their subject matter than in their method. Both move their audiences by declining to show the political history surrounding the characters and objects they sentimentalize. *To the Wonder*

⁴ UNESCO, “Qiaopi and Yinxin Correspondence and Remittance Documents from Overseas Chinese,” *Memory of the World*, accessed August 23, 2026, <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/qiaopi-and-yinxin-correspondence-and-remittance-documents-overseas-chinese>

⁵ Chu Yang, “What the Letters Did Not Say,” *Northward Seaside* [北海], Substack, May 21, 2026, <https://northwardseaside.substack.com/p/what-the-letters-did-not-say>.

⁶ Philip Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008).

⁷ Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others*, 31-32.

exemplifies what Guldana Salimjan calls “the dream of Han innocence,” a cultural disposition that denies or forgets the role of Han settlement and state power in displacing ethnic minorities on the frontier.⁸ *Dear You* rests on a parallel disposition of diaspora nostalgia, which interprets the historical dispersal of overseas Chinese not as political rupture, but as kinship maintained across time and distance, integrating scattered communities back into an emotionally unified nation. That the film’s role in national integration and belonging is not a matter of inference alone. Its executive producer, Luo Zhanhong, publicly thanked the central United Front Work Department (UFWD); the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) body charged with cultivating relations among constituencies and co-opting potential opponents outside the Party, and Chinese communities overseas, for its “guidance and support” in “incorporating this film into United Front cultural and artistic propaganda work.”⁹ The department that received those thanks had grown considerably in the years before. The 2018 restructuring of Party and state institutions merged the State Council’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and State Ethnic Affairs Commission into the United Front Work Department, placing diaspora work and ethnic work alike into a single Party body, and the 20th Party Congress restored the department’s leadership to the rank of a Politburo member. The elevation expands UFWD’s authority, and in this case emphasizing ethnic minorities and Chinese emigrants as its primary targets.

“Telling China’s Story Well”—Cultural Governance in the Xi Era

⁸ Salimjan, “Dream of Han Innocence.”

⁹ Luo Zhanhong [罗展宏], public remarks quoted in “《给阿嬷的情书》总制片人感谢各方支持 [Dear You]’s Executive Producer Thanks All Parties for Their Support”, China News Service [中国新闻网], May 19, 2026, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2026/05-19/10624359.shtml>. China News Service was transferred to the United Front Work Department along with the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office in 2018. A comparable acknowledgment appeared in the credits of Disney’s *Mulan* (2020), which thanked propaganda authorities in Xinjiang and drew international criticism. See “Disney’s *Mulan* Faces Backlash, Boycott for Filming in Xinjiang,” Al Jazeera, September 8, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/9/8/disneys-mulan-faces-backlash-boycott-for-filming-in-xinjiang>.

The phrase “telling China’s story well” (讲好中国故事, *jiang hao Zhongguo gushi*) has anchored Xi Jinping’s approach to cultural governance since at least 2013.¹⁰ It reaches in two directions at once, toward domestic ideological education and toward international soft power, on the premise that China’s rise should be accompanied by a compelling cultural narrative capable of winning hearts at home and influence abroad.

Not every version of the project has worked. Wolf Warrior diplomacy, the aggressive posture Chinese diplomats adopted from around 2019 over conventional restraint, replacing diplomatic language with confrontation on social media platforms such as X, repeatedly backfired against Chinese hard and soft power alike, at least before its foreign audiences.¹¹ Propaganda that argues through slogan and provocation tries to reason audiences into assent rather than naturalizing political content through emotional resonance. The stories that work do the opposite. They persuade audiences to feel their way into identification with national narratives, and they appear to be about something else entirely—love, family, landscape, memory, and daily life. They are, as Benedict Anderson argued in *Imagined Communities*, exercises in imagining community, sustaining the modern nation as a cultural construct held together by shared media and emotional identification with an abstract body of co-nationals.¹² What distinguishes the Xi-era moment is that this imagining has become explicitly transnational, reaching beyond the territorial boundaries of the PRC to encompass ethnic minorities within and overseas Chinese without.

To the Wonder and *Dear You* represent two spatial axes of that expanded imagining. The first faces inward, toward the frontier; the second faces outward, toward the diaspora. Together they illuminate a cultural

¹⁰ On “telling China’s story well” and Chinese soft power more broadly, see Maria Repnikova, *Chinese Soft Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹¹ On assertive “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy and its limits, see Dylan M. H. Loh, *China’s Rising Foreign Ministry: Practices and Representations of Assertive Diplomacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024). The label comes from the nationalist *Wolf Warrior* (战狼, *zhanlang*) movie series (2015, 2017).

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

nationalism that is at once centripetal and centrifugal, drawing ethnic minorities into the national embrace while reincorporating overseas communities across sea and decades, and doing both under a single logic of healing and nostalgia.

Han Innocence and the Domestication of the Frontier

Salimjan developed the concept of Han innocence out of James Baldwin's and Ta-Nehisi Coates's analyses of white innocence; the capacity to deny or forget the racial violence on which a society rests.¹³ Baldwin and Coates wrote about America in particular, in which slavery and segregation produced advantages that white Americans could enjoy without ever having to recognize them as such. Salimjan's transposition holds to the degree that Han settlement in Xinjiang produces the same asymmetry of attention, rather than any equivalence between the two histories that gives the structural correspondence its analytical framework. She argues that a similar structure operates in Chinese cultural production about Xinjiang, where Han characters and audiences appear as innocent bystanders, or even victims, of frontier conditions rather than as beneficiaries of a system of settlement and resource extraction.¹⁴

The disposition is clearest in Li Wenxiu, who is sympathetic, curious, and often naive. The series introduces Li through her ignorance of Kazakh custom played as comedy, and frames her growing appreciation of Kazakh life as a spiritual awakening. It never asks how she came to be in Altay in the first place, which is that her family's presence follows from decades of Party-organized Han migration under the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (新疆生产建设兵团, *Xinjiang Shengchan jianshe bingtuan*; XPCC). The *Bingtuan*, as it is usually called in Chinese, is a state-owned conglomerate and paramilitary body with an independent administrative and judicial system from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous

¹³ Salimjan, "Dream of Han Innocence." She develops the concept in dialogue with James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates; see Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Dial Press, 1963), and Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

¹⁴ Salimjan, "Dream of Han Innocence."

Region that includes its own cities, farms, courts, schools and militia across the territory it has settled, and has systematically transformed the region's demographic and geographic landscape.¹⁵ Salimjan locates two mechanisms behind this innocence. The first is the myth of the inevitable, the suggestion that Kazakh nomadic life is passing away not through human decisions—sedentarization, the expansion of XPCC settlements, pasture conversion—but through the impersonal forces of modernity.¹⁶ The historical record the drama declines to engage is well established. The Qing incorporation of Xinjiang was a military (re)conquest, and successive governments have inherited and extended its structures of frontier governance, above all through the XPCC, whose settlement and land reclamation advanced across pastures that were home to local herders.¹⁷ Wang Lixiong, a Chinese author that focuses on Xinjiang and Tibet, and whose critiques on state ethnic minority policy and developmentalism drew arrests and surveillance, offers an insightful lens through which to understand the Chinese frontier. Presenting development as a morally neutral good—the Party brings roads, schools, and prosperity—often obscures the deeper questions of who has the authority to define and distribute development and who bears its costs.¹⁸ Sultan, Batai's father, who clings to a nomadic life and whose tragedy the series naturalizes and strips of political cause, embodies that myth. The drama portrays him as temperamental, an old man too proud to come down from the summer pasture, and to a general sense that the more “advanced” and “civilized” world has moved past him. Sultan hunts and trains eagles, and the ban on private firearms strips him of his livelihood and his standing together.¹⁹ In the series, the ban already

¹⁵ On XPCC-organized Han migration and its transformation of Xinjiang's demography, see James A. Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Salimjan, “Dream of Han Innocence.”

¹⁷ On the Qing conquest and its afterlives in frontier administration, see Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads*.

¹⁸ Wang Lixiong [王力雄], 我的西域, 你的东土 [*My West China, Your East Turkestan*] (Locus, 2007).

¹⁹ Herders in designated pastoral regions may apply to hold hunting rifles, though police are permitted to place lawfully held firearms under centralized custody in the name of public security. 中华人民共和国枪支管理法 [Law of the People's Republic of China on Control of Guns] (1996), arts. 6, 10, and 29,

happened, with no official announcement and no institution to appeal to, so it does not enter the story as its true form—a man-made decision—and Sultan’s resistance is of stubbornness rather than as a grievance against anyone in particular. His eventual surrender completes this narrative, and the closing scene finds him leading his community through dumplings and firecrackers at Wenxiu’s home. A Kazakhstani review interpreted the story more critically, calling it a colonizer’s film, and noting how Sultan retrieves a rifle hidden from the authorities to shoot a wolf and save a Han life, and that Batai later kills a horse to protect Wenxiu, so that the drama twice has Kazakh characters destroy a symbol of their own culture in order to rescue a Han one.²⁰

The second mechanism is intimacy staged as a cultural encounter.²¹ Wenxiu and the young Kazakh Batai are given a cross-ethnic and cultural romance that appears to transcend the political conditions structuring their relationship. That Han settlement is what makes the encounter possible, and that its wider context is the demographic displacement of Kazakh communities, is what the romance displaces. The closing celebration, in which Han and Kazakh families gather for the Lunar New Year beneath the fireworks, thus reads less as an image of multicultural harmony than as an image of arrival. It presents the frontier as a domesticated space that naturalizes Han settlers by keeping their festivals in and the question of how they came to be here out.

<https://www.12371.cn/2020/06/15/ARTI1592151033067961.shtml>. Periodic 收缴 [confiscation] campaigns then recover them for public safety, listing 猎枪 [hunting rifles] alongside crossbows, grenades, and landmines. 关于依法收缴非法枪爆等物品严厉打击涉枪涉爆等违法犯罪的通告, Supreme People’s Court, Supreme People’s Procuratorate, and Ministry of Public Security, May 25, 2021,

https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2021-05/25/content_5611967.htm. In Xinjiang such notices draw on the Counter-Terrorism Law to their legal basis. 关于依法收缴非法枪爆等物品严厉打击涉枪涉爆等违法犯罪的通告, Bortala Mongol Autonomous Prefecture Public Security Bureau, August 8, 2025,

<https://www.xjboz.gov.cn/xjboz/c125867/202508/f8c76b1983e24c92868e1c482e3e3dbc.shtml>.
²⁰ 卡扎克 [Kazhake], “哈萨克斯坦媒体评《我的阿勒泰》:一部殖民者视角下的政治宣传片 [Kazakhstani media review *To the Wonder*: Political propaganda shot from a colonizer’s perspective]”, *Matters*, June 29, 2024, <https://matters.town/a/tnth0qme0crw>.

²¹ Salimjan, “Dream of Han Innocence.”

None of this makes *To the Wonder* deliberate propaganda, least of all for its cast and crew, who worked under the tight censorship the Party imposes on any subject it deems sensitive. Its characters are portrayed with real care, and its cinematography celebrates a landscape and a way of life set apart from the capitalism and consumerism of the cities. However, all of it unfolds against the ongoing reality of mass internment and surveillance directed at Xinjiang's ethnic minorities in the name of combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism.²² The pastoral romance quietly erases the colonial character of Han settlement and extraction and presents it as a closed book, from which Han and non-Han may now move forward together.

Diaspora Nostalgia and the Extension of the Nation Outward

If *To the Wonder* concerns national belonging in a contested interior, *Dear You* poses the analogous question from the opposite direction. How do overseas Chinese communities stay emotionally attached to a homeland from which they are separated by geography and by generations? The film's answer is the *qiaopi*, the handwritten remittance letters overseas Chinese migrants sent home, particularly to Guangdong and Fujian.²³ By treating those letters as objects of sacred value, it recasts dispersal as the endurance of kinship across impossible distances.

The film gives Zheng Musheng, or Den Bhagseng in Teochew, a history filled with political violence. He goes *xia nanyang* during the Chinese Civil War to escape Nationalist conscription and initially settled in Malaya. He defended Chinese labourers against British colonial police, after which led to his banishment in Thailand, where most of the film takes place, and died three years later. Such details are not incidental, for they place migration within the mid-century upheavals of war, decolonization, and the Cold War, and the film shows those upheavals in intentional ways; from the clandestine classrooms that followed Thai restrictions on Chinese-language

²² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China (OHCHR, August 31, 2022).

²³ UNESCO, "Qiaopi and Yinxin."

schooling, to the Bandung Conference heard over the radio²⁴, to the closing image of *qiaopi* records of overseas donations to the Korean War effort. While these three moments are kept apart, they foreshadow Thailand's changing attitudes toward the Chinese nation and the Chinese presence in Southeast Asia. Following the founding of the People's Republic, Chinese-language education turned into a suspected channel for Communist influence, and the government further restricted education in Chinese to ten hours per week or two hours per day in classrooms. By 1955, first-grade students were only allowed five and half hours per week of Chinese-language education.²⁵

Dear You never dwells on what these upheavals meant inside China, or on how Southeast Asia experienced them, attending instead to the discrimination the ethnic Chinese endured abroad and turning even that into a backdrop against which private acts of loyalty and love become legible. Zheng's death becomes the occasion for the extraordinary kindness of Xie Nanzhi 谢南枝 or Zia Lamgi, the daughter of a hotelier he once saved from a fire, who wrote to and supported his family in his name for eighteen years so that his widow, Ye Shurou 叶淑柔 or Iap Sogriu, and her children would neither grieve nor starve.

This conversion of political history into emotional texture is the heart of diaspora nostalgia. The Cold War is not absent from the film. It exists in Zheng's banishment to Thailand, in the language bans, in that final image of Korean War remittances. But these work as atmosphere rather than argument, the conditions of possibility for a story that is finally about the irreducibility of kinship. What the film never shows is what having "overseas relations" (海外关系, *haiwai guanxi*) actually meant inside China

²⁴ The Bandung Conference of 1955 is where Zhou Enlai concluded the Sino-Indonesian dual nationality treaty and encouraged overseas Chinese to choose local citizenship, a moment at which Beijing's claims on the diaspora were publicly loosened. See 张秀明 [Zhang Xiuming], "印尼华侨与万隆会议(百年航程 有'侨'精彩(29))" ["Indonesian Overseas Chinese and the Bandung Conference (A Century's Voyage, the Splendour of the Overseas Chinese, No. 29)"], 人民日报海外版 (*People's Daily Overseas Edition*), September 24, 2021, 6.

²⁵ On Thai assimilationist policy and the restriction of Chinese-language schooling from the late 1930s onward, see G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand: An Analytical History* (Cornell University Press, 1957).

during the very decades these letters crossed the sea.²⁶ The remittances it describes as pure kinship were, from the early 1950s, the object of a state letter-writing campaign designed to capture foreign exchange. Families with relatives abroad were surveilled and pressured through land reform and the new marriage law, and from the Great Leap Forward through the Cultural Revolution they were recast as a politically suspect class whose letters were opened and whose savings were seized.²⁷ The *qiaopi* the film treats as sacred letters of love were, for many who received them, also the mark of a dangerous tie.

The political stakes of that conversion surfaced in the film's reception in Singapore. Shen Zewei, the Beijing correspondent of *Lianhe Zaobao*, argued in a widely discussed May 2026 commentary that *Dear You* represented the highest form of United Front work, reaching the softest part of the heart and using feeling to complete the labour of political persuasion, and he urged Singaporean readers to watch it with their emotions held at a distance.²⁸ The backlash was fierce. Mainland outlets, the nationalistic *Global Times* among them, accused the paper of paranoid over-interpretation, and many commentators treated the very act of naming the film's politics as an affront to their feelings.²⁹ That reaction is itself instructive. The film's power lies in the way it makes any account of its political aspect an insult to the very family memories the film has just honoured.

Shen's critics were right on one count. The film contains no explicit nationalist content, no flags, no slogans, no reference to the PRC government. But the objection misses the more interesting question, because the film's United Front function does not run through explicit propaganda at

²⁶ Chu Yang, "What the Letters Did Not Say."

²⁷ Glen Peterson, *Overseas Chinese in the People's Republic of China* (Routledge, 2012).

²⁸ Shen Zewei [沈泽玮], "《给阿嬷的情书》的统战启示 [The United Front lessons of *Dear You*]", *Lianhe Zaobao* [联合早报], May 21, 2026, <https://www-esa.zaobao.com/news/china/story20260521-9074937>.

²⁹ "社评:一部《给阿嬷的情书》照出谁的心魔? [“Editorial: Whose inner demons does *Dear You* expose?],” *Global Times* [环球时报], June 16, 2026, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/4RzgWd7nMIF>.

all. The Douban reviewers who made it the year's highest-rated Chinese film responded in the film's own terms, praising its web of loyalties as a kind of utopia.³⁰ The producer's public thanks to the United Front Work Department only make explicit what the film's affective logic has already accomplished.

The director, for his part, has described the long preparation behind the film, the fieldwork across Southeast Asia and the archival research that gave the story its soul. He has also been candid about what he left out. The most devastating letters and scenes never reached the screen, cut because he wanted audiences to leave the cinema reconciled and healed rather than stressed.³¹ This editorial choice is the method in miniature. The production team could very well have come across letters recording the horrors of the early People's Republic. Whether censorship forced the omission or the director chose it does not matter, because the very publicity that trumpets the depth of the fieldwork and research exposes the act as a knowing and self-serving one. *Dear You* distills a purified form of love across distance, cleansed of its terror, and in doing so it narrows the distinctly Teochew feature of the film. For domestic audiences the same story could be set elsewhere in Guangdong or Fujian without changing what the film represents. Given its huge success, the film has certainly told China's story well—the Teochew story, a lot less so. The film moves audiences because it tells a genuine story of loyalty and separation, and its political utility follows from that resonance rather than generating it. Herein lies the difference between diaspora nostalgia and open propaganda; the former works differently because it employs a dimension of sincerity.

One further dimension deserves attention. *Dear You* is the third film in Lan Hongchun's Teochew-language trilogy.³² His choice of Teochew, a minority language within China and the mother tongue of large overseas

³⁰ Li Xin, "An Indie Drama" (quoting Douban reviewers).

³¹ On the director's fieldwork and his decision to cut the source material's most painful letters so that audiences would leave "healed," see "专访 | 《阿嬷》导演蓝鸿春 [Interview with *Dear You* director Lan Hongchun]", "The Paper [澎湃新闻]", May 13, 2026, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_33164270.

³² *Dear You* is the third film in Lan Hongchun's Teochew-dialect trilogy, following *Proud of Me* (爸, 我一定行的) (2018) and *Back to Love* (带你去见我妈) (2022).

communities in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Cambodia, is itself meaningful. If the purified narrative makes the story's setting interchangeable, the language determines whom the film addresses. It reaches the overseas Teochew diaspora in a way the Mandarin-speaking state in Beijing cannot command, with how the intimacy of a language can mark a person as belonging to a particular place before it marks them as Chinese. The dialect here is not local colour but a form of inclusion. To follow the film without subtitles is already to stand inside the community it imagines.

That mechanism became clear when *Dear You* opened in Singapore on June 18, 2026 in its Mandarin-dubbed version for general release. The original Teochew version was limited to the premiere, a handful of special screenings, and festival and niche screenings.³³ This arrangement follows the guidelines that have governed Chinese-language education and broadcasting since 1979, when the Speak Mandarin Campaign (SMC) set out to replace Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, and other dialects Singapore's Chinese community actually spoke with a single standard language assigned by the state. This policy shows that Singapore's anxiety for multiculturalism and diversity may also become a source of social division, and thus the city-state sorts its population into four categories—Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Others (CMIO)—under the assumption that each race holds to one ethnicity and one language.³⁴ Contrary to Malay for Malays and Tamil for Indians, Mandarin was the home language to only 0.1 percent of Singaporeans, and a 1957 survey found Chinese being the most linguistically diverse community that primarily spoke Hokkien, followed by Teochew and Cantonese.³⁵ Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in his address on the SMC, ruled that dialects “have

³³ “Chinese Film *Dear You* to Be Dubbed in Mandarin Here; 4,800 Tickets for Teochew Version Sold Out,” *Straits Times*, June 16, 2026, <https://www.straitstimes.com/life/entertainment/chinese-film-dear-you-to-be-dubbed-in-mandarin-here-4800-tickets-for-teochew-version-sold-out>.

³⁴ Anitha Devi Pillai and Rani Rubdy, “The Changing Status of Malayalam in Singapore,” in *Multilingual Singapore: Language Policies and Linguistic Realities*, ed. Ritu Jain (Routledge, 2021), 86.

³⁵ Ritu Jain, “Multilingual Singapore: Language Policies, Challenges, and Responses,” in Jain, *Multilingual Singapore*, 2; Ng Bee Chin and Francesco Cavallaro, “The Curious Case of Mandarin Chinese in Singapore,” in Jain, *Multilingual Singapore*, 171–172.

no economic value in Singapore. Their cultural value is also very low.”³⁶ Chinese vernaculars fell from the language most spoken at home by 76.2 percent to just 16.1 percent in 2015, while Mandarin rose from almost no Singaporean households to 36 percent of Singaporean homes and in 46.1 percent of Chinese Singaporean homes in 2015.³⁷

It was under such circumstances that a film addressed to a grandmother, in the original language a grandmother would have spoken, then arrived in a country whose state had enforced that community with a different mother tongue. Tickets for the original Teochew screenings quickly sold out, and outcry from both the public and the local film industry argued for a review of the outdated language policy. Two of the country's best-known directors wrote to the press that “screening a dialect film is now no different from screening a French or Malay film.”³⁸ By the time the criticisms reached the Singaporean Parliament on July 7, regulator Infocomm Media Development Authority had approved 272 Teochew screenings, and the Minister for Digital Development and Information conceded that circumstances had changed since the guidelines were written.³⁹ Further revision came on August 23rd, when Prime Minister Lawrence Wong lifted the cap on dialect screenings at the National Day Rally address, as long as a Mandarin-dubbed version accompanied them. He told the audience in Mandarin that he had watched the Teochew version, and what really caught him despite understanding very little is the line *zuoren yao you qing you yi* 做人要有情有义, as being a person of compassion and loyalty per official translations.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ng & Cavallaro, “The Curious Case,” 165.

³⁷ Ng & Cavallaro, “The Curious Case,” 167-171.

³⁸ “Singapore Reflects on Mandarin Language Policy as ‘Dear You’ Teochew Screenings Sell Out,” *Screen Daily*, June 29, 2026, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/singapore-reflects-on-mandarin-language-policy-as-dear-you-teochew-screenings-sell-out/5218145.article>.

³⁹ Ministry of Digital Development and Information, “MDDI’s Response to PQs on Dialect Film Screenings and Dialect Policy,” parliamentary sitting of July 7, 2026, <https://www.mddi.gov.sg/newsroom/mddi-s-response-to-pqs-on-dialect-policy/>.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Wong, “National Day Rally 2026 (Mandarin)” (speech, Institute of Technical Education Headquarters, Singapore, August 23, 2026), Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/national-day-rally-2026-mandarin/>.

These exchanges between the Singaporean government and public measure the power, and the limits to telling China's story well given the restraints of the Chinese party-state. *Dear You* successfully found its overseas audience, and became the last straw to challenge and change a long controversial policy spanning over four decades, though what the Singaporean audiences concluded was neither how the story made them more pro-China nor identify themselves with an ancestral nation across the sea. What Shen Zewei called united front work actually united Singaporean Chinese, and through letters to the press, sold-out screenings, and parliamentary questions pressed their own government for change—a movement unthinkable in today's China.

Two Faces of the Same Project

Placed side by side, the two works reveal a single project operating through two spatial and emotional logics. Both work at the level of feeling rather than argument. Neither advances an explicit political claim, and both instead produce emotional states—the warmth of cross-ethnic friendship, the ache of history and memory—that make particular arrangements appear natural, necessary, or desirable. What makes them worth reading together is not that they are identical but that they are mirror images. One turns a history of arrival into a story of healing; the other turns a history of departure into a story of enduring return; and the correspondences hold scene against scene. Li Wenxiu arrives in Altay and learns to love a place where her family's presence transformed, while Zheng Musheng leaves Chaoshan and spends his short life displaced, demonstrating that leaving severed nothing. The romance between Wenxiu and Batai presents Han presence as national integration over settlement, and the eighteen years of letters Xie Nanzhi writes in a dead man's name transform the diaspora's attachment to homeland as devotion over policy. Each film provides an emotional resolution whenever a political question would otherwise arise.

The asymmetry between their two forgettings is instructive. Han innocence requires forgetting specific events, the military conquest, the

XPCC settlement, the ongoing sedentarization and surveillance. Diaspora nostalgia requires a subtler forgetting, not of violence exactly but of the political contingency of the diaspora's relationship to the mainland, the fact that many overseas Chinese have real and historically grounded reasons for ambivalence about the PRC's claims on their identity and loyalty. The Singapore controversies made that contingency visible twice over, once when a journalist named the film's politics and once when audiences turned its feeling against their own state, and the ferocity of the first backlash reveals how much the film's emotional logic depends on the contingency staying hidden.

Together, Han innocence and diaspora nostalgia compose a system of Chinese national innocence, a disposition in which the nation appears to expand through love and belonging rather than power and interest. The frontier is healed, the diaspora is remembered. The very feelings these works produce conceal the political conditions that make them possible.

Conclusion

To the Wonder and *Dear You* address different peripheries to the same end. They manufacture national belonging through feeling rather than argument, one reaching inward to naturalize Han settlement on the frontier, the other reaching outward to fold the diaspora back into an emotionally unified nation. Both serve the project of telling China's story well, and both succeed because they look like anything but politics, so that naming their function, as the Singapore controversy showed, comes to feel like an assault on the very feelings they produce. Their difference is one of method. Han innocence works through erasure, disappearing histories of conquest and displacement, and colonization is only named beyond the border; while diaspora nostalgia works through memory, attaching a national significance that does not belong to kinship, and Singaporean Chinese took the those feelings to their own newspapers and their own Parliament. Each depends on the invisibility of its own political function, and each succeeds by asking to be received as nothing more than what it appears to be, a love letter.

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***Heqin* and Hierarchy: Princess Status in Tang and Song Marriage Diplomacy with Inner Asian Powers**

Bairong Zhu

Abstract

In the history of relations between Chinese dynasties and Inner Asian powers, *heqin* 和親 marriage alliances formed an important diplomatic practice through which courts managed war, peace, alliance, and hierarchy. This paper focuses on the Middle Period iterations of *heqin* during the Tang and Song dynasties. It argues that the choice between sending a true imperial daughter and sending a more distant imperial clanswoman was politically meaningful. The woman's status reflected how the court understood the balance of power, prestige, and hierarchy between itself and the other state. When a dynasty could still claim superior status, it often limited the concession by sending a woman from the imperial clan rather than the emperor's immediate family. When military dependence or strategic weakness became more acute, however, the court became more likely to send a true imperial princess. The decision was not determined by interstate politics alone: personal and familial concerns could also shape whether an emperor would place his own daughter or close relative into a diplomatic relationship. Through paired comparisons of Tang relations with the Tibetan Empire and the Uyghur Khaganate and Song relations with Liao and Western Xia, this paper shows that Middle Period *heqin* functioned as a language of hierarchy, dependence, and imperial family politics.

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Introduction

Marriage alliances, or *heqin* 和親—the practice by which Chinese dynasties married women, usually under the title of “princess,” to Inner Asian rulers—have long occupied an important place in the study of relations between Chinese dynasties and their non-Chinese neighbours. This practice is commonly traced to the early Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE), when the Han court used marriage diplomacy to manage relations with the Xiongnu after military confrontation at the end of the third century BCE. Much scholarship has therefore concentrated on the Han origins and development of *heqin*. This paper, however, is not a general history of the institution. It delineates a Middle Period scope, focusing on the Tang (618–907 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) and asking how the status of a proposed or dispatched princess functioned within their diplomatic hierarchies.

Within that narrower scope, historians have often understood these marriages as part of a broader diplomatic package that could include tribute, gifts, investiture, and negotiated peace. *Heqin* could help avoid war, secure an alliance, stabilize a frontier, or define a political relationship between two courts.¹ Yet this approach has often paid insufficient attention to the status of the women involved and to the reasons why an imperial court sometimes chose to send a “true imperial princess” and at other times did not. By this term, I mean a woman in the emperor’s immediate family, such as his daughter or sister. By contrast, many women sent in *heqin* marriages were selected from collateral branches of the imperial house or granted the title of princess for diplomatic purposes.

This paper argues that the status of the “princess” in a *heqin* marriage often reflected the balance of power between states and formed part of the diplomatic language through which hierarchy and prestige were

¹ Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 190–96.

expressed.² The court's choice of which princess to marry out was therefore not incidental: it was shaped by military and political realities and conveyed how the dynasty understood its own position vis-à-vis the power with which it was negotiating. The paper further argues that when the court considered sending the emperor's own daughter or sister, the boundary between the personal and the political became blurred. The emperor was not simply dispatching a symbolic representative of the state; he was placing a member of his immediate family into the diplomatic relationship. This personal dimension could therefore affect whether the court ultimately agreed to marry out a true imperial princess.

The case studies are selected as two paired contrasts within Middle Period China. Firstly, Tang relations with the Tibetan Empire (618–842/848 CE) and the Uyghur Khaganate (744–840 CE) compare a completed alliance negotiated from early Tang strength with later alliances concluded under military dependence. Under Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649 CE), the Tang sent Princess Wencheng—an imperial clanswoman rather than the emperor's daughter—to the Tibetan ruler in 641.³ After the An Lushan Rebellion, by contrast, the weakened Tang married true imperial daughters to Uyghur qaghans in order to secure military assistance.⁴

Secondly, Song relations with the Liao dynasty (916–1125 CE) and Western Xia (1038–1227 CE) compare two proposals that did not result in marriage. The Khitan Liao stood near parity with the Song and applied real military pressure, whereas the Tangut-ruled state of Western Xia occupied a lower place in Song diplomatic hierarchy. Because the Tang cases vary the bride's status among consummated alliances while the Song cases reveal when marriage itself became discussable or rejectable, these comparisons are

² Jonathan Karam Skaff, "Negotiating Kinship," in *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 206.

³ Shao-yun Yang, *Early Tang China and the World, 618–750 CE* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 13–21.

⁴ Shao-yun Yang, *Late Tang China and the World, 750–907 CE* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 16.

particularly fruitful for revealing how military need, perceived status, and imperial family concerns shaped *heqin* decisions.

Tang Relations with the Tibetan Empire and the Uyghur Khaganate

By the 630s, the Tang under Emperor Taizong had become one of the strongest powers in East Asia after defeating the Eastern Turkic Khaganate and consolidating control over North China. Yet the Tibetan Empire under Songtsen Gampo was also rising rapidly. Having unified much of the Tibetan Plateau, Songtsen Gampo created a centralized and militarily powerful state that could no longer be dismissed as a minor frontier power.⁵ This changing balance shaped early Tang–Tibetan diplomacy. In 634, Songtsen Gampo sent his first embassy to the Tang court. Emperor Taizong responded by sending an envoy to Tibet, but when the Tibetan ruler renewed his request for a Tang princess, the court refused.⁶

The situation changed after military conflict. In 638, Tibetan forces attacked the Tuyuhun kingdom 吐谷渾—a Xianbei-founded polity centred in the Qinghai Lake and upper Yellow River regions—and then advanced through Tangut 黨項 (*Dangxiang*), and Qiang 羌 territories to assault Songzhou 松州 on the Tang frontier. Chinese sources present this episode as a Tang victory that forced Songtsen Gampo to withdraw and apologize. Tibetan evidence, however, preserves a different picture and suggests a more favorable Tibetan outcome.⁷ Yang Shao-yun therefore argues that, whatever the exact military result, Tibet had demonstrated its ability to threaten the Tang frontier directly.⁸ This was not the behavior of a weak state seeking simple submission, but of a rival power capable of forcing serious diplomatic reconsideration. After the Songzhou campaign, Songtsen Gampo renewed his request, and in 640 Emperor Taizong agreed to bestow an

⁵ Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (Princeton University Press, 1987), 11–20.

⁶ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑, juan 194–195 (Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 6107–8, 6139–40.

⁷ Yang, *Early Tang China and the World*, 2, 22–23.

⁸ Yang, *Early Tang China and the World*, 23.

imperial clanswoman in marriage. Princess Wencheng arrived in Tibet in 641.⁹

The *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (New Book of Tang) presents the Tang–Tibetan relationship in explicitly hierarchical terms, suggesting that the Tang court understood itself as occupying the superior ritual and diplomatic position. It describes Tibet as sending tribute during the Songzhou crisis and, after withdrawing, sending another embassy to “apologize” and renew the marriage request.¹⁰ It also states that when Songtsen Gampo met Li Daozong 李道宗, the Tang imperial prince and envoy who escorted Princess Wencheng toward Tibet, he performed the “rites of a son-in-law,” symbolically placing the Tibetan ruler within a kinship hierarchy centred on the Tang imperial house.¹¹ Later passages reinforce the same rhetoric. A memorial attributed to Lu Dongzan 祿東贊, Songtsen Gampo's chief minister and envoy, praises Emperor Taizong as the ruler under whom all within reach of the sun and moon had become subjects, while another passage has Songtsen Gampo offer troops to suppress the emperor's disloyal subjects.¹² These statements do not prove that Tibet accepted political subordination. They do show, however, that the Tang represented itself as possessing greater prestige, ritual authority, and diplomatic status.

Emperor Taizong's decision to send an imperial clanswoman to Tibet should therefore be understood within the diplomatic context of the time. Tibet had become too powerful to ignore and had demonstrated enough military strength to force serious reconsideration at the Tang court. In practical political and military terms, the two powers were relatively close. Even so, the Tang could still preserve a credible rhetoric of hierarchy in which it remained the more prestigious side. This helps explain why the

⁹ Sima Guang, *Zizhi Tongjian*, juan 195, 6150, 6157.

¹⁰ Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書, juan 216 shang, “Tubo shang” 吐蕃上, Chinese Text Project, para. 4–5.

¹¹ Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tang shu*, juan 216 shang, “Tubo shang,” para. 6.

¹² Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tang shu*, juan 216 shang, “Tubo shang,” para. 7–8.

court sent Princess Wencheng, a woman drawn from the imperial clan, rather than a true imperial daughter.

After the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763 CE), the Tang court could no longer deal with the steppe from the position of strength it had enjoyed in the dynasty's early decades. The rebellion shattered military security and political coherence. As Yang emphasizes, it produced lasting structural damage: the court lost direct command over large parts of the empire, autonomous provincial commands multiplied, and the resources available to the court were sharply reduced.¹³ This broader weakening can also be seen in the court's dealings with the Uyghur Khaganate. The *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Old Book of Tang) records that when Emperor Suzong established himself at Lingwu 靈武, a northwestern frontier city in present-day Ningxia, he immediately sent envoys to the Uyghurs "to establish good relations and request military assistance," a formulation that reveals the asymmetry of the moment.¹⁴ The Tang was no longer dispensing favor to a subordinate frontier power; it was a dynasty in crisis, compelled to seek outside aid in order to survive.

Uyghur support soon became central to Tang recovery. The *Jiu Tang Shu* makes the importance of this aid clear: Uyghur troops under the yabghu, a high-ranking steppe title, helped Guo Ziyi 郭子儀 retake Chang'an and then played a decisive role again around Luoyang, where they charged from the rear and turned the battle against the rebels.¹⁵ The court itself acknowledged that "within twenty days, both capitals were recaptured and stabilized" because of Uyghur assistance.¹⁶ This was not marginal support. Yang likewise stresses that Uyghur cavalry was crucial to the Tang recapture of Chang'an in 757 and Luoyang in both 757 and 762.¹⁷

¹³ Yang, *Late Tang China and the World*, 16–17.

¹⁴ Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Zhonghua shuju, 1975), juan 195, "Huige," sec. 12.

¹⁵ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 195, "Huige," secs. 13–15.

¹⁶ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 195, "Huige," sec. 15.

¹⁷ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 195, "Huige," sec. 16.

Just as important, Uyghur support became part of the wider strategic balance against the Tibetan Empire. After the rebellion, the Tang faced repeated Tibetan incursions, the loss of the Hexi Corridor—the strategic passage connecting the Central Plains with Inner Asia—and a severe contraction of its northwestern position. Yang notes that isolated Tang garrisons on the old frontier could maintain intermittent contact with the court only through the Uyghurs and that later Tang rulers were forced to bargain for military relief under conditions of acute strategic weakness.¹⁸ The alliance was therefore not simply about defeating An Lushan and his successors. It became indispensable to the Tang effort to avoid encirclement and collapse while both internal rebels and Tibetan forces threatened the dynasty. Under such conditions, the marriage of Princess Ningguo was not merely a diplomatic gesture; it was one of the prices of military dependence.

In terms of prestige and status, Tang claims to superiority became increasingly hollow, although the court continued to contest ritual form. When Princess Ningguo was escorted to the Uyghur court, the *Jiu Tang shu* describes the qaghan as seated on his couch and demanding that the Tang envoy Li Yu 李瑀 bow. The qaghan also ordered the eunuch Lei Lujun (雷盧俊), who had been standing above Li Yu, to move below the imperial prince. Li Yu countered that because the Tang emperor had sent his own daughter, the qaghan was the emperor's son-in-law and should rise to receive the imperial edict.¹⁹ The qaghan complied, but only after this ritual contestation.²⁰ More telling still is what happened in practice. After the capture of Luoyang, Uyghur troops pillaged markets and villages for three days, and the Tang court could only mollify them with further gifts.²¹ In 762, the qaghan demanded that Yong Prince Li Kuo 雍王李適, later Emperor Dezong, perform a ritual dance before his tent. When the Tang officials Yao Zi'ang 藥子昂, Li Jin 李進, Wei Ju 魏琚, and Wei Shaohua 韋少華 protested, Uyghur commanders had them beaten; Wei Ju and Wei Shaohua

¹⁸ Yang, *Late Tang China and the World*, 20–21.

¹⁹ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 195, “Huige,” sec. 17.

²⁰ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 195, “Huige,” sec. 17.

²¹ Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 195, “Huige,” sec. 15.

died from their injuries, while the prince was released to the Tang camp.²² These incidents show that the Tang court's rhetoric of superiority no longer matched political reality and that the balance of prestige had shifted toward the Uyghur Khaganate. The court's need to preserve the alliance became so great that, after Princess Ningguo, it sent two more true imperial daughters: Princess Xian'an in 788 under Emperor Dezong and Princess Taihe in 821 under Emperor Muzong.

Taken together, the Tang–Tibetan and Tang–Uyghur comparison shows that the status of the woman sent in marriage was closely tied to both the dynasty's military-political situation and the court's perception of its relative rank. Under Emperor Taizong, the Tang faced a formidable Tibetan rival but still negotiated from considerable strength and could frame the relationship through symbolic superiority. It could therefore concede marriage while limiting that concession to an imperial clanswoman. Emperor Suzong and his successors confronted a far graver crisis: devastated by rebellion and dependent on Uyghur military aid, they had much less room to preserve earlier hierarchies in practice. Under these circumstances, the marriages of the true imperial princesses Ningguo, Xian'an, and Taihe marked not simply diplomatic alliances but a shift in the balance of power itself.

Song Relations with Liao and Western Xia

The relationship between the Song dynasty and the Khitan (*Qidan* 契丹) Liao Dynasty was shaped by prolonged military confrontation. The Northern Song was not without military capacity, yet it faced a powerful northern regime with substantial military strength and political coherence.²³ The Treaty of Chanyuan (*Chanyuan zhi meng* 澶淵之盟) in 1005 established peace and formalized a relationship in which the Song recognized Liao as

²² Liu Xu, *Jiu Tang shu*, juan 195, “Huige,” sec. 23.

²³ Wang Tseng-yu, “A History of the Sung Military,” trans. David C. Wright, in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, pt. 1, *The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors, 907–1279*, ed. Denis C. Twitchett and Paul Jakov Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 214–17; Linda Walton, *Middle Imperial China, 900–1350: A New History* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 38–40.

the one polity standing near its own diplomatic level.²⁴ This order was expressed through fictive kinship: the two states were described as the Southern Court and Northern Court, and their rulers were placed within a framework of brotherly relations.²⁵ What emerged after Chanyuan was a negotiated order in which parity rested on military reality while prestige was managed through calibrated kinship language and ritual form.

It was within this post-Chanyuan order, and under the pressure of a new military crisis in the early 1040s, that Fu Bi 富弼, a senior Song official and diplomat, was sent north. The immediate background was the rise of Western Xia and the strain that prolonged war in the northwest had placed on the Song. The *Song shi jishi benmo* 宋史紀事本末 (The Chronicles of Important Events in the History of the Song Dynasty) states that the Liao court judged the moment favorable precisely because Song forces had long been engaged in the west, had grown weary, and had imposed heavy burdens on the population.²⁶ The two courts still stood on relatively equal diplomatic footing, but Liao enjoyed a limited military advantage because Song resources were tied down in the northwest. Under these circumstances, the Song court authorized Fu Bi to negotiate on the basis of two possible concessions: a marriage alliance or an increase in annual payments.²⁷ When the Liao envoy Liu Liufu 劉六符 raised the possibility of a Khitan prince marrying the daughter of Emperor Renzong, Fu Bi rejected the proposal immediately, arguing that the Southern Emperor's daughter was still young and that marriage could not resolve the immediate crisis.

The reasons for Fu Bi's immediate rejection are important. His practical objection was certainly significant, but the broader political relationship between the two courts and their perceptions of relative status also mattered. Although the Song was militarily disadvantaged, it retained

²⁴ David Curtis Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity in Eleventh-Century China: Sung's Foreign Relations with Kitan Liao* (Brill, 2005), 2–4, 35, 230.

²⁵ Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity*, 145–47, 230.

²⁶ Feng Qi 馮琦, *Song shi jishi benmo* 宋史紀事本末, juan 21, “Qidan menghao” 契丹盟好.

²⁷ Li Tao 李燾, *Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian* 續資治通鑑長編, juan 137, sec. 39; Feng Qi, *Song shi jishi benmo*, juan 21, “Qidan menghao.”

considerable capacity to resist. This is evident in Fu Bi's refusal to cede territory: he made clear that such a demand would compel the Song to resort to military action.²⁸ In other words, the Song negotiated from a position of weakness, but not one of complete helplessness. Fu Bi's rejection therefore cannot be understood solely in instrumental terms; it also expressed the Song court's unwillingness to make a symbolic concession that might undermine its political dignity. Even the Tang, whose ruling house had partial Xianbei ancestry and whose court is often regarded as having been less strictly bound by Confucian marital norms, generally sent daughters of reigning emperors into diplomatic marriages only during periods of acute strategic vulnerability.²⁹ It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Fu Bi's refusal reflected not only immediate practical considerations but also the Song court's continuing effort to preserve its status vis-à-vis the Liao.

As noted in the introduction, the Han origin of *heqin* also provides an important precedent for the personal dimension of marriage diplomacy. Liu Jing 劉敬 advised Han Emperor Gaozu to send his eldest daughter by Empress Lü to marry the Xiongnu ruler Maodun Chanyu. The proposal promised peace and potentially greater Han influence at the Xiongnu court. Yet Emperor Gaozu refused to send his own daughter after Empress Lü protested, and another woman was dispatched in her place under the title of imperial princess.³⁰

A similar tension appears in the Song–Liao case. The princess discussed by Fu Bi and Liu Liufu was most likely Princess Fukang, Emperor Renzong's eldest daughter. Although Fu Bi does not state that Emperor Renzong refused the match because of his attachment to Fukang, the surviving record suggests why the choice would have been especially difficult. The *Song shi* 宋史 (History of the Song Dynasty) notes that

²⁸ Li Tao 李燾, *Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian* 續資治通鑑長編, juan 137, sec. 39; Feng Qi, *Song shi jishi benmo*, juan 21, "Qidan menghao."

²⁹ Skaff, "Negotiating Kinship," 208–209.

³⁰ Anne Behnke Kinney, "Our Woman in Central Asia: Women Diplomats of the Han Court," in *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections*, ed. Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 208–9.

Emperor Renzong cherished Fukang from childhood,³¹ and her later promotion to some of the highest titles available to imperial women further indicates her exceptional favor.³² Her eventual marriage also reveals the emperor's personal investment in her future: rather than sending Fukang to a distant frontier ruler, he carefully arranged her marriage to Li Wei 李瑋, a man from the family of Renzong's biological mother, Consort Li 李宸妃. The decision became the subject of prolonged court discussion and was treated with unusual seriousness.³³

Moreover, of Emperor Renzong's thirteen daughters, nine are recorded in the *Song shi* as having died young.³⁴ Among the four who survived to adulthood, Fukang was the eldest, while the next surviving daughter appears to have been born much later.³⁵ At the time of Fu Bi's northern mission in 1042, Fukang was therefore very likely Emperor Renzong's only living daughter. She carried unusual symbolic and personal importance, and the Liao proposal imposed an especially high emotional as well as diplomatic cost. The Song court's refusal was consequently shaped not only by interstate hierarchy but also by the emperor's attachment to his own child.

By the time Liangzuo 諒祚, the son of Yuanhao 元昊 and second ruler of Western Xia, requested a marriage alliance, Song–Xia relations had acquired a clearly hierarchical character in both military and diplomatic terms. The wars of the early 1040s had exposed serious Song weaknesses, but by Liangzuo's reign the balance had changed. Song officials regarded him as less threatening than Yuanhao and believed that frontier defenses were much stronger than during the Baoyuan 寶元 (1038-1040 CE) and

³¹ Toqto'a 脫脫 et al., *Song shi* 宋史, (Zhonghua shuju, 1977), juan 248, "Gongzhu" 公主, sec. 21, Chinese Text Project: "*zhou, chen guo dachang gongzhu, di zhangnü ye ... dilong ai zhi.* 周、陳國大長公主，帝長女也……帝隆愛之。"

³² Toqto'a 脫脫 et al., *Song shi* 宋史, sec. 21.

³³ Zhao Ruyu 趙汝愚 ed., *Song chao mingchen zouyi* 宋朝名臣奏議, juan 33, "Shang Renzong lun Fukang gongzhu xuanshang qi yi wuli zhi ming cun qi wushu 上仁宗論福康公主選尚乞依五禮之名存其物數。"

³⁴ Toqto'a et al., *Song shi*, juan 248, "Gongzhu zhuan," sec. 20.

³⁵ Toqto'a et al., *Song shi*, juan 248, "Gongzhu zhuan," sec. 24.

Kangding 康定 (1040-1041 CE) reign periods. Under Song pressure, Liangzuo was compelled to apologize and renew submission.³⁶ His diplomatic posture also reflected unequal status: he petitioned for Confucian classics, official histories, and court ritual regulations, treating the Song court as a source of political and cultural authority.³⁷ When he further requested a princess in marriage, the Song refused on the ground that he had already received the imperial surname.³⁸ The Song court's response is revealing. Since surname bestowal already marked Western Xia as a recipient of Song favor within a hierarchical relationship, the court saw no reason to elevate the connection through marriage with a true imperial princess. The refusal therefore expressed not only opposition to a particular proposal but also a broader conclusion that Western Xia did not occupy a military or diplomatic position worthy of such a concession.

Taken together, the Song cases show that the court's willingness to contemplate or refuse a marriage alliance was shaped by military balance, diplomatic status, and the emperor's personal concerns. In relations with Liao, where the two courts stood near parity and the Song faced real pressure, marriage could at least enter discussion, though the court resisted giving up a true imperial daughter. In relations with Western Xia, where the hierarchy was clearer, the Song saw no reason to elevate the relationship through marriage at all.

Conclusion

By treating Tang and Song diplomacy as a distinct Middle Period iteration of *heqin*, while using the Han precedent only as framing context, this paper clarifies what these cases contribute to the broader history of marriage alliance. Across the Tang–Tibetan, Tang–Uyghur, Song–Liao, and Song–Xia comparisons, the status of the woman considered or sent was

³⁶ Feng Qi, *Song shi jishi benmo*, juan 40, “Xixia yongbing 西夏用兵”, secs. 2–3.

³⁷ Li Tao, *Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian*, juan 196, sec. 13.

³⁸ Li Tao, *Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian*, juan 196, sec. 13.

closely tied to interstate power and to the hierarchy each court sought to establish. Where a dynasty retained substantial strength and a credible claim to superior prestige, it could limit the concession by sending an imperial clanswoman rather than a true imperial daughter—or refuse marriage altogether. Where its position became more precarious and dependence increased, the likelihood of marrying out a true imperial princess also increased. The Song–Liao case further shows that, when the proposed bride was the emperor's own daughter, the personal dimension of rulership could alter diplomatic calculation. Middle Period *heqin* was therefore not simply an instrument of peace; it was also a calibrated language of rank, dependence, and imperial family politics.

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“桂林山水甲天下，玉碧罗青意可参。”

“*Guilin shanshui jia tianxia, yubi luo qing yi ke can*”

“Guilin’s scenery is peerless under heaven; within its jade-green mountains and blue-green waters lies a meaning to be contemplated.”

From Wang Zhenggong’s 王正功 Quanjia Shi 《劝驾诗》, 1201

This poem, written by the Southern Song official Wang Zhenggong in Guilin in 1201, celebrated the success of eleven local scholars in the provincial examination in the backdrop of the natural beauty of the rugged mountains of the Guangxi country. Wang addressed the poem to young scholars as they prepared to continue their studies and advance to the next stage of the imperial examination system. His praise of Guilin’s landscape carried with it a message of encouragement directed to students embarking on their scholarly paths.

This spirit of encouragement gives the verse particular meaning for *OnEast*. Our journal offers EAS undergraduates a platform to develop and share their work, encouraging them to take part in a broader academic conversation. Likewise, “*yi ke can* 意可参” speaks to the reflective nature of East Asian Studies, where meaning emerges through close study of the questions we ask.

With the revival of *OnEast* in Volume IX, we hope to carry that gesture of encouragement forward for a new generation of students.

Back photograph—Jiuyan Bridge, Chengdu, China. By Mingjingzi (Luna) Liu.

Cover photograph—Mountains of Guilin. By Vittorio Wang.

