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Genro Democracy: Elite Democracy in Japan

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Abstract

This paper studies the suffrage requirements of the Meiji Constitution, which the Meiji oligarchs/elder statesmen created to show that Restoration Japan would be a western-style liberal state, and the first Japanese general election. The original Japanese electoral law stated that to be a voter, a Japanese man had to be 25 and above, meet residency requirements, and pay 15 yen in yearly taxes. Only 1% of the Japanese population met these requirements. However, unlike the preceding eras of Japanese history, most of these were commoners. As a result, this was the first time that Japanese outside the aristocracy and samurai classes, if they met the financial requirements, got to have a say in the running of their nation. Through an analysis of various primary and secondary sources, this research establishes that the first Japanese general election did not truly reflect the voice of the Japanese people, considering that lower-class Japanese and residents of Hokkaido and Okinawa could not vote. Even considering these factors, as the first election in Asia, the first parliamentary election of Japan was still a major change, for this was the first time that Asians, regardless of birth, got to choose their leaders. This paved the way for the other Asian democracies that would follow.

Keywords: Meiji era, Japanese constitution, Japanese parliamentarism

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Introduction

During the Meiji period, the leaders of Japan drafted a new Constitution, with the help of foreign advisers, to create a new state structure to replace the old Chinese-style/*ritsuryo* state structure. This was supposed to show the Western nations Japan was at their level, but at the same time, create a governmental structure suitable to the Japanese's needs. Due to this, the resulting Constitution allowed commoners to participate in the Japanese government for the first time.

However, due to electoral law provisions accompanying the Constitution, participation was limited to the wealthiest commoners. As a result, the Meiji Constitution may have created a liberal democratic state structure. However, this structure was a *genro*/elite democracy because even though most qualified voters voted, the franchise was limited by the taxation system, which favored rural landlords and a few wealthy merchants, and the residence requirement did not include the territories of Hokkaido and Okinawa. Thus, the first general election in Japan, despite having a high turnout, did not consider the voices of most Japanese. Despite the limited number of votes in the first Japanese election, it is still significant in the study of Asian history because it was the first election ever held in Asia.

Framework

In theory, the new Constitution was able to give Japanese commoners (those who were neither ex-samurai or nobility) the power to shape their country, and it was seemingly able to do so, since the Meiji Constitution did not discriminate against any subject based on class. However, Japan became an elite democracy run like a well-kept casino. This is because it was like how Benedict Anderson (1988), described Philippine politics, where anyone could participate, but the elite would always win in the end. In Japan, anyone could participate, just like the casino would welcome any paying customer. Despite this, in the end, due to the voting requirements, participation was limited to a few, and these few would win. The only difference between this *genro* democracy and feudal Japan was that the *genro*/imperial advisers allowed wealthy commoners to participate in the crafting of the new Japan.

Meiji Constitution and *Genro* Democracy

After the success of the Meiji Restoration, the restored Imperial Government of Emperor Meiji decided to send the Iwakura mission to see the West and learn how to reform the Japanese governmental system to ensure that the forced treaties imposed on Japan by the European countries and the United States be renegotiated (Takii, 2007). Takii Kazuhiro (2007) would explain this as an attempt to achieve equality with European nations. Once the Japanese could be equal to the other European nations, then they would escape the humiliation forced on them by the West. This was part of a general transformation of Japanese society that was taking place. To face Europe and the United States on equal terms, Japan had to transform itself into a society that could fit in the Western mold. In the 19th century, due to the influence of the Enlightenment and the rise of liberal ideas, a constitution was needed. This is because it was necessary to clearly define the powers of the government and protect the rights of the people.

However, it was important for the Meiji leaders to research the constitutions of the West to see which model would be most appropriate for Japan. This is why Ito Hirobumi, one of the Meiji leaders and the first prime minister of Japan, went to Europe (Takii, 2016). According

to Takii Kazuhiro (2016), he studied the Prussian Constitution and learned about it from German law scholars Rudolf von Gneist and Lorenz von Stein. The German model, according to Takii's (2016) analysis, was chosen over the British model because the Meiji leaders thought the British parliament was too powerful. This was because the British parliament makes laws while implementing it through a Cabinet responsible to it. The Meiji leaders feared that it would weaken the emperor.

The German Constitution, on the other hand, granted considerable powers to the German Emperor, for the Imperial Chancellor was accountable to the emperor alone. (German Historical Institute, n.d.). According to the German Historical Institute's (n.d.) copy of the German Imperial Constitution, the constitution was, instead of being a social contract between the German Emperor and the people, an agreement between the German monarchs to establish a unified Germany under the presidency of the Prussian King (as German Emperor).

This was suitable for the Meiji leaders because they rallied around the emperor. Therefore, it was not surprising that the Meiji leaders ensured that the Constitution they drafted would appear to be the gift of Emperor Meiji to the Japanese people. Consequently, Ito Hirobumi (1906) and the rest of the Meiji Cabinet created a constitution where the emperor had all sovereignty. Article IV of the new Japanese constitution explicitly stated that sovereignty was with the emperor, not the people, which explains why the Meiji Constitution calls the Japanese people subjects instead of citizens (Ito, 1906). Another evidence of the emperor officially having full sovereignty is that only the emperor could propose amendments to the Constitution, but with the approval of a two-thirds vote of the Imperial Diet (Ito, 1906). This would be significant later in Japanese history, for the current Japanese constitution would be promulgated following this process as an amendment to the Meiji Constitution.

After all, even under the various shogunates and the Fujiwara *kampaku*/regents, sovereignty was still with the emperor/empress (for before the Meiji era, Japan had eight empresses). The shoguns and regents ruled in the emperor's name. This conservatism was like that of the German Reich, which is why the Meiji leaders chose it as a model. It was easy for the Meiji leaders to adopt some form of constitutionalism because of the ancient Japanese tradition of the emperor not participating in day-to-day governance.

However, what was new with the Meiji Constitution was that the Japanese emperor agreed to share his legislative power with an Imperial Diet, as stated in Article V of said constitution, which would have two chambers, the House of Representatives and the House of Peers (Ito, 1906). The framers of the Meiji Constitution chose the term Diet for the parliament because they chose the German Imperial system as their model, for the term Diet was used for the parliament of the Holy Roman Empire. Even if the people were not sovereign yet, this was still a giant step towards democracy because, for the first time, the people got a say on how to govern Japan.

After all, the final approved version of the Meiji Constitution, as explained by Ito (1906), provided for an elected House of Representatives, which had priority over the budget and revenue. Therefore, the people of Japan, for the first time, got a say on how the emperor (through his ministers) would spend their taxes. This meant that if the elected representatives opposed the initiatives of the emperor's advisers, then they could block the budget they proposed. In short, that would get the advisers to think again and consider the ideas of the electorate.

However, even if the people were now sharing power with the emperor, the Meiji leaders or the *genro* still were on top. This was because, as Prince Ito (1906) explained, when the emperor would act, the ministers were responsible, and the *genro* were the ministers. As the emperor's advisers, they exercised his authority, and so they exercised real power. So, in the end, the Meiji Constitution's system resembled a parliamentary monarchical system in its early stages. Also, even in most modern constitutional monarchies outside Japan, the monarchy (The Crown) still has the official sovereignty, but the royal advisers are accountable to the elected legislature. In this stage though, cabinet collective responsibility had yet to develop.

As the elected house, the House of Representatives would be the centerpiece of Japan's new *genro* democracy. This is because the people of Japan, provided they met the requirements for suffrage, could share power with the emperor's unelected advisers. However, as seen with the first Japanese election, only a minority of Japanese could vote, due to the limiting nature of these requirements.

The First Japanese Election (as a Case Study)

Voting Requirements

The Meiji Constitution, regarding suffrage, only mentions that the members of the House of Representatives would be directly elected by Japanese subjects, based on the provisions of an Electoral Law (Siemes, 1968). This Law of Election stated that only Japanese men aged 25 years who were residents of their Fu (City) or Ken (Prefecture) for a year or more and paying at least 15 yen in either land or income tax (McLaren, 1914). Regarding income tax, the taxpayer had to be paying it for at least three years (McLaren, 1914).

One reason behind these qualifications is that more conservative leaders like Yamagata were very skeptical about the liberalism of the West, due to their belief that giving everyone political rights would overthrow the Japanese state (Takii, 2007).

Another reason behind these restrictions was that, according to the liberals like Ito who desired a parliamentary regime, was that Japanese liberalism was still at its infancy, so it was not yet the right time to allow full-blown democracy (Takii, 2007).

Also, to demonstrate that Meiji Japan was a *genro* democracy, the suffrage requirements in Meiji Japan will be discussed. However, for purposes of this paper, these will be limited to the first Japanese election, promulgated the year after the constitution, for the first election sets the tone for all future elections, and in these succeeding elections, the electoral rules would already be modified.

Age Requirement of 25 Years for Voters

The Meiji Constitution and the Law of Election limited Japanese subjects to above 25 voting age to restrict suffrage to those who supposedly had mature judgement (Siemes, 1968). In those days, most of the registered population of Japanese males during the early Meiji period, was above 25 (Morita, 1963). However, it is very difficult to gauge the population of Japan per age group in this early period since population registration was at its infancy (Morita, 1963). Also, these men above 25 were from every class of society, from the commoners, ex-samurai, and nobility, so age limits in themselves are not discriminatory.

However, the heads of the old Japanese aristocratic families were not allowed to vote, regardless of age (Ito, 1906). This was fair because the heads of the noble families were eligible for membership or election in the Upper House, the House of Peers, and for the higher nobility, meaning those in the ranks of Prince (equivalent to Duke) and Marquis, were automatically members of the House of Peers, as explained by Marquis (later Prince) Ito Hirobumi (1906). This was likely to prevent men from becoming members of both houses of the Imperial Diet. After all, even in modern-day Britain, membership in the House of Lords is still a disqualification for voting in the general elections.

Thus, the age requirement for suffrage was not discriminatory, since, without considering the other requirements, most Japanese men would have been eligible to vote. Due to this, when universal suffrage in Japan was instituted during the late Taisho period, this requirement remained.

Residence Requirements and the Marginalization of Ethnic Minorities

Based on the first Japanese election law, a Japanese man had to meet a one-year residency requirement in his city (Fu) or prefecture (Ken) (McLaren, 1914). Also, these prefectures were divided into electoral districts (Mason, 1969). Most electoral laws have residence requirements so that voters know their voting place well enough to choose the right candidates and avoid flying voters. Thus, this requirement in Meiji Japan seemed reasonable.

McLaren's (1914) translation of the Law of Election explicitly stated, in Section CXI, that its provisions would not apply in Hokkaido and Okinawa. Okinawa was not included because it was only incorporated into Japan with the overthrow of the Ryukyuan Kingdom (Kerr, 2000). As it once was a separate kingdom, the Ryukyu people in Okinawa had a different way of life than the Japanese, which explains why the Japanese did not grant Okinawans the right of suffrage. However, according to Kerr (2000), the Ryukyu Kingdom was already under the Japanese sphere of influence during the Tokugawa period, but it retained its separate status to allow the Japanese to trade with China.

Thus, the Okinawans were viewed as foreign in the eyes of Japanese, which likely explains why the framers of the Meiji Constitution and the Law of Election were reluctant to include Okinawa in constructing electoral districts. The incorporation of Okinawa into Japan only made the subservience of the Okinawans to the Japanese official, for their separate status denied them suffrage, even for the Okinawan elites. These elites were given Japanese noble titles, so they ended up being eligible for the House of Peers.

Hokkaido, on the other hand, was not considered part of Japan at this time, for Japan proper was limited to Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku Islands (Lu, 2016). Due to this, in the early Meiji years, Hokkaido was governed by the Hokkaido Development Agency (Lu, 2016), and not by its local government. The Agency encouraged ex-samurai to move to Hokkaido (Lu, 2016), most probably because some of these samurai were discontented due to losing their privileged status during the Meiji restoration. As a result of moving to Hokkaido, these ex-samurai, along with other Japanese colonists, ended up being denied the right to vote in the first Japanese election.

Also, the colonization of Hokkaido ended up pushing the indigenous Ainu aside, and the lands given to the colonizers were taken from them (Okada, 2012). Also, another reason why Hokkaido was not included in the creation of electoral districts was that the Ainu were

originally not considered Japanese. This was why the Japanese, according to Mitsuharu Okada (2012) of the University of Hawaii-Manoa, forced the Ainu to use Japanese last names and abandon their traditional practices. Thus, since the Ainu were not fully assimilated into Japanese society, they were denied the rights enjoyed by Japanese subjects, just like the Okinawan people.

Due to the exclusion of certain territories from the residence requirement, the 1-year residence requirement in Japan denied the Okinawans and the colonists of Hokkaido the right to suffrage. This residence requirement also denied the Ainu the right to vote, since they were the indigenous residents of Hokkaido.

In effect, setting a residence requirement, which would seem reasonable, while at the same time, excluding certain areas in Japan just because the locals were considered non-Japanese, effectively marginalized the local inhabitants. Also, not including Okinawa and Hokkaido in the prefectures, for purposes of election, served to deny Ainu and Okinawans representation in the Imperial Diet.

Taxation as a Requirement for Voting

To be qualified as a voter, a Japanese man had to pay taxes at the value of 15 yen or more (McLaren, 1914). The rationale behind this was that only people who could contribute to the work of the state by paying taxes should be allowed to have a voice in its administration (Siemes, 1968). This was because in a liberal state, the consent of the governed is necessary for a government to function, especially regarding expenditures, and it was believed that only those who contributed to state expenditures via taxation could have a say on how it should be spent. Also, even for men, universal suffrage was not popular during the 19th century, so in theory, this would be considered normal.

However, during the early Meiji period, most taxes in Japan were land taxes, so most of those who could meet the 15-yen requirement were rural landowners (Jansen, 2008). Land taxes only had to be paid for a year for a voter to qualify, while income taxes had to be paid for three years (Jansen, 2008). This skewed the voting requirements in favor of rural landlords rather than employees. These rural landlords did not only form most of the electors during the first election, but they also comprised the majority in the House of Representatives, (Jansen, 2008). These landlords benefited from the expropriation of the former *daimyo*, and thus, were able to purchase their lands. Thus, the wealthy landowners of Meiji Japan were of humble origins compared to the former *daimyo* and samurai.

Also, the Law on Election discriminated against urban dwellers because their income tax requirement was 15 yen (McLaren, 1914). However, they had to pay it within a three-year period, unlike property taxes, which the taxpayer had to pay for a year before a landowner could register (Mason, 1969). This was supposed to be a reward for farmers because their tax contributions were greater than those of the urban dwellers, for at that time, there were around 500,000 people who were paying 15 yen in land taxes, while there were 14,000 people who were paying this amount in income tax (Mason, 1969). This could also be a remnant of the discrimination against merchants which was prevalent in feudal Japan, for some urban dwellers were wealthy merchants.

Due to this, it can be concluded that, in theory, a minimum amount of payable taxes would make sure that only those who could contribute to state coffers would be allowed to decide

where their money would go, however, since the taxation system in Meiji Japan was mostly built on land taxes, not on income taxes, this made sure that wealthy landlords were those who controlled the House of Representatives. As a result, even though commoners could participate in government, high tax requirements limited involvement to a new elite. Despite the rise of a new ruling class, this class arose from humble origins, so this was still something new, when compared to the old feudal society.

Results of the Election and the Profile of the Elected Representatives

As a result of these restrictions on suffrage, the total number of men who voted in the first Japanese election was 450,365, according to Australian professor R.H. P. Mason (1969), out of a population of 40 million. Due to this, only 1% of the Japanese population could participate in the first general election (Mason, 1969). Thus, the supposed voice of the people that the Imperial Government heard during the first election and inside the House of Representatives was the voice of the new elite created by the *genro* during the Meiji Restoration.

The representatives they elected to the House of Representatives were mostly commoners, around 30 to 40 years old, and either wealthy or middle class (Mason, 1969). This is significant because the minimum age for representatives was 30 (Siemes, 1968), and most of them were not from the old aristocracy (Mason, 1969). 191 out of the 300 elected were commoners, compared to 109 former samurai (Mason, 1969). In this context, “commoner” meant Japanese who did not belong to the *Kazoku* class (aristocrats) or the *Shizoku* class (ex-samurai). Thus, the nobility had to share power with the commoners for the first time in Japanese history.

Also, Mason (1969) mentions that the liberal *Yayoi Club* won a plurality of 130 seats, while the Progressives won 40 seats and the National Liberals, 5. Due to this, the Liberals had 175 seats in total, as compared with the 80 seats of Yamagata’s pro-Government party, and 45 seats for the unaffiliated, based on Mason’s (1969) study. As a result, the Liberals could push through with their plans for Japan, even if Yamagata could get all the independents on his side. Thus, those who yearned to expand suffrage gradually won, for the only reason the Liberals did not mind restricting suffrage because Japanese democracy was in its infancy. Once the transition from feudalism to the new Japan was complete, suffrage could be extended to all men, which happened under Meiji’s son Emperor Taisho.

However, women’s suffrage would have to wait until the end of the Pacific War, when the current Japanese constitution was promulgated, following the revision process mandated under the Meiji Constitution. This process would also replace the House of Peers with an elected House of Councilors. Therefore, full democracy in Japan had to wait until 1946, when a new Constitution was promulgated (Prime Minister’s Office, 1946), which made suffrage universal even to women.

Conclusion: The Power of the *Genro* in *Genro* Democracy

However, even though governance was opened to the commoners, the *genro* still had power since they were the ones who drafted the Constitution and the Law on Election. Thus, they created provisions that allowed them to restrict suffrage, like residence requirements that effectively banned Ainu and Okinawans, as well as new Japanese arrivals to these areas, from voting, as well as tax restrictions which effectively limited suffrage to wealthy landlords as

well as upper middle class urban dwellers. In addition, most of those elected to the House of Representatives paid 125 yen in taxes (Mason, 1969). This meant that most of the members of the Lower House were wealthy, either as rural landowners or urban entrepreneurs, and thus, it only represented a minority of the Japanese population, for most Japanese people did not own enough property to pay land taxes for.

Also, due to the surrender of the daimyo's domains to the Imperial Government, as well as land reform programs that ended feudalism in Japan, the *genro* ensured that most of the land in Japan would end up in the hands of commoners. As a result, those who could purchase these lands became wealthy landlords. Thus, it can be said that the new elite that could vote in election and serve in the Imperial Japanese government was created by the *genro* themselves.

Since the new elite that controlled the House of Representatives was created by the *genro*, in theory, it should mean that they should be able to control business in both houses, since as ministers of the emperor, the *genro* controlled the House of Peers and had a voice in the House of Representatives. The reality is that because the Liberal and Progressive parties won a majority of the seats in the house, they had power nearly equal to the *genro*, since as Ministers and Privy Counsellors, the *genro* could introduce legislation, and influence the Emperor's decisions, but the House of Representatives and House of Peers were equal, so the Liberal majority could block these proposals. Also, the House of Representatives had budgetary power, so they could deny funding to proposals they disagreed with. Thus, even though Meiji Japan was controlled by the elites, there was still a space for democracy, due to the equality of both houses.

In the end, even though Japan was on its way to democracy during the Meiji Period, the Meiji Constitution, through the Law on Election, created a *genro* democracy, since the framers of the Meiji Constitution and the Law on Election restricted suffrage by creating residence requirements that excluded those living in certain areas in Japan, as well as tax requirements that excluded majority of the Japanese due to the favoring of rural areas. Due to this, those elected to the House of Representatives, as well as the voters in the first Japanese general election, were part of an elite that the *genro* created.

However, due to the victory of the Liberals, democracy in Japan would gradually expand, for the Liberals in the elite favored gradual expansion of democracy. In fact, Kainuma (2024) would state that after the first Sino-Japanese War, the Meiji advisers would implement a business tax, which would increase the power of industrialists over landowners, which would create an expansion of the tax base. This expansion opened suffrage for more people, due to the rise of the non-landowner taxpayers. Ultimately, this led to the passage of the Manhood Suffrage law by the end of the Taisho period, which opened the vote to all Japanese men, regardless of the taxes they were paying, so ultimately, even the factory workers and farm employees got the chance to vote for their representatives (Colegrove, 1929).

To conclude, even if democracy in Japan was limited to a tiny minority in its first election, it was still a start. After all, the first Japanese election was the first election to take place in the Asian continent, under the first codified Asian constitution. After all, even in the West, democratic constitutions in their original forms limited liberal democracy to the elites. This is why there was nothing wrong with Japan limiting suffrage, for the liberals who did win would later expand the vote through amending the election laws, first through changing the tax base, then eliminating tax restrictions altogether.

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Instagram as a Catalyst of Change: Kohati Dakwah Organization's Adoption of Women's Empowerment Programme on Instagram @perempuanberkisah

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Abstract

This research aims to find out how Kohati Dakwah processes the innovation of women's empowerment programs in the @perempuanberkisah.id Instagram account and then adopts it so that there is a change in the direction of the organization's movement. The changes of work programs were made during the change of management period 2022/2023 to 2023/2024. In the old period, Kohati Dakwah as women's movement organization was oriented towards branding the organization due to the vacuum of the organization due to the pandemic, while in this new period, it focused more on women's empowerment programs and gender equality. This research is a mixed method research whose data collection uses questionnaires, interviews, and documentation. By utilizing two theoretical concepts at once, diffusion of innovation theory and elaboration likelihood, this research reveals the processes of receiving messages (through peripheral channels, analyzed with ELM theory) to cause changes in the direction of the organization's movement based on innovations from the @perempuanberkisah.id account (analyzed with innovation diffusion theory). There are 5 Kohati Dakwah work programs adopted from the @perempuanberkisah.id Instagram content program including. The @perempuanberkisah.id Instagram account acts as a reference in changing the work programs of Kohati Dakwah.

Keywords: women's empowerment, Instagram, diffusion of innovation

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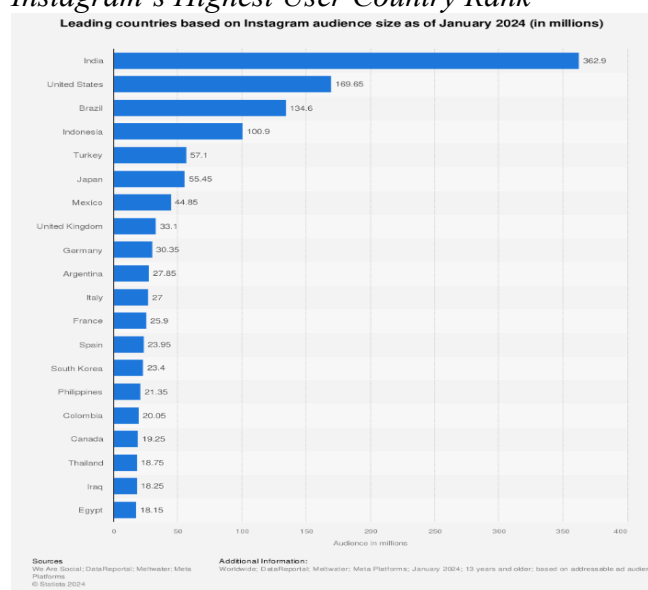
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Introduction

Social media has a major influence on people's perceptions (Montana & Junaidi, 2021). Social media can influence the perception and even the values of its users, depending on the intensity, duration and frequency of use. This fact is proven by the media effect theory, hypodermic needle, or hypodermic needle theory apart from affecting perception, social media also affects social change because it is used massively and exploitatively (Yusuf & Susanto, 2021). This social extension, in turn, is a factor in the increasing number of people using social media to voice certain issues (Yusuf & Susanto, 2021). The fluidity of user identity in social media minimizes users' concerns when voicing certain issues that may contradict their identity in real life (Cover, 2023). Perloff, a communication professor from Cleveland State University, revealed that the power of social media does not only stop at the level of perception but can even have an impact on policy, so it is not surprising that people who are considered marginalized and experience injustice use social media in the hope of triggering attention from policy makers (Budiarsa & Pandiangan, 2022).

The Perempuan Berkisah community is one of the many communities that use social media-Instagram to create a women's empowerment movement (Reprianto et al., 2022). The account is called @perempuanberkisah.id and actively posts various content every day. As the name implies, "women telling stories," this account accommodates the stories of women who experience injustice and violence but do not have the power to speak up (Wulandari, 2020). The incoming stories are then reviewed so that they can be educated together. This account was created on September 5, 2018 and its status remains active until now (read: 2024), which means it has been operating for 5 years. When the @perempuanberkisah.id account was accessed (May 19, 2024) it had 2,711 posts with 107,593 followers (Wulandari & Widiarti, 2020). In the @perempuanberkisah Instagram bio, it is stated that the account functions as a medium for empowerment, a catalyst for change, and a safe space based on empathy and victim partiality, so it is not surprising that the themes of the content and programs promoted are not far from gender justice and women's education (Parasdya et al., 2023).

Figure 1
Instagram's Highest User Country Rank



Source: Dixon (2024)

The use of Instagram among groups and communities is not taboo because since its appearance in 2010, Instagram has continued to increase the number of users and various interests (Choi & Lee, 2023). Indonesia itself is even ranked as the 4th most Instagram-using country in the world, based on data from Statista (the world's global data and business intelligence platform). Instagram also recorded that it only took 11.2 years to reach 2 billion active users, which means it is much faster than Facebook and YouTube. In addition, Instagram is not only used for individual interests but also as a driving force for the emergence of social movements in society (Sukarnadi & Raharjo, 2019). Not surprisingly, more and more social communities are utilizing Instagram as a media partner (Jalil & Zakaria, 2024).

In the context of this research, what is meant by Kohati Dakwah is an organization consisting of female activists who are members of the Islamic Student Association (HMI) of Walisongo State Islamic University Semarang. Looking at its history, Kohati is a semi-autonomous body of HMI established for in-depth studies of HMI female cadres or called HMI-wati. In organizational tradition, Kohati always updates the work program every time a new management changes (Pangestu & Supratman, 2019). Kohati Dakwah for the 2023/2024 period officially underwent new management in October 2023 after the inauguration along with a work meeting. The Kohati Dakwah work program for the 2023/2024 period experienced significant changes compared to the previous period.

Kohati Dakwah itself has another name, namely the field of women's empowerment so that since its inception in 2014, the direction of its movement has indeed focused on empowering women. Kohati had experienced a degradation in the number of cadres and organizational activeness due to the pandemic. So in the management period 2022 to 2023 Kohati Dakwah focused more on organizational branding activities and hardskill training with the aim of recruiting new cadres and building emotional intimacy after a long pandemic. After feeling successful, Kohati Dakwah again changed the focus of its program to women's empowerment but with new innovations. Through interviews with 5 informants, it is known that during the preparation of the work program, the management adopted many programs on the @perempuanberkisah Instagram account. This is the subject of the author's research, namely on how Kohati dakwah utilizes Instagram @perempuanberkisah.id in changing the organization's work program.

There are many aspects that can be explored related to this issue, for example, how the packaging of the @perempuanberkisah.id account attracts and inspires the women's da'wah sector handled by Kohati Dakwah UIN Walisongo Semarang; how individual factors of administrators in the organization play an important role so that their use of social media inspires programs in Kohati; how the relationship and linearity of Kohati's work program with the content in the @perempuanberkisah.id account.

In other words, this research does not pay attention and focus on the power of media only, but how media consumption can be seen as a process of receiving messages. The processes of receiving messages by groups show uniqueness, namely between individual reception processes and processes in group dynamics. The way they receive and process messages within the time of using social media determines the way they accept and adopt what is in it into their organizational processes.

On the other hand, in addition to being an organizational tradition, Kohati Dakwah also continues to try to develop work programs that are open to all changes, not rigid, and need to

apply communication strategies that are not only creative but also (Haryadi, 2018). Current women's issues and problems are more crucial and relevant considerations. So, the selection of the diffusion of innovation theory in this study aims to see organizational changes on the one hand, while on the other hand, how the use of social media itself can actually be seen as individual autonomy in processing the messages obtained through social media (Rachmah & Rosramadhana, 2022).

There have been many studies that raise the theme of new media-social media instagram, but no one has collaborated with the issue of change, adoption, adaptation, diffusion and innovation. Maarwiyah et al's research, for example, analyzed the role of social media on the work program of the mayor of Probolinggo. The results showed that social media was able to become a means of communication for policies and programs. Social media becomes a bridge of communication between the government and the public in a more relaxed manner, namely through the social media comment column (Rachmah & Rosramadhana, 2022) which essentially carries out the government's public communication function.

Other research states that Instagram can be used for branding by inviting followers to voice environmentally friendly campaigns such as the @greenationid Instagram account. The results of this study show that Instagram is in the realm of communication so that it acts as a medium for sharing, collaborating, and connecting. The success rate of Instagram in voicing certain issues can be seen from the increase in insight per post as well as the number of positive comments (Sihaloho, 2023). Sihaloho in his research on Instagram, looks at its role as a medium of sexual education for adolescents. The results of this study state that Instagram takes an effective role in providing education about sexuality, especially for teenagers aged 17-24. While data on Instagram users shows that 17-24 year olds are the highest users of Instagram. Instagram is proven to be able to bring changes in adolescents' understanding of sexuality.

So, there has been a lot of research on the theme of organizing certain social movements through Instagram, but no one has linked it to the process of adoption and adaptation to changes in the decisions of a particular group so that adoption actions emerge. This research aims to reveal how the use of media plays a role in the perceptions of individuals within Kohati Dakwah so that it determines the direction and mode of policy action in developing new work programs.

In short, this research combines two approaches, namely the first approach that looks at the power of the media (media effects) and "media powerful." The focus is on how content on social media inspires adjustment and adoption for group activities in an organization. Secondly, communication group dynamics, is a concern to link media use and communication group dynamics, which is essentially an advanced phase on how the process of receiving their messages from social media determines the direction and form of organizational activities. These two things are crucial in this research, which focuses on the power of social media use and the decisions that occur in communication group dynamics in developing their work programs. In this case, what happened to Kohati Dakwah UIN Walisongo Semarang.

Methods

This research is a mixed-method research, quantitative is used to measure and analyze data in the concept of ELM theory, then qualitative is used when describing the data and when

analyzing using innovation diffusion theory. The informants of this research are 7 Kohati Dakwah administrators on the recommendation of the general chairman because they are considered core administrators.

Quantitative

A quantitative approach is used to measure how informants process messages, whether from the central or peripheral route? Researchers collected data through a questionnaire given to informants during the interview process so that researchers could directly supervise the questionnaire filling process. This questionnaire contains identification of central and peripheral elements, the researcher himself in this case takes part in explaining the elements to avoid confusion. The questionnaire uses a Likert scale of 1-5 for its measurement scale. The data was analyzed using Microsoft excel with the average, min and max formulas, simply because the output was only to find out whether the central line was indeed greater in number than the peripheral. The data was then described descriptively by including some interview results.

As the author mentioned in the literature review section, this theory is divided into 2 pathways of thinking; central and peripheral. Each pathway has 4 specific criteria as follows:

Table 1
Measurement Concept

Variabel	Indicator	Parameter	Measurement
Central	<i>Relevan of Source</i>	a. Information relevant to Kohati Dakwah's output as a women's empowerment body b. Has been discussed in previous studies	5: Strongly agree 4: Agree 3: Undecided 2: Disagree 1: Strongly disagree
	<i>Knowledge About Topic</i>	Informants have the capacity to know about the information at hand	
	<i>High Argumentation Topic</i>	The content includes clear arguments, not just claims based on prominent figures, or books/journals.	
	<i>Credible Source</i>	After accessing the content, the informant analyzes it in depth and then decides whether to affirm or not.	
Peripheral	<i>Likability of source</i>	a. The reason for accessing information is because they like it b. Interest because of the interesting design c. Interest because of "who" is conveying it	
	<i>Credibility of source</i>	After accessing the content, the information is immediately accepted because from the beginning the source is considered credible so there is no need to criticize it further	
	<i>Engaging/ Entertaining</i>	Information contains entertainment elements like because of the music used, the layout, etc.	
	<i>Consensus of audience</i>	a. The decision to accept information is only limited to following the crowd because the concept is that if many people agree with the message, individuals are more likely to accept the message without much critical thinking b. Forced to affirm due to social pressure (Stephen W. Littlejohn, 2021)	

Qualitative

This approach is used to analyze data with the concept of innovation diffusion theory. The data was collected through interviews with 7 informants (which researchers have mentioned the reasons above) and then documentation. The documentation process is carried out on the @perempuanberkisah Instagram account and utilizes literature related to the research theme. The results of interviews and document analysis are the primary data sources of this research.

Result and Discussion

The Analysis of Information Process

The table below is the score given by the informants based on the ELM theory measurement criteria:

Tabel 2

Informant Assessment Scores Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) Criteria in Processing Information From Instagram @perempuanberkisah.id

	Central				Amount	Average	Peripheral				Total	Average
	R	K	H	C			L	C	E	COA		
I1	5	3	4	4	16	4	2	1	1	2	6	1,5
I2	5	5	3	4	17	4,25	2	2	2	1	7	1,75
I3	4	5	3	3	15	3,75	1	3	2	2	8	2
I4	4	3	3	4	14	3,5	3	2	3	1	9	2,25
I5	4	4	5	4	17	4,25	2	1	2	1	6	1,5
I6	3	4	4	4	15	3,75	2	2	1	2	7	1,75
I7	4	5	5	3	17	4,25	1	2	1	1	5	1,25
Min	3	3	3	3	111	15,85	1	1	1	1	48	6,85
Max	5	5	5	4			3	3	3	2		

Description:

I1-I7: Informants 1-7

R: Relevance of Topic

K: Knowledge About Topic

H: High Argumentation Quality

C: Credible Source

L: Likability of source

C: Credibility of source

E: Engaging/ entertaining

COA: Consensus of audience

Based on the data above, it is known that informants not only use the central route, but also the peripheral route. It is clear that the central route dominates with a total of 111 and an average of 15.85 while the peripheral is 48 and 6.85. So, it can be concluded that Kohati Dakwah in processing @perempuanberkisah.id content uses critical thinking and in-depth analysis. Furthermore, researchers also describe this data analysis in descriptive form through the interview process in the hope of broadening the readers' perspective, as follows:

Instagram as part of social media is proven to be able to influence perceptions ranging from personal to group domains (DH & Nuralam, 2018). The content of the @perempuanberkisah.id account before influencing changes in the work program and agenda

of Kohati Dakwah activities has indoctrinated the thinking of Kohati Dakwah members personally. Through an interview with Neneng Khaerunnisa, Chairperson of Kohati Dakwah, it is known that the education received from the account, often brings the education to the discussion agenda among cadres.

Group dynamics finalize existing thoughts. The response of other members, both accepting and denying, is a sign of a stimulus that has been successfully provided by @perempuanberkisah.id, causing emotion, involvement, participation, sharing or the emergence of certain ideas. The degree of elaboration is determined as far as their views, judging it as something relevant or not. In the interview excerpt, it is revealed as follows:

I have been following the @perempuanberkisah.id account for a long time. In fact, I have liked almost every post because of my enthusiasm for their educational program. Usually when there is a new post that I think is important for organizational studies, I will immediately look for literature related to the content in the post and then discuss it in organizational studies. (P1)

It is quite clear that the use of social media has directed certain attention so that someone is moved to explore by looking for certain references and literature. For the life of a student organization based on reasoning and intellectual development, the use of social media inspires in determining the agenda of discussion in the organization. This supports the evidence that there is an element of topic relevance in @perempuanberkisah.id content with topics commonly discussed in Kohati Dakwah studies, which means that one element in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) theory of the central route has been fulfilled. It is very important to identify the process of receiving messages completely through the central system because it is more credible and scientific (Fitri & Muhajarah, 2022).

After a person decides to accept the information in a central system, there will be relatively long-lasting changes that will most likely be accompanied by behavioral changes. Individual understanding that is then implemented into group communication makes the diffusion or spread of information widespread which then impacts on in-depth discussions until the element of “knowledge the topic” or the existence of knowledge about the topic (the second element of the central system of ELM theory) is fulfilled.

Incidentally, one of our work programs that has been passed down from generation to generation is the kohati dakwah discussion (diskohda). At that time I was still the Chairperson of the Kohati Division for the 2020 period. So, indirectly, the majority of studies that I discuss with friends in Kohati are the issues @perempuanberkisah.id. The issues discussed are up to date and the sources are clear. In addition to clear sources, the grammar and arguments are always logical and reasonable. Yes, maybe because the references are clear too. (P2)

The interesting thing about this statement is: First, social media use influences its users. Secondly, in the use, the user accepts the media agenda or the themes of discussion in it. Third, the relevance and acceptance aspects of the user, encourage him to bring it as a matter of discussion and discussion within his organizational group.

In his capacity as Head of Division, this authority strengthens the relationship between the media agenda on social media and the discussion agenda in the organizational group. Meanwhile, the acceptance or rejection of information is determined by the communication

dynamics of the organizational group. The existing content is not immediately approved but first examined in a group study by considering all arguments and lengthy discussions. In the context of ELM theory, the stronger and more logical the argumentation, the more able it is to trigger critical thinking from content consumers (in this case, Kohati Dakwah administrators). Credible source as the fourth and final element is also fulfilled, for example seen from the following interview:

Apart from the clear source, the grammar and argumentation are always logical and reasonable. Yes, maybe because the references are clear too. (P3)

Kohati Dakwah had a vacuum for two periods due to internal problems as well as the influence of the pandemic, namely in the 2019-2022 period. The next period was finally focused on rebuilding the image of the organization through the media because at that time Kohati Dakwah was also experiencing a membership crisis due to a long vacancy period and a pandemic. In the 2022/2023 period, Kohati Dakwah managed to achieve its management targets, namely consistency in organizational branding through the media and recruitment of cadres according to the target. All achievements and evaluations were then discussed during the commission session before the inauguration took place. Through this session, it was agreed that there was a need to change the management target without neglecting the achievements of the previous period.

I really remember our efforts when we did content in the past to introduce kohati. At that time, the early days of the campus began to be full offline so it was like it was really mandatory to get cadres. Some content ideas are also from @perempuanberkisah because honestly the layout is sweet hehe and the diction of the sentences is easy to read so I think it's good to be applied on Kohati Dakwah's Instagram too. (P4)

After the success of Kohati Dakwah in the 2022/2023 period in completing their program during management, Neneng and other administrators developed a more innovative program. They target programs that lead to women's empowerment with various new innovations with the specification of sexual violence awareness.

From the beginning, the concept has been women's empowerment, Kohati is another name for the Women's Empowerment Division at HMI. The difference is that we want to be specific about awareness of sexual violence so if you look at CATAHU, the number of sexual violence during the pandemic has actually increased. I don't know how it is on campus, but Kohati cadres must have knowledge and awareness of this issue so that they can help victims out there. Usually, the victims are marginalized. (P5)

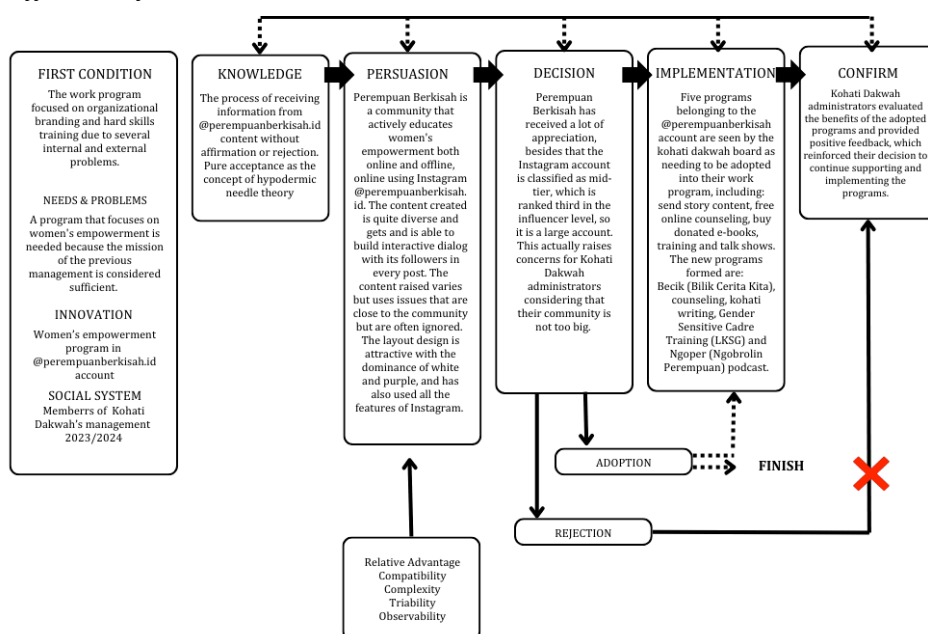
Thus, the researcher presents a fairly long discussion about how the central channel is used in the process of receiving information by informants. However, the informants did not deny that the process did not escape the peripheral elements; likability of source, credibility of source, engaging/ entertaining, and consensus of audience. The informants admitted that the appearance of a design that is pleasing to the eye and neat is one of the main attractions of the @perempuanberkisah.id account. Then for the second element in the peripheral path, namely credibility of source, which is precisely because of the credibility of the source of information, consumers will agree more easily.

Process of Program Adoption with Innovation Diffusion Concept

The adoption process in the diffusion of innovations theory involves several stages that individuals must go through before they accept and use the innovation, including:

1. Knowledge
Individuals first learn about the innovation and gain a basic understanding of how the innovation works.
2. Persuasion
Individuals begin to evaluate the benefits and disadvantages of the innovation and begin to form personal opinions about whether or not the innovation is worth adopting.
3. Decision
Individuals make a final decision based on the information and evaluation that has been done in the previous stage.
4. Implementation
After deciding to adopt an innovation, individuals begin to use the innovation.
5. Confirmation
Individuals ensure that the decision to adopt the innovation is the right and sustainable decision.

Figure 2
Diffusion of Innovation's Procces



The chart above is a description of the program adoption process by Kohat Dakwah in the concept of innovation diffusion theory. The use of Instagram @perempuanberkisah.id is Kohati Dakwah's effort to arrange work programs in accordance with their target in the new management, namely empowering women with a focus on preventing sexual violence. This change in the direction of the organization's movement is due to the need for continuous progressivity after Kohati Dakwah had a vacuum for two periods.

Yes, there were some internal problems, but the point is that due to the vacuum caused by the pandemic, the old administrators disappeared, so it was as if there was a vacancy in the position. That's why during tum Nisa's period it was like catching up, then in our period we have to be better again because in the last period we had that much effort to reactivate Kohati.

(Interview with Azimah, General Secretary of Kohati Dakwah on December 03, 2023 at 11.00 WIB).

The @perempuanberkisah.id Instagram account has long been a pioneer of ideas that are used as ideas in Kohati discussions. The account is considered to have been able to become a publicsphere for marginalized people, namely women who experience injustice but are unable to speak. The comment section is also always activated and never restricted, providing an opportunity for content consumers to interact with each other and express opinions. This can be a measuring tool of the extent to which consumers are critical in dealing with the issues presented. The issues displayed in the content are also always up to date so that consumers do not merely drag on old problems.

The above process indicates that the first stage in the Diffusion of Innovation theory has occurred, namely knowledge. On the other hand, the management began to evaluate the benefits and disadvantages of innovations and began to form personal opinions about which innovations owned by @perempuanberkisah.id could be adopted considering that the community was already quite large even though Kohati Dakwah was formed first. With less resources than the Perempuan Berkisah community, it is feared that they will not be able to adopt their innovations, so further consideration and introspection is needed before the decision and implementation stages. This process was carried out more intensively and formally during the Commission Session agenda, which was a meeting to prepare the work program by the Kohati Dakwah management.

In the end, Kohati Dakwah adopted 5 Perempuan Berkisah programs so that of the 8 excellent programs available, 5 of them were the result of adoption. With this, the decision stage as the third element of the innovation diffusion theory has been carried out. As for the implementation stage, it was carried out when the five programs were applied. The following is the explanation:

1. “BCK (Bilik Cerita Kita)” Program/A Room for Talk for Female

This program is a kind of gender violence complaint booth. It was organized because of the tendency of victims to remain silent due to fear or shame. The management will provide a link that is shared every day in the organization's internal group (HMI throughout UIN) and externally, but the management limits it to Walisongo UIN students only. Then those who want to fill in are free to choose to include their name or contact information to be directed to counseling. If the sender wants to be anonymous, then he must use a second Instagram account.

Figure 3

“Kirim Kisah” Content at @perempuanberkisah



Source. instagram.com

This program was inspired by the send story program on the @perempuanberkisah.id account. This program aims to provide a safe space for women to tell stories, and can be a complaint if they get indecent treatment. This program can also be a long-distance telescope for Kohati Dakwah administrators to find out what are the problems faced by female students in the scope of UIN Walisongo Semarang, especially HMI.

2. Counseling

This program was inspired by @perempuanberkisah.id online counseling. As discussed in point 1 above, this counseling is limited to being a friend of the sender's story, not bringing in a particular psychologist. So, the message repliers are Kohati Dakwah administrators who have attended the feminist-based counseling training held by Perempuan Berkisah. However, if the sender is considered to need further treatment, the management will direct him to the counselor at Perempuan Berkisah.

Figure 4

Counseling Training Held by Perempuan Berkisah



Source. instagram.com

3. “Kohati Menulis” Program

This program was inspired by a post containing the achievements of Perempuan Berkisah members in publishing an ISBN book. As students, Kohati Dakwah administrators feel the need to empower the writing skills of cadres. Along with these considerations, it is known that some of the organization's seniors are writers who have published books so they are asked to provide trainings for cadres.

Figure 5

Part of “Kohati Menulis” Program



Source. instagram.com

4. “Latihan Kader Sensitif Gender (LKSG)” Program/ Gender Sensitive Cadre Training
This program was inspired by several trainings held by Perempuan Berkisah both online and offline. In HMI, such trainings include non-formal trainings that can be attended not only by women but also by men. To register, participants must write a short essay with a specified theme to measure their mastery of gender insights.
5. “Ngoper (Ngobrolin Perempuan)” Program/ Women’s Talk
Themes of this discussion are inspired by @perempuanberkisah.id topics. This program is conducted on a hybrid basis twice a month; online at the beginning of the month and offline at the end of the month. The online Ngoper program aims to expand the reach of participants, while the offline program aims to revive the discussion atmosphere among Walisongo State Islamic University, especially on gender equality themes.

Figure 6*“Ngoper” Program by Kohati Dakwah*

Source. instagram.com

Conclusion

This research aims to find out how Kohati Dakwah processes the innovation of women's empowerment programs in the @perempuanberkisah.id Instagram account and then adopts it in the preparation of work programs. Based on the results of the research, it was found that the innovation of the women's empowerment program in the @perempuanberkisah.id Instagram account was received through the central system so that it passed through critical thinking and not just affirmation. Through the concept of innovation diffusion, innovations are processed and sorted before finally being adopted into the Kohati Dakwah work program which is oriented towards empowering women with the specification of preventing sexual violence.

Through the findings obtained in this study, it is recommended that other organizations engaged in women's empowerment consider using social media as a reference for innovative program creation. Training and dissemination of the benefits of using social media in an organizational context need to be carried out so that organizational members can utilize this platform effectively. In addition, further research is expected to examine the comparative

effectiveness of various social media platforms in creating social movements so as not only to know which social media is the most up-to-date but also its patterns and uniqueness.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I use “DeepL AI and ChatGPT” for translating my paper.

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Fostering Metacognitive Skills in Students Through Art Curatorial Experiences

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Abstract

Students are encouraged to foster their metacognitive skills through curatorial practices in Arts. Art education includes not only the acquisition of technical abilities, but also the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative capacities. This essay suggests that curatorial learning, which is typically connected to museum workers, provides a powerful foundation for developing metacognition in secondary art students, which is the knowledge and control of ideas acquisition. Curation, as described by Flavell (1976), is a process that requires metacognitive participation. It involves the careful selection, organization, and interpretation of artworks to create a unified visual narrative. Thus, students entrusted with curating exhibitions have a rare chance to cultivate reflective and critical thinking skills. This method is consistent with Zimmerman's (1989) model of self-regulated learning, as curators must carefully examine artworks, taking into account their aesthetic, historical, and audience-related consequences. Self-reflection and self-awareness is another essential component of metacognition. Students have many opportunities to assess their work and the success of their curatorial choices through curating practices. Students can find areas for growth and hone their curatorial abilities by getting input from teachers and peers. To conclude, including curatorial education within secondary art education provides a variety of ways to foster metacognition. Teachers may create a rich learning environment that strengthens communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-awareness by involving students in the processes of selection, organizing, interpretation, and reflection. These abilities will go beyond the art classroom, giving students the skills they need to thrive in a complicated and dynamic environment.

Keywords: metacognition, curatorial, students

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Introduction

Metacognitive skills are increasingly recognized as essential components of effective learning across various educational contexts. Defined as the awareness and regulation of one's cognitive processes, metacognition enables students to monitor their understanding, evaluate their learning strategies, and adjust their approaches as needed (Flavell, 1976). In the realm of education, particularly in art education, fostering these skills is crucial not only for artistic development but also for cultivating critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Art education traditionally emphasizes technical skills; however, it also provides a unique platform for students to engage deeply with their creative processes and reflect on their learning experiences (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013).

Art education traditionally emphasizes the acquisition of technical skills; however, it also provides a unique platform for students to engage deeply with their creative processes. Through artistic expression, students learn to reflect on their choices, explore different perspectives, and articulate their ideas. This reflective practice is crucial for developing metacognitive awareness, as it encourages students to think critically about their work and the decisions they make throughout the creative process (Fayena-Tawil et al., 2011). By cultivating a reflective mindset, educators can empower students to take ownership of their learning experiences and develop a deeper understanding of both themselves as artists and the broader context of their work.

Curatorial practices offer a powerful framework for enhancing metacognitive skills among secondary art students. Traditionally associated with museum professionals, curatorial work involves selecting, organizing, and interpreting artworks to create cohesive narratives that resonate with audiences. Engaging students in curatorial activities allows them to take an active role in their learning by making decisions about which artworks to include in exhibitions and how to present them meaningfully (Delibaltova, 2016). This active engagement fosters critical thinking as students analyze aesthetic qualities, historical contexts, and thematic connections between artworks.

Moreover, curatorial practices provide opportunities for collaboration among peers. As students work together to curate exhibitions, they engage in discussions that encourage them to reflect on their artistic choices and consider alternative perspectives. Research has shown that feedback mechanisms play a crucial role in enhancing metacognitive development during curatorial activities (Beaty & Silvia, 2013). Constructive feedback from peers and teachers prompts students to evaluate their decisions critically and refine their understanding of the artistic process.

Despite the potential benefits of integrating curatorial practices into art education, there is a notable gap in existing research regarding how these practices can effectively enhance metacognitive development. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between curatorial practices and metacognitive skills within the context of secondary art education. Specifically, it aims to explore how engaging in curation enhances metacognitive awareness among students and assess how feedback from peers and teachers influences their reflective practices during curation.

By investigating the intersection of curatorial practices and metacognition in art education, this research aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform teaching strategies and enhance student learning outcomes. Ultimately, fostering metacognitive skills through

innovative pedagogical approaches like curatorial practices can empower students not only as artists but also as critical thinkers prepared to navigate the complexities of an increasingly dynamic world.

Literature Review

The Concept of Metacognition

The literature review begins by examining the concept of metacognition, which encompasses two primary components: metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation. Metacognitive knowledge refers to an individual's awareness of their cognitive processes and understanding of how they learn best. This includes knowledge about oneself as a learner, knowledge about strategies for learning, and knowledge about the task at hand (Flavell, 1976). In contrast, metacognitive regulation involves planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's learning strategies (Zimmerman, 1989). Research indicates that students who possess strong metacognitive skills tend to perform better academically because they can adapt their learning strategies based on self-assessment (McCollum, 2020).

Fostering metacognitive skills is particularly important in the context of art education, as it encourages students to engage critically with their artistic choices. Art education often involves subjective interpretation and personal expression; therefore, developing metacognitive awareness can empower students to reflect on their creative processes more deeply (Fayena-Tawil et al., 2011). By encouraging students to think critically about their work and the work of others, educators can facilitate a richer learning experience that extends beyond technical mastery.

Integrating Curatorial Practice Into the Arts Curricula

Curatorial practices provide a structured framework for enhancing metacognitive skills among secondary art students. Traditionally associated with museum professionals, curatorial work involves selecting, organizing, and interpreting artworks to create cohesive narratives that resonate with audiences. Engaging students in curatorial activities allows them to take ownership of their learning experiences. By participating in the curation process, students are encouraged to make decisions about which artworks to include in exhibitions and how to present them meaningfully (Delibaltova, 2016). This active engagement fosters critical thinking as students must analyze aesthetic qualities, historical contexts, and thematic connections between artworks.

Research has shown that integrating curatorial activities into art curricula can lead to improved student outcomes. For instance, Delibaltova (2016) found that engaging students in curatorial projects significantly enhanced their metacognitive awareness and critical thinking skills. Similarly, Marino et al. (2018) emphasize that curatorial practices encourage self-reflection by prompting students to evaluate their artistic choices critically.

Relationship Between Metacognition and Curatorial

To understand the relationship between metacognition and curatorial practices in art education, it is essential to consider relevant theoretical frameworks. Zimmerman's model of self-regulated learning provides a valuable lens through which to examine this relationship. According to Zimmerman (1989), self-regulated learning involves three key phases:

forethought (planning), performance (monitoring), and self-reflection (evaluation). Each phase is integral to developing metacognitive skills. In the context of curatorial practices, students engage in forethought by planning their exhibitions—selecting artworks based on specific themes or messages they wish to convey. During performance, they monitor their decisions regarding organization and presentation while considering audience engagement. Finally, self-reflection occurs when students evaluate their curatorial choices based on feedback from peers and teachers or through personal assessment of their exhibitions' effectiveness.

A growing body of literature supports the integration of curatorial practices into art education as a means of fostering metacognitive skills. For instance, McCollum (2020) emphasizes that explicit instruction in metacognition can significantly enhance students' ability to reflect on their artistic choices during curation. Additionally, Liu et al. (2023) found that participation in curatorial projects led to increased self-awareness among students regarding their cognitive processes.

Moreover, studies have shown that feedback mechanisms play a crucial role in enhancing metacognitive development during curatorial activities. Beaty and Silvia (2013) argue that constructive feedback encourages students to reflect critically on their work and consider alternative perspectives when making artistic decisions.

In Summary

Overall, the literature suggests that integrating curatorial practices into secondary art education not only enhances artistic understanding but also equips students with essential metacognitive skills necessary for success in various contexts. By actively engaging in curation, students develop critical thinking abilities while fostering a deeper awareness of their cognitive processes.

Methodology

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore how curatorial practices foster metacognitive skills among Year 12 IB Diploma Programme Visual Arts students. The study involves 18 students from the 2025 cohort, all of whom are taught by the researcher.

Data Sources

Student Exhibition Works

Each student's final set of exhibited artworks was collected and analyzed. These works provide insight into students' planning, creative decision-making, and thematic development throughout the exhibition process.

Curatorial Rationales

Students' written curatorial rationales—composed as part of their exhibition requirements—were gathered. These documents offer direct evidence of students' reflective thinking,

articulation of intentions, and evaluation of both individual artworks and the overall exhibition theme.

Student Questionnaires

After the exhibition, all 18 students completed a structured, open-ended questionnaire. The questions were designed to elicit reflection on their curatorial and creative processes, critical thinking development, and the transfer of skills to other educational or life contexts.

Literature Observation

A literature observation was conducted to contextualize classroom findings within the broader field of art education. Peer-reviewed articles from databases such as ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were reviewed using keywords like “metacognition in art education,” “curatorial practices,” and “self-regulated learning.” This review informed both the thematic coding and interpretation of classroom data.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

All data sources—artworks, curatorial rationales, questionnaire responses, and literature—were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process included familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification and review of themes, and defining and naming themes. Codes focused on metacognitive indicators such as planning, self-reflection, evaluation, adaptation, and audience awareness. Patterns and themes were triangulated across sources to strengthen validity.

Ethical Considerations

All participants and their guardians were informed of the research aims and procedures, and written consent was obtained. Student identities were anonymized in all reporting. Participation was voluntary and had no impact on academic evaluation.

Limitations

As the researcher is also the students’ teacher, there is a possibility of response bias or social desirability in student reflections. The study is context-specific, focusing on a single cohort within an IB Visual Arts program, which may limit generalizability. Nevertheless, the use of multiple data sources and rigorous thematic analysis provides valuable insights into the role of curatorial practice in fostering metacognitive skills in art education.

Discussion

Overview of Key Findings

This section presents a synthesis of the main findings from the analysis of student exhibition works, curatorial rationales, and reflective questionnaire responses. The evidence demonstrates how the IB DP Visual Arts Exhibition and curatorial writing processes fostered metacognitive engagement, critical thinking, and personal growth among Year 12 students.

Reflective and Intentional Curation

Students consistently engaged in deep reflection throughout the exhibition process. The arrangement of artworks in the exhibition space was not arbitrary; rather, it was the result of careful consideration of thematic coherence, narrative flow, and audience engagement. For example, students reported revising the sequence and placement of their works to guide viewers through a story or concept, as seen in the thoughtful grouping and display of paintings, mixed media, and three-dimensional pieces in the exhibition photographs.

Metacognitive Engagement and Artistic Decision-Making

The process of curatorial writing served as a powerful tool for metacognitive reflection. Students described how writing about their intentions and processes helped them evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their artworks, reconsider their original ideas, and make purposeful changes. For instance, one student noted that reflection during curatorial writing led to multiple revisions of an artwork's background and inspired new creative directions. Others highlighted how the act of explaining their work to an audience prompted them to clarify and refine their artistic messages.

Development of Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

The exhibition and curatorial process required students to think critically about both visual and conceptual aspects of their work. Many students reported that they had to analyse how each piece contributed to the overall theme and narrative and make decisions about which works best supported their intended message. This critical engagement extended to technical choices, such as experimenting with new media or altering compositions to achieve greater impact.

Enhanced Understanding of Art as Communication

A significant shift was observed in students' understanding of art—from viewing it primarily as a visual or technical pursuit to recognizing it as a means of communication. Students came to appreciate the importance of conveying stories, emotions, and personal or cultural messages through their art. The exhibition experience highlighted the necessity of considering audience perspective, as students adjusted their works and rationales to ensure clarity and resonance with viewers.

Personal Growth and Transferable Skills

Beyond artistic development, students identified growth in transferable skills such as time management, organization, and problem-solving. Many expressed that the skills gained through the exhibition and curatorial writing would benefit them in future academic and professional settings. These included the ability to plan and execute complex projects, communicate ideas effectively, and reflect critically on their own work and progress.

Enjoyment and Emotional Reward

Despite the challenges and demands of the exhibition process, students reported a strong sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. The opportunity to see their artworks displayed publicly and to articulate their creative journeys was described as rewarding and affirming.

In Summary

The IB DP Visual Arts Exhibition and curatorial writing process provided a rich environment for students to engage in metacognitive reflection, develop critical thinking, and experience personal and artistic growth. The combination of visual evidence from the exhibition and student reflections in the questionnaires demonstrates that curatorial practice is a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering deeper learning and self-awareness in art education.

Reflection and Metacognitive Engagement

Evidence of Student Works of Exhibition and Curatorial Writing

This research draws upon student work samples obtained from the Exhibition and Curatorial activities of the IB Diploma Programme Visual Arts Exhibition. This event forms a component of the Internal Assessment, conducted in accordance with the IB Diploma Guidebooks. The samples were selected from 3 students that represented Personal & Cultural Theme, Social Issue Theme, and Environmental Theme.

Figure 1

Student 1 - Works of Exhibition “Rooted of Heritage”



Personal & Cultural Theme

The student behind “Rooted in Heritage” (Figure 1) exhibits strong metacognitive skills. They are clearly aware of their personal motivations, the conceptual underpinnings of their work, their artistic choices, and the intended impact on the audience. The improvements suggested are mainly about further refining the *communication* of these already well-developed metacognitive insights, particularly in explicitly linking visual elements to conceptual interpretations for the reader. This would elevate the curatorial writing from good to excellent, making the connection between the viewer and the artwork even more immediate and profound.

Evidence of Metacognition Skills From Student 1

Based on Student 1 Curatorial Writing (Appendix A, Figure 1), The student clearly understands and articulates the personal significance of her heritage to their artistic practice. This level of self-awareness is a strong indicator of metacognition. The rationale goes beyond

simply describing the art; it explains why certain artistic decisions were made (e.g., use of saturated colours, choice of acrylic medium). This shows conscious thought about her process. The student doesn't present a monolithic view of heritage but explores its complexities, including appreciation, challenges, and concerns about disconnection. This demonstrates an ability to think deeply about her theme. The student discusses how certain pieces “invite audience to appreciate cultural intersections” or “portrays the hope to rebuild.” This suggests an awareness of the message she want to convey to viewers. The statement “display my technical abilities in different forms of art” shows self-assessment of her skills. The rationale is well-organized, moving from the overarching theme to specific artworks, and explaining how each fit into the larger narrative. This indicates a deliberate planning process.

Figure 2

Student 2 - Works of Exhibition “Paradox of Female Beauty”



Social Issue Theme

The student behind “The Paradox of Female Beauty” (Figure 2) demonstrates a high level of metacognitive skill. They have a clear vision for their exhibition, strategically plan its presentation, and articulate their conceptual and artistic intentions effectively. The areas for improvement are primarily in refining the depth of visual analysis within the written interpretations and achieving even greater conciseness in the prose. These refinements would further enhance their metacognitive ability to translate their sophisticated visual ideas into equally compelling written narratives for their audience. Their strong planning and awareness of audience impact are particularly commendable.

Evidence of Metacognition Skills of Student 2

Based on Student 2 Curatorial Writing (Appendix B, Figure 2) The rationale is clearly structured, moving from a broad theme to specific examples and then to exhibition layout. This demonstrates a conscious plan for presenting their ideas. The student explicitly states her “artistic intention of empowering natural beauty and challenging societal expectations,” indicating an awareness of her own goals for the exhibition. The student articulates how each artwork *contributes* to the overall theme, showing an understanding of how her individual creative choices serve a larger conceptual framework. The concluding section reflects on the “technical competence and exploration of unconventional mediums” and the “amalgamation of art forms.” This shows a meta-level awareness of their own artistic process and choices. Phrases like “urges viewers to reject imposed beauty standards,” “builds the audience's

perception,” and “forms a profound impact for which viewers are encouraged to acknowledge” indicate that the student is thinking about how their work will be received and what message they want to convey to the audience.

Figure 3

Student 3 - Works of Exhibition “Unraveling Nature: The Cost of Our Footprint”



Environmental Theme

The student behind “Unraveling Nature: The Cost of Our Footprint” exhibits excellent metacognitive skills. They have clearly planned, executed, and articulated their exhibition with a high degree of self-awareness regarding their conceptual goals, artistic choices, and desired audience impact. Their ability to structure a powerful narrative and connect diverse artworks to a compelling central message demonstrates sophisticated metacognition. The minor areas for improvement are primarily refinements that would further hone an already strong and effective piece of curatorial writing. This student clearly understands not just *what* they are creating, but *why* they are creating it and *how* they want it to affect their audience.

Evidence of Metacognition Skills of Student 3

Based on Student 3 Curatorial Writing (Appendix C, Figure 3), the student chose a complex and globally significant theme and effectively broke it down into various sub-themes (disappearing landscapes, ocean pollution, animal suffering, climate change impact). This shows a deep understanding of her chosen subject matter. The detailed explanation of the exhibition's viewing flow (“From right to left, my exhibition is designed to be seen as if mirroring the slow unravelling of our natural world”) is strong evidence of metacognition. The student has clearly thought about the audience's journey and how to maximize the impact of the narrative. The explicit statement of aiming to “urge reflection, accountability, and action” reveals a deliberate and purposeful approach to her art beyond mere aesthetic creation. The rationale demonstrates a critical awareness of the environmental crisis, acknowledging the “stark reality” despite ongoing discussions. This is a mature critical perspective. The student consciously employs metaphors, symbolism, and narrative structures (like the “time capsule” or the “slow unravelling”) to convey her message, showing an understanding of how to make her art resonate conceptually. The student consistently considers how their exhibition will affect the viewer, aiming for “reflection,” “nostalgia,” and a direct “question.” This shows a strong focus on the communicative aspect of her work. The

student views their “technical competence and exploration of unconventional mediums” not just as a skill display but to create a “statement, a warning, and a plea for change.” This integrated thinking is a hallmark of strong metacognition.

Analysis Related With Artwork Selection and Organization for the Ib Dp Visual Arts Exhibition

The visual documentation of the exhibition reveals a sophisticated, intentional arrangement of diverse artworks—paintings, mixed media, three-dimensional pieces—demonstrating careful planning, thematic coherence, and a strong awareness of audience engagement. Each work is accompanied by a curatorial rationale, further evidencing the students’ reflective processes and their ability to articulate the meaning, context, and intention behind their creations. The strategic placement of works, attention to lighting, and narrative flow across the display panels all point to advanced curatorial thinking and self-regulation.

These observations are powerfully reinforced by the students’ written reflections. Many students described the selection and organization of their artworks as both challenging and rewarding, with initial confidence often giving way to a deeper recognition of the complexities involved. They recounted how the process required them to critically evaluate their ideas, adapt their plans, and make purposeful decisions to achieve thematic unity and communicative clarity. For example, students spoke of altering the sequence of their works to guide viewers through a story, revising artworks to better fit the overall message, and experimenting with new media or presentation techniques to enhance visual impact.

Significantly, students consistently reported that the experience fostered substantial metacognitive growth. They engaged in ongoing self-reflection, monitored their progress, and assessed the effectiveness of their curatorial choices. This reflective practice extended beyond the exhibition, with students noting improvements in critical thinking, problem-solving, and the ability to communicate complex ideas—skills they recognized as transferable to other academic and life contexts.

Evidence of Students Questionnaire

The Analysis Regards to the Student’s Questionnaire Based on the Aspects of Metacognition Skills and Artistic Intention

This questionnaire follows by 12 Participants which is choose randomly selected. This questionnaire done independently. This table below present some samples of the responses from seven guiding questions provided.

Table 1

Sample Responses From Topic Related to Selecting and Organizing Artwork for the Ib Dp Visual Arts Exhibition (Guiding Question 1) and Topic Related to Preparation Process Regards to the Ib Dp Visual Arts Exhibition (Guiding Question 2)

Sample Participant Response	Guiding Question 1: How did you feel about selecting and organizing artworks for the IB DP Visual Arts Exhibition?
Student A	It felt challenging to figure out how these artworks could blend in together based on my chosen theme and the style of the artworks. Displaying on the exhibition gives out a sense of decision choice whether I should have finished the artwork with this result I wanted or something different. But in the end, I still manage to send out the message regarding about memories in time and identity.
Student B	I feel it could have been better than what I actually have done. If I have known the direction of the viewers during the exhibition day. I could have communicated a much more concise story during the whole exhibition. Instead of guiding the viewers one-by-one from the first to the last artwork.
Student C	I feel it could have been better than what I actually have done. If I have known the direction of the viewers during the exhibition day. I could have communicated a much more concise story during the whole exhibition. Instead of guiding the viewers one-by-one from the first to the last artwork.
Sample Participant Response	Guiding Question 2: Can you share an example of a decision you made during the preparation process on regards to your IB DP Visual Arts Exhibition? What factors influenced your choice & decision?
Student D	During the exhibition preparation, I took the effort to position all my artwork in a way that it blends in together and positioned lighting above my exhibition board to enhance the overall aesthetics of my artwork by controlling the highlights and shadows of my 3D art using light. By doing this, I can attract lots of visitors to take a closer look at my artwork and have them ask questions out of curiosity and interest towards my art.
Student E	A decision I made during the preparation process was figuring out how to arrange the exhibition pieces in a way where the whole exhibition made sense. I started the exhibition with my most bright and striking artwork to capture the audience's attention. How I decided to arrange my artworks wasn't just random. I placed them based on how I wanted the viewers to go through and learn about the message behind the whole exhibition.
Student F	One of the major decisions I made was initially planning to create a digital artwork but later changing it to an animation. This decision was influenced by my desire to explore and present more variety in the types and styles of art in my exhibition. I felt that including an animation would add a dynamic element and reflect my willingness to try new mediums, especially since I want to pursue a design-related major in the future.

Table 2

Sample Responses From Topic Related to Reflection Towards the Process in Working on the Exhibition and Curatorial Writing (Guiding Question 3) and Topic Related to Development of Critical Thinking That Influences by the Curatorial Writing Experiences (Guiding Question 4)

Sample Participant Response	Guiding Question 3: Did you find yourself reflecting on your thought processes while working on the exhibition & curatorial writing? If so, how did that influence your decisions?
Student G	I did reflect in my thought processes while working on the exhibition and curatorial writing as all the ideas used for my artwork were inspired by my real-life experiences. This has influenced my decisions especially when choosing the right words for my artwork explanations and making sure that both my concept and ideas are explained and communicated well to the audience.
Student H	Yes, I found myself reflecting on my thought processes while working on the exhibition and curatorial writing. It made me more aware of the intentions behind each artwork and why I created it, and how it connected to the overall theme of women's issues. This reflection helped me refine my exhibition by choosing works that not only showed technical skill but also had strong conceptual meaning.
Student I	Yes, I reflected on my overall artworks individually, my thoughts and concept developments regarding the meanings. Certainly, influencing my decisions to depict and exhibit interrelated messages associated with my topic.
Sample Participants Response	Guiding Question 4: In what ways do you think this exhibition and curatorial writing has helped you develop critical thinking skills?
Student K	It pushed me to evaluate my own work from multiple perspectives—not just as the artist, but also as the audience and as a critic. I had to think critically about what each piece communicated to different groups of audiences, how they interacted with each other, and how to articulate that in words. It also helped me consider the cultural and contextual relevance of my work more consciously, which sharpened my analytical and interpretive skills.
Student L	It helped me explore more about the impact and consequences of culture on a deeper level.
Student M	Thinking about what could have been improved or fixed.

Table 3

Sample Responses From Topic Related to Enjoyment Towards the Process in Working on the Exhibition and Curatorial Writing (Guiding Question 5) and Topic Related to the Changing of Perspective in Understanding Art (Guiding Question 6)

Sample Participant Response	Guiding Question 5: What aspects of the exhibition and curatorial writing did you enjoy the most? Why?
Student A	What I enjoyed the most was making the final artwork. After finishing the artwork, it satisfied me from the result that I've made and that it would be displayed in the exhibition. The curatorial writing also helped me be able to express my creativity and ideas to be shared.
Student B	During the exhibition because it felt rewarding as people visit and ask questions about the process and overall personal experience.
Student C	What I enjoyed the most is explaining my theme that I have chosen. By explaining and writing it down both during the exhibition and curatorial writing it helped me in explaining my hard work to the viewers.
Sample Participants Response	Guiding Question 6: Do you feel that your understanding of art has changed as a result of this experience? If so, how?
Student D	Yes, my understanding of art has changed because of this experience. I used to see art mainly to create something visually appealing, but through the exhibition process, I've come to appreciate how deeply art can communicate ideas, emotions, and personal perspectives. I learned that the process behind the artwork is just as important as the final piece.
Student E	Yes, very much. The whole experience, including the process portfolio and comparative study, required me to research and analyse various artworks and styles. This made my understanding of art grow a lot, and I started to see art from different, more interesting perspectives. I now appreciate not just the visual aspects of art, but also the context, message, and creative process behind it.
Student F	Yes, I learned that stepping out of my comfort zone to express the theme that I want is significant to my understanding of art.

Table 4

*Sample Responses From Topic Related to Development of Skills Beyond Art
(Guiding Question 7)*

Sample Participant Response	Guiding Question 7: How do you think the skills you've developed during these experiences (Exhibition and Curatorial Writing) will help you in other areas of your education or life?
Student G	The skills I have developed during the experiences will help me in other areas such as the critical thinking skills which would help me in making a right decision when facing a tough situation and understanding fully the situation before making a choice. This would apply when I'll be studying in university, finding a job, or even a simply daily routine that would require me to utilize this skill. Not only critical thinking skills but time management is also essential in my life as it also helps me in organizing my daily routine and plays a part with my decision-making skills, allowing myself to be effective in both managing my time and making decisions that can lead to efficiency.
Student H	The skills I developed will help with critical thinking, communication, and organizing ideas clearly. They'll be useful in future projects, presentations, and any tasks that require creativity.
Student I	Time management and creativity skills as I had to ensure and plan out my timeline for my works to finish on time alongside showcase my creativity abilities to evoke emotions of others from my artworks.

In summary from the participants responses demonstrated that Exhibition and Curatorial Writing activities serve as a transformative force for holistic student development. The experience moves beyond artistic creation to profoundly cultivate metacognitive abilities, sharpen critical thinking, transform the understanding of art as a communicative medium, and equip students with a robust suite of transferable skills highly valuable for their ongoing education and future life endeavours.

These are some of the aspects that develop as an impact from the Exhibition and Curatorial Writing Activities.

Deep Reflection and Metacognitive Engagement

All students reported engaging in significant self-reflection throughout the exhibition and curatorial writing process. They described how reflecting on their thought processes influenced their decisions, from selecting and arranging artworks to revising themes and messages. This metacognitive engagement was evident in their willingness to reconsider initial ideas, adapt to challenges, and make purposeful changes to better communicate their intentions.

Intentional Artistic and Curatorial Decisions

Students made intentional decisions about the selection, sequence, and presentation of their works. Many described changing the order of artworks, modifying visual elements, or even switching mediums to enhance thematic coherence and audience engagement. These choices

were often driven by a desire to create a logical narrative flow and to ensure that each piece contributed meaningfully to the overall exhibition.

Development of Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills

The process fostered critical thinking, as students evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of their works, analysed how each piece fit within the broader theme, and sought ways to improve both content and presentation. They reported that curatorial writing required them to justify their choices and articulate their reasoning, further strengthening their analytical skills.

Enhanced Understanding of Art as Communication

Students' understanding of art evolved from focusing solely on technical execution to recognizing art as a powerful tool for storytelling and communication. They became more aware of the importance of conveying clear messages, considering audience perspectives, and using visual and written elements to express complex ideas and emotions.

Personal Growth and Transferable Skills

Beyond artistic development, students identified growth in transferable skills such as time management, organization, collaboration, and problem-solving. Many expressed confidence that the skills gained through this experience would benefit them in future academic, professional, and personal contexts.

Emotional Reward and Enjoyment

Despite challenges, students found the process rewarding and fulfilling. They enjoyed seeing their creative efforts culminate in a public exhibition and valued the opportunity to share their stories and ideas with an audience. The sense of accomplishment and pride was a recurring theme in their responses.

In Summary

The synergy between the visual evidence of the exhibition and the depth of student reflection captured in the questionnaires underscores the IB DP Visual Arts Exhibition as a powerful pedagogical tool. It not only cultivates artistic and curatorial expertise but also advances students' metacognitive abilities, preparing them for future creative, academic, and professional challenges.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integrating curatorial practices into the IB Diploma Programme Visual Arts curriculum is a highly effective approach for fostering metacognitive skills among secondary students. Through the analysis of student exhibition works, curatorial rationales, reflective questionnaires, and relevant literature, it is clear that the curatorial process compels students to engage deeply in planning, self-monitoring, and critical evaluation of their artistic decisions.

Students' experiences in selecting and organizing artworks for public display required them to balance individual creativity with thematic coherence and audience engagement. The

curatorial rationale served as a structured tool for reflection, prompting students to articulate intentions, assess outcomes, and make iterative improvements. This aligns with established models of metacognition and self-regulated learning, highlighting the value of explicit reflection and adaptation in educational practice.

Furthermore, the challenges inherent in exhibition curation catalysed the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and transferable skills such as organization and communication. Students reported that these experiences not only enhanced their artistic growth but also prepared them for broader academic and life challenges.

In summary, the findings affirm that curatorial experiences in secondary art education are instrumental in nurturing metacognitive awareness, critical inquiry, and personal growth. Embedding such practices within the curriculum equips students with essential skills for success in an increasingly complex and dynamic world.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, me as a researcher used Perplexity AI, Grammarly and Gemini AI to support the organization of content, enhance clarity, and refine academic language. The AI tools were employed to assist in structuring sections, suggesting academic phrasing, and summarizing relevant literature. All outputs generated by these tools were carefully reviewed, edited, and supplemented by me as a researcher to ensure accuracy, originality, and scholarly integrity. I take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Curatorial Writing of Student 1

Curatorial Rationale

Rooted in Heritage

Majority of my work embodies culture and its significance in both society and my identity. The theme “Rooted in Heritage” was inspired by my cultural experience since childhood, being of a Chinese ethnicity and Indonesian nationality. Growing up, I have tried to balance the two between each other and the modern culture society seems to thrive in. The parts of culture I typically depict are traditions, legends, beliefs, and even traditional patterns - from Ming Dynasty porcelains to Mega Mendung motifs in batik - all which contribute to illustrating society’s liveliness as whole. What drives my interest in cultural themes is the role it plays in my identity and the responsibility I have to preserve my roots. My art originates from the constant reminder of how disconnected today’s generation is from their heritage and ethnicity. My works explore issues in that respect, while some appreciate the detail civilization places in the way they live. My art process involves utilizing oversaturated colours and hues to imitate how traditions, superstitions, and myths of my ethnicity and nationality make society alive. Colours are used as metaphors in varying cultures; red signifies sun, blood, and fire, all of which denote prosperity in Chinese culture, whereas it epitomizes courage in Indonesian beliefs. I do not use hues for its visual properties, but to emphasize why China, Indonesia, and other cultures use this and what it means to them. Because of my need for saturated hues and detail, I typically use acrylic as my medium, whether in canvas, clay, or even playing cards, as its consistency allows me to layer, enrich detail, and is versatile in its nature. Four of my works consist of acrylic on canvas. Both “Prambanan in Full Hue” (representing carvings along Indonesia’s Candi Prambanan temple) and “210 BCE Dilemmas” (featuring Qin Shi Huang’s terracotta soldiers) have a common subject: centuries-old artifacts from my respective heritages. However, each is able to depict two different meanings: the former invites audience to appreciate cultural intersections as Hinduism entered Indonesia while the latter embodies the appreciation of emperors’ superstitions and their achievements to move today’s society. Similarly, “In Loving Memory of Modernity” conveys a positive outlook on the situation as society manages to remember their own culture, represented through traditional Indonesian batik attire despite eating at fast food chains. The fourth artwork in this group, “Porcelain Binds the Roots,” is a more personal artwork as it’s a self-portrait that signifies the disconnection between me and my Chinese roots as I live in Indonesia. Unlike the previous works, it contains negative connotations as it sheds light towards how future generations could easily forget traditions. Like the previous works, “Playing Along the Lines of Segregation” also uses acrylic, however, consists of a different medium: 51 playing cards. Rather than placing the focal point on the reason for this tragedy between Chinese and Indonesians, I emphasize the long-term negative implications towards the eradication of Chinese traditions as fear is instilled. This portrays the hope to rebuild and reestablish customs to preserve our roots. Playing cards were utilized to highlight a separated art piece, representing the segregation between two contrasting cultures during 1998. A different medium (3D sculpture) that also uses acrylic is “Garuda’s Downpour,” composed of clay and wires to sculpt Indonesia's cultural beliefs behind the source of their staple food, as well as farmer’s relationship with our national emblem. “Yellowface” also uses different media as it consists of pencils, pastel oils, and water colour to depict how society overlooks cultural differences by skin color (through

magnolias and cranes). A completely different medium in the form of digital art “Cranes’ Batik,” appreciates the cultural intersection between both my ethnicity and nationality. By utilizing a wide range of media and mediums, I can display my technical abilities in different forms of art to convey different aspects of culture – it has been a constant factor in inspiring my work. However, my theme isn’t just about understanding culture, but its power in both society and individuals’ identity, shaping the way we live and who we are.

Appendix B

Curatorial Writing of Student 2

Curatorial Rationale

The Paradox of Female Beauty

In this 21st century, as social media and technology continue to evolve, beauty standards for women have become more conflicting and contradictory than ever, deeply instilled in today’s female culture and the ways they present themselves to society and the public. The perception that beauty must equate to perfection raises the acknowledgement to embrace identity rather than conforming to these unrealistic standards. Holding an artistic intention of empowering natural beauty and challenging societal expectations, my exhibition theme: *The Paradox of Female Beauty*. My theme explores the complexities of modern beauty standards, delving into the pressures of beauty perfection and self-image imposed by society’s exceptional standards, challenging the contradictions that define beauty—both empowering and restrictive, natural and artificial, yet admired and criticized. Appealing to both personal and societal perspectives, my body of work urges viewers to reject imposed beauty standards and foster a deeper appreciation for true self-acceptance and authenticity by challenging female beauty paradoxes. My exhibition begins with a perspective on this concept – my acrylic piece: *Traces of Tears*. This vivid, pink-toned painting inspired by Elena Kraft represents the cost of beauty and the pressure placed upon females to conform to ideals shaped from pain depicted through the melting face cascading into roses. This issue synchronizes with my following artwork: *Bloom*, another acrylic piece which displays a similar issue of how females overshadow their true beauty to attain the perfect appearance. This subject guides me to my following painting *Worn Perfection* which reflects females portraying a false image of perfection by disguising their real authentic beauty. Additionally, the struggle and pain of female beauty are depicted in my acrylic piece *Laced in Pain* inspired by Olga Belgisheva, further highlighting the sacrifices made to pursue exceptional beauty standards – where strength and suffering link. My next piece, *Bite of Guilt*, inspired by my personal experiences shifts from the paradox of expectations and authenticity. This acrylic series raises the shame tied to eating to maintain a desirable appearance and beauty through the vibrant colours and illustrations of tempting sweets. Moreover, my following mixed media and watercolour piece, *Fragments of Time*, exhibits the duality of aging that is viewed as loss of beauty to society. This encourages the concept that beauty is not bound by time and is endless. *The Unfiltered Soul*, my charcoal and acrylic on book piece, usage of mediums inspired by Yasmin Morris and urges that beauty should be free from overwhelming constraints and judgements presented by the monochromatic tones. The exhibition concluded with my gypsum and clay sculpture, *Breaking Free*, which empowers females to break free from confinement to societal norms. By using a female’s hand and glass, this piece ultimately displays how societal expectations must be reclaimed to embrace freedom of beauty, unshaped by external judgements. This exhibition is arranged to be viewed from the centrepiece, *Traces of Tears*. This piece establishes my central theme, inviting viewers to evaluate the paradox of female

beauty within struggles and perfection. On the left side of the room, viewers may explore the three acrylics paintings with vibrant and pink hues, all with interrelated concepts of the pressure to attain beauty perfection while overshadowing true beauty and enduring pain. Meanwhile, as viewers gaze to the right side, they encounter diverse paradoxes on female beauty through *Bite of Guilt*, *Fragments of Time*, *The Unfiltered Soul*, and *Breaking Free*. The symbolism illustrated from the usage of colours and object emphasis in each piece builds the audience's perception, allowing correlation with their experiences in the present times. Thus, the established relationship between the artworks forms a profound impact for which viewers are encouraged to acknowledge the conflicting nature of beauty and reject imposed standards in Favor of embracing authenticity. Through this collective body of work, utilizing mediums including painting, sculpture, charcoal, ready-made objects, this exhibition demonstrates my technical competence and exploration of unconventional mediums. Nonetheless, with the diverse use of techniques including expressive brushstrokes and harmonizing colours, I hope to achieve an amalgamation of art forms that makes a strong impact on my audience. By addressing contemporary beauty standards and raising awareness to tackle such standards, I aim to effectively express my selected theme: *The Paradox of Female Beauty*.

Appendix C

Curatorial Writing of Student 3

Curatorial Rationale

Unravelling Nature: The Cost of Our Footprint

In an era where environmental issues have reached a breaking point, nature's voice grows fainter under the weight of human impact. While discussions around sustainability and climate action have gained momentum, the reality remains stark forests continue to vanish, oceans suffocate in plastic, and entire ecosystems are on the brink of collapse. My exhibition not only depicts environmental decay; it urges reflection, accountability, and action to viewers. My exhibition begins with *Fading Horizons*, a series of acrylic paintings that act as a time capsule for disappearing landscapes. Once vibrant and full of life, these sceneries are now rare, soon to be lost to climate change, industrialization, and environmental neglect. As the world warms and natural beauty fades, the question moves deeper into the crisis, which is portrayed by *Abandoned Depths*. It presents a submerged nursery, where a manta ray glides through the remnants of a world lost to rising sea levels. A once-safe space for children is now an eerie underwater relic, emphasizing how future generations may inherit a world where clear skies and stable lands no longer exist. This prominent loss continues in *Caught in the Cycle*; a mixed media assemblage of plastic waste trapped in a net. Soap bottles, which once symbolizes cleanliness, have now polluted the very oceans they were meant to protect. The net represents both an attempt to collect the damage and the inescapable trap of our consumption habits. The consequences of human negligence extend beyond the oceans. *Frozen Warning* shifts focus to the Arctic, where a polar bear and a penguin (representing arctic animals) are depicted inside a refrigerator, struggling to survive as melting ice destroys its home. Global temperatures are rising at an alarming rate, and species that have adapted over millennia are now left on the brink of extinction. This represents the contrast of two possible futures, which unfolds in *The Two Worlds*, an acrylic painting split between a cold, industrialized cityscape inspired by Gotham City and a vibrant, untouched paradise. The torn effect in the middle represents the growing divide between urban expansion and nature's slow disappearance. One path leads to continued destruction, while the other offers a chance at restoration to what was

once utopia. My next piece focuses on the issue of plastic pollution once more in Trapped in Plastic, where a turtle struggles within the confines of a plastic bottle. This piece is inspired by the concept of Aude Bourguine's "Lungs of Ocean" series. With millions of marine animals dying from plastic waste each year, this piece encapsulates the suffocating reality of human negligence, turning oceans into death traps for the creatures that call them home. From suffocation to devastation in nature, Silent Guardian depicts a young girl in green standing in the heart of a burning forest, surrounded by grieving animals. As nature personified, she does not flee; she mourns. As deforestation and wildfires intensify, entire ecosystems are being erased, leaving behind only ashes and loss. The silent guardian ultimately watches over what remains, embodying the sorrow of the wilderness losing their place on Earth. The exhibition concludes with Would You Drink This? a 3D assemblage confronting viewers with a clear water dispenser filled with polluted, murky water. A cup sits beside it, subtly posing an unsettling reality: while some take clean water for granted, billions face scarcity and contamination. The simplest necessity is becoming a privilege; this acts as a reminder to the viewers that the consequences of environmental damage affect us all. From right to left, my exhibition is designed to be seen as if mirroring the slow unravelling of our natural world. It guides viewers through landscapes on the brink in Fading Horizons and The Two Worlds, oceans in distress in Abandoned Depths, caught in the Cycle, and Trapped in Plastic, and the silent cries of the creatures left behind through Frozen Warning and Silent Guardian. The tragic cost of our footprint was concluded with my centrepiece Would you drink this? which was designed to question the paradox of responsibilities and human life. By weaving together acrylic paintings, digital art, mixed media, and installations, my exhibition becomes more than an artistic expression—it is a statement, a warning, and a plea for change before it is too late.

Reconsidering Japaneseness and Authenticity: The Cultural Globalization of the Japanese Tea Ceremony in the New York Metropolitan Area

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Abstract

“Few practices are simultaneously as exotic and representative, esoteric and quotidian, instrumental and sensual, political and cultural as the Japanese tea ceremony” (Surak, 2013, p. 1). Surak’s statement represents a broader recognition of the Japanese tea ceremony (hereafter the JTC) as the embodiment of the quintessence of Japanese culture, not only internationally but also domestically. This embodiment of culture exists despite, as well as because of, the fact that most Japanese people themselves lack deep knowledge and experience of the JTC. However, in today’s era of cultural globalization, a variety of cultural products and practices are now experienced worldwide, and the JTC is no exception. Based on thirteen years of ethnographic research, the present study examines the landscape of cultural globalization with a focus on this quintessentially Japanese cultural practice in the New York metropolitan area. The study analyzes the two primary, and frequently conflicting, dimensions of the JTC’s propagation in the area, namely, reconstruction and deconstruction of Japaneseness. In so doing, the study critically examines how (in)authenticity is valued within the JTC community and how this valuation can be interpreted in the larger context of cultural globalization. The study concludes that, as the JTC is at a point of increasing globalization as a cultural practice, the continued expansion of the JTC is contingent on how the community assesses (in)authenticity within the practice. The study, therefore, comments not only on (in)authenticity within this singular context but suggests the significance and imperatives of redefining the notion of cultural authenticity in modernity.

Keywords: Japanese tea ceremony, New York, cultural globalization, authenticity, Appadurai’s scapes

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Introduction

In today's globalized world, cultural boundaries are increasingly fluid, allowing traditional practices to cross borders and take on new meanings. This paper presents an ethnographic study of the Japanese Tea Ceremony (hereafter the JTC) as practiced in the New York Metropolitan Area (hereafter the NYMA), a cosmopolitan setting shaped by diverse cultural influences. In this context, the JTC offers a lens to explore how tradition is maintained, adapted, and reinterpreted globally.

Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's (1996) theory of global cultural flows, particularly his five "scapes," the study analyzes how global influences shape local practices. The JTC is explored not only as a traditional form but also as a practice integrated into everyday cultural negotiation.

While often seen as a symbol of Japanese culture, the JTC in the NYMA raises questions about authenticity and the reconstruction of Japaneseness. Building on the analysis of five "scapes" of the JTC in the NYMA, this paper further examines two forms of cultural authenticity and explores how the JTC navigates the tension between tradition and modernity in a global context.

Ultimately, the paper shows how the JTC is adapted and recontextualized in the NYMA, with processes of transformation and hybridity emerging through cross-cultural interaction in a globalized setting.

Overview of the Fieldwork

This study is based on thirteen years of longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork on the JTC in the NYMA. I practiced the JTC for twenty-three years, first in Japan for ten years and then in New York for thirteen. This experience allowed me to act as a participant observer and examine both continuities and local adaptations in its practice at NYMA. Since 2012, my fieldwork has included a range of participant-observation activities such as attending, organizing, teaching, and demonstrating at tea lessons, workshops, festivals, and public events. I also taught the JTC for eight years at institutions like the Nippon Club in Manhattan, allowing sustained engagement with diverse students and practitioners.

In addition to observation, I conducted twenty formal and informal interviews with Japanese and non-Japanese practitioners, instructors, students, and cultural mediators. The interviews were sometimes recorded and sometimes not, and they varied between formal and informal. They were supported by detailed field notes, video recordings, and photographic documentation focused on the interactional dynamics of the JTC practice in various settings.

Conceptualizing Cultural Globalization –Scapes of the Japanese Tea Ceremony in the New York Metropolitan Area

Understanding the JTC in the NYMA requires a framework that explains how cultural practices move and transform globally. This section draws on Appadurai's (1996) theory of global cultural flows from *Modernity at Large* to analyze how the JTC is transmitted, adapted, and reinterpreted in this specific context.

Appadurai identifies five overlapping “scapes”—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes, to describe the complex, uneven global movement of people, media, technology, capital, and ideas. This framework helps explain how the JTC travels beyond Japan and evolves in new settings like the NYMA.

Cultural globalization, according to Appadurai, is not a linear replication of traditions but involves local adaptation and reinterpretation. The JTC, practiced in settings ranging from private homes to cultural institutions, is reshaped by local conditions such as space limitations and audience diversity. These adaptations reflect a negotiation between maintaining tradition and responding to new contexts.

This study applies Appadurai’s theory to explore how the JTC is redefined in the NYMA through the interplay of so-called Japanese traditions and the local environment. The following subsections analyze each “scape,” drawing on fieldwork—including interviews and observations followed up with detailed note-taking—to illustrate how global flows shape the local practice of the JTC.

Ethnoscape: Mobility of People and Language

The ethnoscape of the JTC in the NYMA comprises a diverse community of an estimated 200–300 members. Central to this community are the Omote-senke and Ura-senke schools, which maintain regional branches and certified instructors, preserving ties to Japan (Creighton, 1997). Instruction is typically led by licensed Japanese tea masters, many of whom are permanent U.S. residents and serve as cultural and linguistic gatekeepers.

The community includes Japanese sojourners, long-term immigrants, and a growing number of non-Japanese participants, who often teach in intercultural settings (Inoue, 2003). Non-Japanese involvement is increasing, and this brings varying levels of cultural and linguistic fluency. Japanese remains essential in naming tools and concepts, while English is commonly used in instruction, especially publicly. As Surak (2013) notes, bilingual teaching increases accessibility but can lead to simplified content.

Overall, the community remains largely centered around Japanese members and the Japanese language, although the presence of non-Japanese participants and the use of English continue to grow within this bilingual environment.

Ideoscape: Values of Preservation, Adaptation, and Wellness

The ideoscape includes not only efforts to preserve the traditional forms of the JTC but also a range of discourses related to adaptation and reinterpretation. In some instances, this results in a partial transformation of established practices. Such shifts do not always arise from deliberate strategies. Rather, they often emerge in response to various social, linguistic, and cultural conditions. In the multicultural and institutionally diverse context of the NYMA, the meanings of the JTC are negotiated continuously. Practitioners engage with different value systems, including those related to mindfulness, wellness, and cross-cultural learning. These ideological frameworks shape how the JTC is practiced and understood today in the NYMA.

Discourse of Preservation

Among the JTC practitioners in the NYMA, there is a strong emphasis on preserving traditional forms and values. This is reflected in the careful transmission of procedures, utensils, and lesson formats modeled after Japanese practice, as well as in frequent references to lineage-based legitimacy.

For many, authenticity is defined by adherence to original teachings, with Japanese instructors often seen as custodians of tradition. A clear example is found on the Omotesenke Domonkai USA Eastern Region website, where the organization, which represents the American branch of the Omotesenke school, frames its mission around maintaining the tradition as practiced in Japan. The following is an excerpt from their homepage:

Omotesenke, being the main family line that carries on the tradition of Rikyu's chanoyu, authentically preserves that tradition and seeks to pass down to the future generations the beauty and spirit of Japan through constant pursuit of chanoyu that reflects the zeitgeist of the time.

This statement reflects a preservation-oriented ethos. At the same time, it shows an awareness that tradition must respond to historical and cultural change.

Discourse of Cultural Adaptation

Deconstruction of Hierarchy and Formality. One area where the notion of adaptation is most clearly articulated is in the modification of pedagogical hierarchy and formality. In contrast to the rigid hierarchical structures often found in tea schools in Japan, many practitioners in the NYMA espouse a more flexible and dialogic approach. This aligns more closely with American expectations of mutual respect and open communication in educational settings. Such shifts in pedagogical style reflect what Surak (2013) describes as the “internationalization” of the tea ceremony, where forms are selectively adjusted to fit local cultural norms without entirely abandoning traditional frameworks.

Ed, a non-Japanese practitioner with over forty years of experience, commented on this point:

One very I find negative aspect of Japanese teaching method is when the teacher talks down to the students. That is, it's a very difficult way to get a message across, generally speaking. Hierarchy is OK. But it's how it's conveyed.

This remark highlights a central concern in adaptation discourse. Hierarchy itself is not necessarily rejected, but the manner in which it is expressed is questioned, especially when it appears authoritarian or dismissive. The roles of teacher and student are maintained, but the expected demeanor and communicative style may differ.

In practice, many instructors in New York, both Japanese and non-Japanese, adjust their teaching style, often becoming more conversational and explanatory. For example, in group lessons, teachers may provide contextual explanations, encourage questions, or acknowledge alternative ways of understanding practice. Rather than undermining the core structure of the JTC, these changes might be seen as reflecting a localized shift in how authority is expressed and received.

The Imperative for Americanization. As the JTC takes root in the United States, questions inevitably arise about how formal roles and hierarchical conventions translate across cultural boundaries. One notable area of tension concerns the role of the first guest, or *shokyaku*. James, who has studied the JTC for over ten years, reflects on the difficulty of maintaining such roles in the U.S., stating, “That’s almost impossible to maintain in the United States. Because the whole concept of the 1st guest as being senior. It just, it just doesn’t make any sense. And the fact that only a 1st guest can speak.” His comment highlights a key issue in Americanization, where formal elements like the exclusive speaking rights of the *shokyaku* can conflict with American values of equality and open participation. As Ito (2017) notes, this role may also create pressure and confusion for non-Japanese participants, potentially limiting accessibility in intercultural settings.

Ideologies of Japanese Language Use and Meaning

Japanese Language as a Common Ground. Some practitioners view Japanese positively, describing it as a shared cultural point of reference that fosters unity. Victoria, a non-Japanese practitioner with five years of experience, compares its role to that of Latin in European intellectual history:

I personally think it's important because I have found it as a way to connect with the host, to connect with each other. In a way, I think of how, throughout Europe especially, Latin was used, right? ... It’s a common ground to have the Japanese. So, I personally like it.

This perspective highlights how Japanese is not simply a communicative tool but also functions as a form of symbolic capital. As Bourdieu (1991) notes, language carries symbolic power that goes beyond mere communication, acting as a marker of social position and cultural legitimacy. In the context of the JTC, the deliberate use of Japanese serves as a cultural anchor, creating a common ground that fosters unity and mutual respect even among non-native speakers.

Michael, a long-time practitioner, expresses a similar view, emphasizing the communal and emotional aspects of using Japanese. He states, “For example, when we come together ... we’re all Japanese speakers. In that context, speaking in Japanese adds a little something for us as a cultural element that we enjoy.” Here, Japanese contributes to the ambiance of the gathering. It becomes a cultural marker, deepening the shared experience. Even when participants are fluent, Japanese plays a role beyond communication, it enhances the ritual and aesthetic atmosphere of the gatherings.

These perspectives suggest that Japanese can act as a medium of shared identity and respect. Its performative or symbolic use adds meaning precisely because it is limited and deliberate. In this way, language becomes a cultural anchor within the diverse environment of the NYMA.

Japanese Language as an Obstacle. At the same time, not all practitioners view Japanese use in a positive light. In the multilingual and multicultural context of the NYMA, some express concern that Japanese may function as a barrier rather than a bridge—a point that will be explored further in Section 4. These critiques reflect a different ideology, one that values clarity, access, and participation over symbolic authenticity. Ed, an experienced practitioner, describes how language can affect inclusion. He states, “if a person is not a

Japanese speaker, then the use of Japanese would serve to exclude that person from the flow.” This concern aligns with broader sociolinguistic insights on language and exclusion. Ishihara (2005) argues that in multilingual settings, the unmediated use of a dominant language often creates barriers for non-native speakers, thereby limiting their full participation and fostering exclusion rather than inclusion.

Another practitioner, Kevin, who has practiced the JTC for over five years, highlights the necessity of adapting language use for broader accessibility:

(For the JTC to be globalized) we definitely have to change the language, to use the language of the place where it's being conducted... Like carry out the ceremony all in English... If you only use Japanese, you can throw a Japanese word around, which is fine, but then you have to explain it, because the whole purpose is communication.

Kevin's perspective corresponds to Ishihara's observation, reflecting a discourse on the necessity of linguistic accessibility through explanation and translation in diverse cultural contexts.

Discourse of Mindfulness and Wellness: Strategic and Personal Approaches

In the NYMA, the JTC is increasingly linked to mindfulness, wellness, and self-care. For instance, at a Nippon Club event titled “Business and Tea Ceremony,” tea master Yoshitsugu Nagano discussed integrating tea practice into professional well-being, reframing the JTC for modern work life. Wilson (2014) similarly shows how Buddhist mindfulness adapts within American wellness culture; likewise, the JTC functions as a cultural practice supporting mindfulness and emotional balance.

Some participants describe drinking matcha as a tool for self-regulation. Sally, one of the guests at a private tea gathering I hosted, said, “I drink matcha every morning now. I stopped drinking coffee. Matcha doesn't give me too much of a jolt like coffee does.” Alex, who participated in a tea ceremony event at a college, noted, “I was stressed out, and I felt healed during the ceremony.” These reflections highlight not only tea's calming effects but also the JTC's reinterpretation as a wellness practice associated with mental health and sustainable living. These examples show how mindfulness and wellness discourses, both personal and institutional, expand the JTC's accessibility and contemporary relevance in the NYMA.

Financescape: Cultural Capital and Commodification

While the ideoscape focuses on the values, beliefs, and symbolic meanings associated with the JTC, a full understanding of its practice in the NYMA also requires attention to its economic dimensions. The JTC does not circulate solely as a form of cultural expression or aesthetic practice; it is also embedded in systems of financial exchange, commodification, and market-based valuation. As Philippczyck (2018) notes in his study of tea ceremony practices in Europe, the globalization of traditional cultural forms often leads to a dual structure in which authenticity and commercial viability must be negotiated. His findings show how the JTC is simultaneously preserved as a symbol of cultural heritage and adapted to meet the expectations of broader consumer markets. This insight is particularly relevant in the NYMA, where tea-related activities are shaped by both cultural and economic logics. Examining this financial layer reveals how the JTC, even when practiced with deep respect

for tradition, is situated within broader flows of capital that influence its transmission, presentation, and perceived value.

In Appadurai's (1996) framework, the *financescape* refers to the movement of money, capital, and economic practices across global and local contexts. In the case of the JTC in the NYMA, this *scape* encompasses two contrasting economic dimensions. On one side, the JTC continues to function as a form of cultural capital, often sustained within relatively affluent and exclusive communities. It is supported through private instruction, personal patronage, and membership-based institutions, where access is typically limited by both cost and social networks. On the other side, matcha, which can be said the most recognizable element of the JTC culture, has been widely commercialized. It circulates in popular consumer markets through cafes, wellness branding, and retail products. This version of tea culture is accessible to a broad public but is largely disconnected from the formal structures and values of the JTC.

This section examines these two divergent aspects of the *financescape*: (1) the JTC as a culturally prestigious practice embedded in upper-middle-class or elite networks, and (2) the commodification of matcha as an everyday consumer good in mainstream markets.

Cultural Capital of the Japanese Tea Ceremony

In the NYMA, the JTC's cultural capital is often expressed through individual patronage, including curated tea rooms, high-end utensils imported from Japan, and private gatherings. These settings preserve the tradition's artistic integrity but also make the practice accessible mainly to those with financial and social resources.

Two overlapping discourses arise: one emphasizes the JTC's aesthetic and cultural value as a refined Japanese tradition with deep history and philosophy; the other signals elite cultural status. Patrons use exclusive events and rare utensils to position themselves as culturally sophisticated. As Bourdieu (1984) notes, cultural consumption like this serves not only appreciation but also social distinction.

Commodification of Matcha-Drinking Culture

On the other hand, the commodification of matcha-drinking culture in the NYMA reflects the underlying logic of cultural globalization, which is marked by accessibility, hybridization, and casual simplification. Unlike the formal structure of the JTC, these commercial expressions translate tea culture into approachable, lifestyle-friendly formats that emphasize ease and familiarity. For example, matcha cafes featuring cozy interiors, seasonal menus, and quick service, similar to Western coffee chains, have become increasingly prevalent. These spaces do not seek to replicate traditional tea settings; rather, they offer casual environments where patrons can incorporate matcha lattes or sweets into their everyday routines. Similarly, online matcha-making kits and pop-up tasting events offer casual opportunities for those unfamiliar with the JTC to experience matcha in relaxed, low-pressure contexts.

This trend does not signify a rejection of Japanese tradition but rather a reconfiguration that corresponds to global cultural flows. Such developments reflect Robertson's (1995) concept of *glocalization*, where global cultural elements are adapted and reinterpreted within local contexts. Although these commercialized practices may diverge from the formal structure of the JTC, they illustrate an alternative mode through which Japanese tea culture is circulated, adapted, and appreciated in a globalized setting.

Mediascape: Tradition and Urban Life

Media representations of the JTC in the NYMA are varied, spanning formal ceremonies to everyday matcha experiences. For example, the *kenchashiki* (offering tea ceremony) held in March 2025 by the Omotesenke head at a New York cathedral was covered by NHK and Nikkei, and its coverage emphasized peace and respect, showcasing the JTC as a symbol of ceremonial diplomacy.

Alongside such high-profile events, practitioners affiliated with schools like Omotesenke and Ueda Soko promote seasonal *chakai* (tea gatherings) through social media. Keiko Kitazawa of Murasaki Tea offers Omotesenke-style classes in Manhattan, while the Omotesenke Domonkai Eastern Region USA organizes public ceremonies at venues such as Place 229, blending traditional and modern elements. Digital posts showcase utensils, kimono, and sweets, presenting the JTC as both a preserved tradition and a living urban practice.

The article *“From Zen to Zoom: The Digital Revival of Japanese Tea Ceremonies”* (2024) highlights how digital tools like Zoom and Instagram became vital during the pandemic, expanding reach and preserving tea techniques through virtual reality and online archives. Casual lifestyle portrayals also flourished, such as the *“GREEN TEA Room”* pop-up on the High Line, which linked matcha to stress relief and wellness and was widely promoted through social media.

Together, these media portrayals show the JTC’s range, from a dignified cultural symbol to a trendy urban beverage, reflecting its flexible role in the NYMA.

Technoscape: Mediated Practice and Transnational Access

Though traditionally requiring in-person interaction, the JTC in the NYMA has embraced technology, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic as mentioned above. Online tea classes and virtual lectures expanded access; I also personally taught and attended such sessions connecting with both local and Japanese instructors.

At public events, visual media like screens show historical context or close-ups of movements, enhancing understanding. Platforms like Zoom facilitate international exchange, connecting the NYMA practitioners with Japanese teachers. These technological integrations complement rather than replace tradition, showing an adaptive technoscape that broadens participation without losing core values.

Overall, the five scapes reveal that the JTC in the NYMA is a dynamic practice shaped by global mobility, evolving values, economy media, and technology. It is neither a static preservation of tradition nor a complete reinvention, but rather a complex interplay of adaptation and continuity. This ongoing negotiation raises critical questions about what defines “authenticity” in a globalized world, who decides it, and how cultural meaning shifts when practices move beyond their origins. The next section will explore these issues in relation to modernity.

(In)Authenticity and Modernity of the Japanese Tea Ceremony in Cultural Globalization

Among multiple interviews conducted, this section is particularly informed by an interview with tea master Yoshitsugu Nagano, founder of Chanoyu Week NYC, to discuss two key issues: the ambiguity of tradition and the contested meaning of “Japaneseness.” I chose to highlight Nagano’s perspective because, through initiatives like Chanoyu Week, he actively explores new possibilities for the JTC, and is, in my view, a leading figure in its contemporary development in the NYMA.

“Japaneseness” becomes central when considering authenticity and modernity in global contexts. It is expressed through community makeup, language, and visual aesthetics, and is sometimes deliberately reframed or downplayed. Nagano views this not as a loss, but as a chance to rethink cultural boundaries, opening new possibilities for the JTC in the NYMA.

Obscurity of Tradition—Example of *Seiza*

Nagano notes that so-called tradition in the JTC is inherently ambiguous, a condition stemming not only from its relocation abroad but from its own historical development within Japan. As such an instance, he discusses the concept of a *seiza*, the formal kneeling posture often associated with traditional Japanese etiquette, as follows:

For example, the term *seiza* itself was actually coined by the Meiji government. And it wasn’t until the Taisho era that the average person in Japan, upon hearing *seiza*, would picture that specific sitting posture. So it's only been about a hundred years, really.

Here, Nagano points out that *seiza*, the sitting posture commonly seen as emblematic of Japanese tradition, was only standardized around a century ago. This historical insight challenges the assumption that such a posture has always been an integral part of Japanese cultural practices like the JTC.

He further reflects:

If you consider that the tea ceremony has a history of around 650 years, going back to the Muromachi period, and for 80% of that time people weren’t using the *seiza* posture, then... it really makes you wonder: what do we truly mean when we say something is ‘authentic’?

Based on these remarks, Nagano highlights the ambiguity surrounding the concept of “tradition” in tea culture. The formal kneeling posture known as *seiza*, which is commonly perceived as quintessentially Japanese, was only standardized roughly 100 years ago. Given that the JTC itself spans approximately 650 years, with most of that history predating the widespread adoption of *seiza*, this example problematizes fixed notions of authenticity within the tradition.

Diminishment of Japaneseness

Community Composition

Following his reflection on the constructed nature of tradition, Nagano highlights how the composition of the JTC community shapes its cultural meaning in the NYMA. He expresses a conscious intention to avoid the overrepresentation of Japanese nationals in his gatherings and lessons, stating, “Something I’m really conscious of at my practice sessions is making sure that Japanese people don’t make up the majority. I don’t mean in every single class, but more in terms of the overall group composition.” This underscores his engagement with inclusion and representation. Drawing on Tajfel and Turner’s (1979) social identity theory, which explains how dominant in-groups can marginalize others, Nagano’s approach challenges exclusionary boundaries. By disrupting a Japan-centric model, he creates space for non-Japanese practitioners, challenging and redefining “authenticity” of the JTC in a global context.

Choice of Language

In addition to community composition, linguistic choices also play a critical role in shaping how inclusive or exclusive the JTC practice becomes, particularly in a multicultural setting like the NYMA. Nagano is highly intentional about how language mediates access to the JTC community. He says, “That’s why, for example, I never use Japanese on Facebook or Instagram. I’ve made it a rule not to post in Japanese anymore. That way, it’s easier for people who don’t speak Japanese to feel welcome and join in.” By avoiding the use of Japanese on social media, Nagano seeks to make his events and classes more accessible to non-Japanese speakers, thereby lowering the linguistic threshold for participation. His deliberate language choice functions as a form of cultural outreach, extending the space of the JTC beyond those with prior familiarity with Japanese language or cultural codes. Nagano’s approach reframes language not as a marker of authenticity, but as a potential barrier to be consciously dismantled in the interest of inclusivity.

This perspective aligns with findings by Sugiarto and Arif (2024), who examine how English-language practices on social media platforms reflect and shape cultural identities in globalized contexts. They argue that language choices in digital spaces do more than communicate. That is, they actively construct cultural inclusion or exclusion, influenced by cultural contexts and platform dynamics. Thus, Nagano’s deliberate avoidance of Japanese in online communication exemplifies a strategic effort to make the JTC practice more accessible and inclusive.

Visual Images

Just as language choice functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, so too do visual representations, especially in digital contexts such as social media. Nagano is acutely aware of how imagery shapes perceptions of who belongs in the JTC community and actively uses visual strategies to broaden its appeal, as shown in an excerpt from his interview below:

Also, on Instagram, I make a point of posting not just overly traditional content, but mixing it up a bit, and I try to appear in the posts myself as much as possible. That’s because when I show up, it tends to lower the perceived age range of the group. And since I’m male, it gives off the impression that it’s okay for men to join too.

He further elaborates:

Of course, if the goal were to present ‘the classic tea ceremony’ image, then I think it’d be better to show a female student in a kimono doing something elegant. But instead, I choose to do things like posting in English, avoiding overly ‘Japanese’ aesthetics, and showing myself in the content. That’s the kind of approach I’m taking.

Nagano, who is himself a man in his 30s, consciously uses his own image to counter conventional associations of the JTC with older, female practitioners. By appearing in his posts, he aims to visually signal that the practice is not limited by age or gender, thereby making the space feel more accessible to younger people and men. His choice to use English and to avoid stereotypically “Japanese” imagery further distances his representation of the JTC from its conventional, museum-like aesthetics.

Rather than reproducing stereotypical images of kimono-clad women engaged in graceful gestures, or visual tropes often associated with the “authentic” JTC, Nagano adopts a more casual and contemporary aesthetic. This approach resonates with research by Deolalikar (2022), who examines how visual narratives in advertising have historically shaped perceptions of tea culture and its associated gender norms, particularly through the depiction of women. Deolalikar’s study highlights how visual representation is not neutral but actively constructs cultural meanings and expectations, often reinforcing gendered associations. Nagano’s conscious disruption of these traditional visual tropes reflects a broader strategy to reposition the JTC as something open, modern, and socially accessible.

By frequently appearing in his own posts, using English captions, and avoiding overtly “traditional” visuals, Nagano attempts to reposition the JTC as a practice that invites a more diverse range of participants, particularly younger individuals and men. These visual strategies reflect his intention to challenge normative images of Japaneseness and make the JTC resonate more broadly with participants in the NYMA.

Concluding Remarks

This study has examined how the Japanese Tea Ceremony (JTC) in the New York Metropolitan Area is not a static cultural artifact, but a dynamic practice shaped by global flows. Using Appadurai’s (1996) theory of cultural globalization, particularly his “scapes” framework, I have shown how the JTC is influenced by ethnoscap (people), ideoscap (ideas), financescap (resources), mediascap (media and information), and technoscap (technology). These flows reshape rather than dilute the JTC, transforming its meanings and forms of participation.

For example, examining the case of Yoshitsugu Nagano reveals how authenticity in the JTC is constructed through interaction with local dynamics in the NYMA, which leads to a further consideration of cultural globalization in a broader context. Rather than relying on continuity with a fixed past, authenticity in the NYMA emerges as relational and processual, negotiated through language, representation, and community makeup. Nagano’s strategic choices, including his avoidance of Japanese on social media, his emphasis on self-representation, and his embrace of diversity, challenge essentialist notions of “Japaneseness” and contribute to reframing the JTC for broader public engagement.

In light of the foregoing, it could be argued that the form of authenticity emerging in the NYMA reflects broader patterns of cultural negotiation beyond this region alone. This perspective challenges the idea that cultural legitimacy is secured solely by tradition, emphasizing instead that authenticity is contingent, socially constructed, and continuously negotiated. Such a view aligns with DeSoucey's (2016) concept of "rationalized authenticity," which balances tradition with contemporary relevance in global contexts, and Philippczyk's (2018) notion of authenticity as performative, shaped by both local and global expectations.

Within this framework, authenticity in the NYMA manifests through acts of inclusion and reinterpretation. Practitioners of the JTC embody various discourses that negotiate tradition within diverse and global contexts, contextualized by modernity. In other words, the authenticity and inauthenticity of so-called traditional culture are not fixed but continuously redefined for both practitioners and audiences. This flexible, negotiated approach reimagines tradition for the 21st century, raising broader questions about how global flows reshape cultural legitimacy and how contemporary individuals engage with evolving practices.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I used ChatGPT to assist with the following tasks for this paper: proofreading and editing, searching for helpful resources, and having interactive discussions on particular points.

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Atmospheric Instability: Melodramatic Collision of Gender, Tradition, and Communication in *Forecasting Love and Weather*

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Abstract

Forecasting Love and Weather (FLW), an internationally co-produced romantic drama, follows the lives of fictional employees at the Korean Meteorological Administration (KMA), delving into both the challenges of workplace dynamics and the intricacies of personal relationships. As a melodrama, FLW highlights ideological conflicts, particularly in the realms of marriage and family, set against the backdrop of modern societal values. The series portrays how female characters navigate and resist gender biases and malicious comments in their professional lives, while also challenging the traditional association of the public sphere with masculinity and the private sphere with femininity. Through its exploration of the blurred boundaries between personal and professional spaces, FLW reveals deeper ideological contradictions. This study analyzes the communication styles and decision-making processes situated in the broader framework of melodrama as depicted in the show, both at the organizational and interpersonal levels, to understand how they reflect the issues of gender dynamics and workplace relationships in contemporary society. Ultimately, this research aims to unpack how FLW, through the lens of international co-production and melodramatic genre, presents the collision between traditional values and modernity, particularly in its representation of women in the workplace and its portrayal of "soft" characteristics in male characters.

Keywords: melodrama, representation of women, modernity in K-drama, media and ideology

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Introduction

Forecasting Love and Weather (hereafter *FLW*) is a romantic drama co-produced by Joongang Newspaper's general channel, Joongang Tongyang Broadcasting Company (JTBC) and Netflix. *FLW* narrates the lives of those working at the headquarters of the Korean Meteorological Administration (KMA), exploring the challenges they encounter and the complexities of workplace relationships. As an indispensable public service institution in South Korea, KMA is committed to delivering timely and precise weather information, according to the current administrator, Yoo Hee-Dong (KMA, 2023). At the core of KMA's mission as a governmental service lies the ethos of "Watching the Sky Friendly, Serving the People Faithfully [*sic*]," which resonates throughout the narrative of *FLW*, setting in the fictionalized National Meteorological Center in Seoul (KMA, 2023). The recurring slogan "Innovative weather services a stepping stone to public safety" in *FLW* emphasizes the shared sense of responsibility in protecting the well-being of the public through reliable weather forecasting.

This program revolves around the lives of four central characters: Jin Hu-kyung, Lee Shi-woo, Han Gi-jun, and Chae Yoo-jin. As a melodrama, this program depicts ideological conflicts present the collisions between traditional and modern values in Korean society and also in representations of Korean women in the workplace. Meanwhile, it illustrates how female characters defend themselves when confronted with malicious comments and biased gender stereotypes in the workplace. The interplay between the private and public spheres highlights ideological contradictions throughout the serial, challenging the notion that the public sphere always symbolizes masculinity and the private sphere represents femininity.

Therefore, this paper seeks to examine how *FLW*, under the context of international co-production and with a particular relationship to genre, depicts the ideological conflicts stemming from the collision between traditional values and modernity, particularly in the representation of women in the workplace and the embodiment of "soft" characteristics to male characters. In addition, as this show places emphasis on diverse communication styles and the decision-making processes within both organizational and interpersonal dimensions, this paper aims to understand the various communication strategies employed in the public/private dichotomy to unravel their broader implications.

The History and Globalization of Korean Drama

Since its inception in 1984, Korean television has served as a tool for the state to assert political control and promote dominant ideologies (Kim, 2005). Although state influence has gradually declined with the rise of major media corporations, early Korean dramas were still shaped by male-dominated narratives and limited female representation. As Kim (2005) notes, women held few leadership roles in the media industry and were often portrayed in domestic roles, reflecting the enduring influence of Confucianism, which reinforces hierarchical gender norms (Shim, 1984). Following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Korea shifted its modernization strategy toward exporting popular culture, with government support fueling the global rise of K-dramas (Kim, 2013; Noh, 2022). This state-business partnership mirrors *FLW*'s narrative structure, where private relationships play out in public settings. The cultural liberalization across Asia further accelerated the Korean Wave or *Hallyu* (Kim, 2013).

Despite global success, many dramas continued to portray women as sacrificing their careers for love or suppressing ambition to protect fragile male egos, rooted in traditional gender

expectations. However, co-productions with platforms like Netflix have shifted these dynamics. As Noh (2022) asserted, modern K-dramas often center on romance and melodrama, using emotional intensity and ideological conflict to appeal to global audiences. The rise of “soft masculinity” (Murell, 2019) and more complex gender portrayals reflects broader cultural shifts, both in Korea and internationally. These themes are central to *FLW*, which we now explore through the lens of melodrama in Korean television.

The Melodrama Genre

Peter Brooks’ work, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), has provided a platform for literary debates and studies related to melodrama. While Brooks (1976) acknowledged common features of melodrama such as “the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, action; overt villainy, persecution of the good, and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety”¹ (pp. 11–12), the unique strength of melodrama lies in its capacity to depict intense emotionalism and the representational effects of ethical and ideological conflicts. Additionally, the characteristic trait of soap opera, which has been widely adopted in the continuing serial, is *excess*. Importantly, melodrama has developed into a transnational phenomenon, with its narrative strategy appealing to global audiences (Slifkin, 2014). According to Slifkin (2014), melodrama not only addresses personal wounds but also holds the potential to engage with public and political matters. Meaning, there is an inversion of bringing the private matters into the public sphere.

Despite early criticism, melodrama has not only persisted but evolved alongside shifts from the industrial to the information era. Castells’ (1997) concept of the Network Society illustrates how capitalism, powered by information technologies, now revolves around the exchange of information rather than physical production. Information has become abundant and commodified, altering global media production and consumption (Castells, 1997; Freeman & Louca, 2002). This transformation, emerging in the 1970s amid global economic liberalization, influenced television’s evolution. Rather than replacing melodrama, TV absorbed and capitalized on it, turning viewers into passive consumers drawn to its emotional appeal (Joyrich, 1988). Once associated with feminine domesticity, melodrama has expanded to broader audiences through both daytime and prime-time formats.

TV melodrama simplifies complex realities into relatable narratives, using visual metaphors, rhythmic music, and ideological tension. In the streaming era, it retains serialized structures but shifts focus away from domestic drama, challenging traditional gender roles. In *FLW*, for example, tasks once confined to the private sphere, like emotional support and care, appear in public settings, reflecting broader labor shifts and the growing role of women in the workplace.

Ideological Conflicts: The Fusion Between Tradition and Modernity in Korea

As scholars have asserted about the current complex and somewhat ambivalent nature of Korean society, shaped by the interplay of Confucian values and forces of modernity. This transformation can be traced back to the early interactions with Western ideologies, including the spread of Catholicism and the establishment of women’s schools (Kim, 2005; Shim,

¹ “Breathtaking peripety” from *The Melodramatic Imagination* (Brooks, 1976) refers to a sudden and dramatic reversal of fortune or significant turning point of the plot in the narrative.

1984). Hence, the close contact with Western ideologies has propelled Korean society toward modernization, particularly in the context of women's self-realization and pursuit of independence.

Despite rapid economic development in Korea, persistent gender inequalities continue to thrive within the framework of patriarchal society (Kim, 2013). This phenomenon finds its roots in the enduring influence of Confucianism, which extends beyond moral principles and deeply permeates the political, social, and economic sectors (Kim, 2005). As a result of this inherently male-centric culture, women's presence and influence within media-related governmental committees remain minimum and the repressive narrative of women's representations has shown little sign of change (Kim, 2005; Kim, 2013).

The common conventional approaches in constructing women's images reveal a stark gender imbalance, including the number of women on screen in fewer numbers with less important roles (Kim, 2005). The persistent reinforcement of traditional gender roles is equally striking, as men are often associated with paid work while women are confined to domestic spaces. Women's on-screen presence is predominantly restricted to discussion of personal and family matters, while men engage in non-personal social affairs to make them more professional and prestige. This dichotomy reflects the assigned roles of females and males in society corresponding with the societal expectations for private and public matters. Even as more working women make their appearance in television drama, the depictions are often seriously distorted to portray them as unfeminine and selfish as punishments for their competence and unmarried status. This gender disparity extends to character traits, with male figured presented as reasonable, independent, strong, and dominant, while female characters are presented as emotional, depended, weak, and obedient (Kim, 2005).

The enlightenment period in the 1920s marked the beginning of a transformative awakening among modern Korean women (Shim, 1984). Education played a pivotal role in this modernization. The establishment of Ewha Haktang, the first women's school in the late 19th Century, signified the advent of modern education for Korean women. With rising demand for education, similar schools were funded in major cities across the country, introducing new lifestyles and democratic ideas to young women while fostering critical perspectives on gender inequality (Shim, 1984). In the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, women began to recognize the enduring constraints imposed by patriarchal society, questioning the pervious internalization of the self-sacrifice values rooted in traditional Confucianism.

This coexistence becomes more apparent when examining the contributions of female playwrights. Not until the 1960s did female playwrights begin to emerge (Shim, 1984). One notable figure was Kim Cha-rim, the first professional female writer to address women's issues from a distinct female viewpoint, aiming to provide role models for younger generations (Shim, 1984). Despite her efforts to champion independence and sexual freedom for women, her works often depicted a conflict between the pursuit of self-fulfillment and the restrictions on traditional gender roles. This portrayal resonated with the prevailing practice among male writers in which determined women who assert independence came at a high price (Shim, 1984). In essence, Kim Cha-rim struggled to create a female character who transcends the gender expectation and achieved personal fulfillment in the confines of this patriarchal society. According to Kim (Shim, 1984, p. 217), this was due to "there was no such model in real life".

The lack of real-life representation of independent women in Korean was in contrast with the delineation of female characters by American female playwright at the same period. Megan Terry proposed the notion of strong women as “a creative person who makes decisions and is independent and self-actualizing” (Shim, 1984, p. 165). While it is true that women in Korea historically faced sex-segregation, low employment status, and the societal pressure to marry, the increasing participation of younger women in education and the economy has led to a growing awareness of deeply entrenched biases and gender expectations. These women aspire to pursue individualized lifestyle, which is particularly evident in their changing attitudes toward marriage and the increasing divorce rate. This shift reflects the growing empowerment of women to finally make decisions about their own lives (Kim, 2005).

Nonetheless, media representations of working women continue to face similar challenges as those seen in 1960s playwrights. In Japanese television dramas, for example, a particular model of womanhood portrays women as having to make certain sacrifices to achieve independence (Cho et al., 2015). The emergence of *josei* drama, a genre aimed at women, exemplifies a new frontier in women's on-screen representation. However, it often fails to respect the boundary between a professional woman's public and private life, attributing the romantic failure to women's ambitious in the workplace (Cho et al., 2015). This representation mirrors the everyday dilemma faced by women in Japan who must choose between their career and their family. Japanese women are not the only group that needs to confront this situation; this dichotomous choice between family and workplace is a global issue, particularly in Asian countries like Korea, China, and Japan. In Korea, for example, women's economic activity rate drops from 55.5 percent to 27.7 percent after marriage, and more than half of women exit the labor market after getting married (Kim, 2005). *FLW* dramatizes this social issue by putting its female characters in dilemma of dealing with implicit workplace discrimination and taking on the role of being a wife and a mother to balance family dynamics. However, *FLW* does not merely align with the stereotypical depictions of working women, making it worth examining how the representations of female characters subvert the conventional standards.

The concept of soft masculinity, as a social construct that challenges dominant masculine ideologies, reflects shifting gender roles and serves as a subtle form of rebellion among younger Koreans (Murell, 2019). Closely tied to the rise of the new middle class and the changing role of women, soft masculinity emerges as both a product of and response to evolving family structures and gender norms in Korea (Jung, 2011). Unlike hegemonic masculinity often associated with patriarchy, soft masculinity—blending traditional Korean ideals, Japan's “pretty boy” image, and global metrosexuality—offers a more emotionally expressive, relational model of manhood (Ainslie, 2017; Jung, 2011). As portrayed in *Winter Sonata* (2002), this form emphasizes tenderness, purity, and politeness, extending beyond physical appearance. In *FLW*, male leads Shi-woo and Gi-jun similarly embody these traits through their caring behavior toward women, illustrating that softness does not equate to weakness. The following section applies these theoretical foundations to analyze key incidents in *FLW*.

“No Way of Knowing Until You Confront”

The essence of effective communication depends on the cultivation of mutual respect among communicators transcending defined physical attributes and societal norms. Historically, the public sphere was intricately tied to the ruler during the medieval period (Habermas, 1974). However, as structures of power disintegrated, the “bourgeois public sphere” emerged. This

transformation involved private individuals coming together in a public body to engage in rational critical discourse about matters of public interests (Habermas, 1974). This dissolution of boundaries between private and public corresponds with advocating for the equal relationship between males and females. Therefore, in the ideal public sphere serves crucial functions by providing an open and inclusive arena for debate, a particular democratic communication style that has been supported by Habermas (1974). In this rational force of argument, there are four associated features:

- (i) that nobody who could make a relevant contribution may be excluded; (ii) that all participants are granted an equal opportunity to make contributions; (iii) that the participants must mean what they say; and (iv) that communication must be freed from external and internal coercion so that the “yes” or “no” stances that participants adopt on criticizable validity claims are motivated solely by the rational force of the better reasons. (Habermas, 1998)

This idealized communication and its associated practices are showcased in *FLW* but are confined to the characters’ professional lives. The program demonstrates that the commitment seen in *FLW*, which resonates with the core value of KMA in safeguarding public safety and well-being, can only be realized through the establishment of a democratic atmosphere among characters during their interactions and discussion in workplace.

In the first episode, for instance, following an unsuccessful hail prediction, a heightened concern permeates the atmosphere as Shi-woo raised the question of a potential storm. In the debate between Dong-han, the director in the Gangwon Office, and Shi-woo, the weather reporter at the Metro Office, everyone is encouraged to contribute sound reasoning before reaching a final decision. In the face of compelling arguments on both sides portrayed through the spilt screen in equal division, Hu-kyung chooses to follow the concrete data, deciding against issuing a storm advisory.

Figure 1

Episode 1, Titled “Signal”, Captures the Moment Where Hu-Kyung Has the Decision-Making Power, Debating Between Two Contrasting Arguments



However, she emphasizes the need to keep monitoring the elusive data to make the correct decision. Notably, even as Shi-woo collaborates with Seok-ho, Hu-kyung’s coworker in a relatively managerial position, to send the storm advisory without permission, this incident demonstrates the ideal public sphere for debate and also highlights the conservative, rational, and data-driven leadership style of Hu-kyung.

Despite the normative perception of government work as hierarchical and characterized by top-down management, *FLW* presents a working environment with open and efficient communicational practices. Characters engage in group discussions, share crucial weather-related information, and collectively make decisions. However, a discernable contrast emerges in their personal lives, marked by conflicts, infidelity, secrecy, misunderstandings, and disagreements. This discrepancy also represents the characters' shift from rationality in their professional endeavors to irrationality in their personal lives.

Unpredictable Weather and Dramatic Love

Melodrama relies on dramatic twists—coincidences, revelations, and last-minute rescues—to sustain emotional intensity (Neale, 1986). *FLW* incorporates these elements through key turning points such as the initial cheating incident, Hu-kyung's secret cohabitation, and multiple relationship crises. Episode titles, framed as weather puns, thematically link personal turmoil to workplace dynamics, blurring boundaries between public and private life. This narrative structure both preserves melodrama's unpredictability and challenges traditional dichotomies.

The series opens with Hu-kyung preparing for her wedding while Gi-jun remains emotionally absent, reinforcing gendered expectations that women manage private matters. Her mother's criticism of Gi-jun's passivity reveals dissatisfaction with Hu-kyung's independence, highlighting societal pressure to conform to traditional marital roles. Their engagement, shaped by miscommunication and external coercion, foreshadows relational breakdown and family conflict. Gi-jun's emotional withholding contrasts with idealized open communication, setting the stage for a generational clash over marriage, work, and identity.

Figure 2

Episode 1, Title "Signal", Depicts the Scene Where Hu-Kyung and Her Families Are in the Wedding Shop



Note. Hu-kyung is interrupted and apparently dissatisfied by her mother's complaints toward Gi-jun.

In her formal attire, Hu-kyung embodies the image of a strong, self-actualized woman who is decisive, independent, and logical. When consulted by a coworker about reporting a potential hailstorm, she argues against it using concrete data. However, the juxtaposition of this rational decision-making with scenes of her preparing for her wedding and caring for her unwell fiancé subtly implies that the storm's misprediction is unfairly blamed on her because she is a working woman.

The episode title “Signal” carries dual meaning: the missed meteorological signal and the overlooked signs of infidelity in Hu-kyung’s personal life. Director Ko, head of the Seoul forecast office, fosters open dialogue and collective reasoning—aligning with Habermas’s model of ideal communication. Recognizing Hu-kyung’s potential, he appoints her as team leader after the previous director’s heart attack. Her eventual decision, informed by both rational data and a weather reporter’s intuitive testimony, reflects a communicative environment where reason and expertise are equally valued.

Figure 3

Episode 1, Titled “Signal”, Captures the Moment Where Forecasting Teams Engage in Group Meeting, Deliberating on Whether to Issue a Rainstorm Advisory



In this decisive moment, the screen composition foreshadows Hu-kyung’s leadership style. Director Ko is positioned in the center, facing the screen divided into three parts: the central discussion area, the left side featuring rational arguments supported by Dong-han, and the right side showcasing intuitive reasoning led by Shi-woo. Hu-kyung is seated directly facing the left part of the screen, emphasizing her innate characteristic as a rational working woman. As expected, she chooses to follow the rigid formula again, making the decision based on numbers and refusing to issue a rainstorm alarm.

Confronted with harsh rejection, Shi-woo turns to Seok-ho, Hu-kyung’s coworker responsible for issuing weather alerts. By invoking the past failure to predict hail, Shi-woo persuades Seok-ho to override Hu-kyung’s decision and send the advisory—an act that challenges her authority and reflects the lack of respect from male colleagues. Shi-woo’s emotional response, marked by vulnerability and sensitivity, embodies traits of “soft” masculinity, contrasting with traditional ideals of male stoicism. His phone confrontation with Hu-kyung further reveals his disregard for her leadership, mocking her wedding preparations and implicitly reinforcing gender bias by framing personal commitments as distractions from professional responsibilities. Yet despite his earlier defiance, Shi-woo later redeems himself by securing a forecaster position under Hu-kyung’s team at the headquarters.

Meanwhile, Hu-kyung returns home, exhausted, only to discover Gi-jun’s infidelity—explaining his distant behavior and wedding delays. The twist deepens when it’s revealed that he cheated with Yoo-jin, Shi-woo’s girlfriend, merging professional and personal betrayals. Yoo-jin’s intrusion and Shi-woo’s disrespectful remarks signal the collapse of boundaries between Hu-kyung’s work and domestic life, heightening the melodramatic tension. As these entangled characters now share a workplace, the stage is set for further emotional and relational upheaval.

This opening episode is rich in utilizing unexpected events to bring all the main characters together and sets the stage to blur the boundary between the private and the public in the beginning by showing the entanglements among characters. More importantly, as Hu-kyung's personal affairs are intruded upon, the distinction between workplace and domestic matters begins to erode, providing the space for the program to explore the interconnectedness between these two realms. As this show develops, it becomes clear that private matters can only be resolved by adopting the democratic communication styles through making the problems more visible and seeking the suggestions of others. The melodramatic elements further create a space for conflicts to emerge and evolve, encompassing communication problems, marriage issues, and gender stereotypes.

“Life is a Sequence of Unexpected Events”

The secret relationship between Hu-kyung and Shi-woo blurs the lines between personal and professional life, illustrated through discreet exchanges and hidden affections at work. Their need for secrecy, however, hampers open communication, making it difficult to share genuine feelings or concerns. This becomes evident when Shi-woo's father unexpectedly appears at their workplace seeking financial help, thrusting their private relationship into public view and straining their connection. Simultaneously, Hu-kyung faces mounting pressure from her mother, who is intent on arranging a marriage for her. These familial intrusions and contrasting backgrounds underscore the traditional societal expectations placed on the younger generation, casting their love as unattainable and steeped in hesitation – a hallmark of melodrama.

Yet melodrama thrives on unpredictable twists that continuously pull the couple back together. After learning that Dong-han has taken refuge at KMA to escape family conflict, Shi-woo follows suit, preserving his pride by avoiding Hu-kyung's offer to live with her. This leads to unintended consequences when a director criticizes Hu-kyung for mismanaging her team, as the night-duty room is now unavailable. The narrative lightens as Hu-kyung discovers Shi-woo and Dong-han sleeping in their cars, a moment made humorous by the ironic soundtrack and Shi-woo's earlier lie about housing. This convergence of events reflects melodrama's charm—where even conflict-laden situations offer moments of awkward intimacy and unexpected connection.

Figure 4

Episode 7, Titled “Ozen Warning”, Captures the Moment When Hu-Kyung Discovers Shi-Woo and Dong-Han at the Parking Lot



Note. The cinematography skillfully composes the shot, placing Dong-han in foreground with a subtle out-of-focus effect, while Shi-woo and Hu-kyung remain in the background, all within the same frame.

Dong-han reveals that Shi-woo had been living in his car after being evicted, highlighting his financial struggles. In response, Hu-kyung decisively invites them to live in her apartment, prioritizing efficiency and asserting her authority. This unexpected turn reflects the melodramatic tone of the series while also subverting traditional norms—portraying Hu-kyung as an independent woman who challenges expectations around gender and pre-marital cohabitation.

The mini climax of the program occurs when all central characters are gathered in the same moment with various intentions in Hu-kyung's apartment, effectively serving as a midpoint for the narrative. Feeling incredulous, Hu-kyung's inner thoughts were expressed through her voice-over, acknowledging the unpredictability of life with the phrase "life is a sequence of unexpected events".

Figure 5

Episode 7, Titled "Ozen Warning", Depicts the Mini Climax in Which All Main Characters Have Gathered in Front of Hu-Kyung's Apartment



Note. This scene symbolizes the intrusion into the private sphere, as evidenced by the casual outfits of most characters contrasted with the intruder, Gi-jun, who is in his formal attire. This again blurs the boundaries between home and work, highlighting the interconnectedness of their lives beyond the boundary of the office.

This serves as a self-reflexive recognition of the genre within this program. Viewers are supposed to believe a series of contrivances including how Gi-jun coincidentally ends up drunk on the very day Hu-kyung decides to invite both Shi-woo and Dong-han to live together. They are also expected to accept the unlikely scenario of Seok-ho, Hu-kyung's coworker, happens to be her downstairs neighbor. Additionally, the narrative unfolds the disbelieves as Gi-jun appears in front of HU-kyung's apartment just as Dong-han finishes grooming, Seok-ho returns the side dishes, and Shi-woo steps out of the elevator in the same tense and dramatic moment. Those convergence and the feeling of excessive coincides are exactly the characteristic traits that compose the soap opera. The intricate timing of these events also amplifies the melodramatic nature of the scene, emphasizing the unexpected twists and turns that characterize the lives of the characters in *FLW*.

Variation Zone: Grow Stronger or Fall Apart

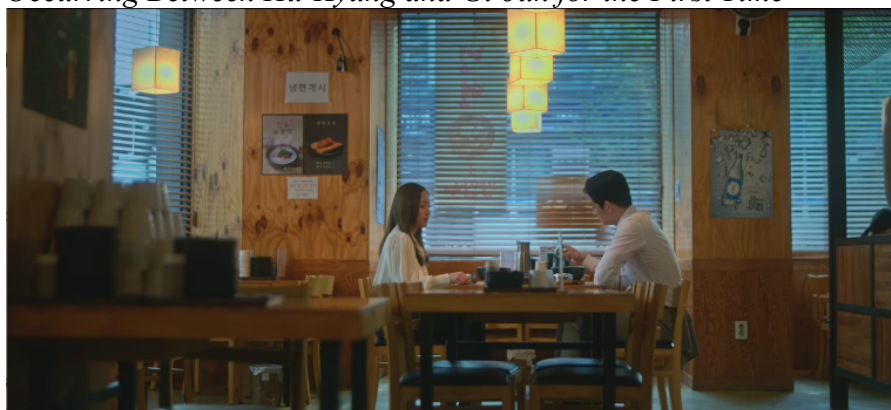
Before the final reunion and happy ending, a series of relationship crises heightens the melodramatic tension. When Hu-kyung assigns Shi-woo to the Jeju Typhoon Center to gain distance and reevaluate their relationship, an unexpected incident lands him in the hospital which was witnessed by Yoo-jin, his former lover, whose presence adds further misunderstanding. The situation escalates when Shi-woo's father storms into KMA, publicly

confronting Hu-kyung and exposing their relationship. His aggressive behavior, rooted in traditional masculinity, starkly contrasts with Hu-kyung's modern independence and symbolizes the ongoing clash between patriarchal dominance and female autonomy. Despite her professional status, Hu-kyung is silenced, revealing how traditional power still suppresses women's voices in moments of conflict.

Ironically, this confrontation becomes a catalyst for growth. Hu-kyung and Gi-jun, now distanced from their failed engagement, begin to connect honestly as friends. Their open dialogue reflects a core theme of *FLW*: resolving ideological conflict through transparency and mutual understanding. Gi-jun confronts his past failures, while Hu-kyung acknowledges her emotional blind spots. In doing so, they foster genuine communication—an overdue but meaningful shift in both their personal lives and evolving identities.

Figure 6

Episode 12, Titled "Variation Area", Reveals the Candid and Open Communication Occurring Between Hu-Kyung and Gi-Jun for the First Time



Reconciliation: Forming the Ideal Public Sphere

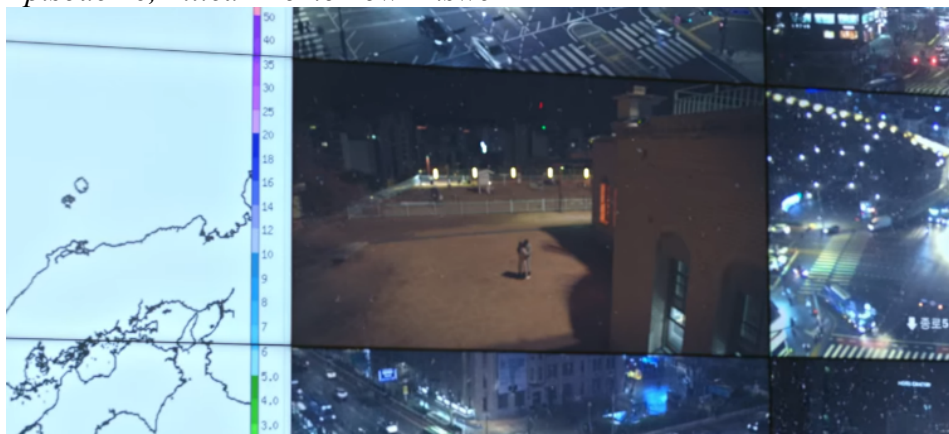
Ultimately, the program concludes with all couples overcoming their previous obstacles, leading to happy endings. The most significant resolution lies in the relationship between Shi-woo and Hu-kyung. In the final moments, they share a tacit understanding, waiting for each other at the same place while the snow falls, which is an implicit reflection of their successful professional work and the completion of their reunion in the private sphere. As they candidly confess their feelings and share a kiss, they also appear in the weather forecasting monitors, symbolizing again the changing era by blurring the conventional separate boundaries.

Figure 7

Episode 16, Titled “Tomorrow Answer”, Captures the Ultimate Reunion and Happy Ending Between Hu-Kyung and Shi-Woo Amidst a Snowfall, Which Implies the Successful Workplace Collaboration in Predicting the Snowy Weather

**Figure 8**

Episode 16, Titled “Tomorrow Answer”



Note: This scene is filmed from the monitor in the weather forecast station, which depicts the precise moment of their reunion, erasing the boundaries between one’s private and public lives.

The concluding scene, just before Hu-kyung and Shi-woo meet each other’s parent, is portrayed in slow motion. This cinematic choice emphasizes the achievement of their ideal environment, where forecasters, workers, and directors engage in meaningful discussions and debates to reach the common goal – providing the most accurate weather prediction. Hu-kyung, who initially started as the inexperienced youngest female leader, undergoes a transformative journey, culminating in her confident declaration, “I’ll tell you tomorrow’s forecast.” This symbolizes not only her ultimate maturity but also the resilience of women in the workplace, earning deserved respect from coworkers and fostering a content relationship.

Figure 9

Episode 16, Titled “Tomorrow’s Answer”, One of the Concluding Scenes Which Captures the Ultimate Maturity and Confidence of Hu-Kyung



Note. This is the direct address where Hu-kyung looks directly into the camera, speaking not just to herself, but to viewers across the nation as an empowered woman. “Tomorrow’s forecast” extends beyond weather predictions in this program; instead, it symbolizes the future empowerment and growing independence of women.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *FLW* challenges traditional gender roles in Korean society and redefines melodrama by blending workplace dynamics with intimate personal narratives. Hu-kyung’s transformation exemplifies the rise of strong, self-actualized women, echoing Megan Terry’s concept of female empowerment. At the same time, the show explores contradictions in family, marriage, and gender expectations, portraying characters who defy societal norms. Its emphasis on ethical communication and information transparency reflects the blurring of public and private spheres in today’s information society, suggesting that open dialogue is key to resolving personal conflicts. Marriage remains a central theme, offering a lens into evolving expectations in Korean culture. The contrast between Shi-woo’s soft masculinity and Hu-kyung’s assertiveness subverts traditional gender dynamics, while the failure and later reconciliation of Gi-jun and Yoo-jin highlight the growing value of equity in relationships. Rather than reducing characters to binaries – rational vs. emotional or strong vs. weak – *FLW* follows their journeys as they seek balance and understanding in complex interpersonal contexts.

By intertwining personal struggles with professional growth, the show demonstrates that resolving private conflicts often depends on stability in public roles. Characters like Donghan and Hu-kyung find resolution through open communication, mirroring the inclusive and deliberative spirit of their workplace. In this way, *FLW* constructs a “public sphere” within personal lives, where candid dialogue becomes a tool for emotional reconciliation. Ultimately, *FLW* contributes meaningfully to contemporary discourse on gender, relationships, and social change in South Korea, offering a nuanced and progressive representation of women and modern life on Korean television.

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Human-Nature Relationships in the *Maccera Tappareng* Tradition: An Ecocritical Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between humans and nature in the Maccera Tappareng tradition of the Bugis community in Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi. Maccera Tappareng is part of the ancestral cultural heritage of the Bugis tribe, especially the Wajo community, which aims to purify the lake and ask for blessings. This research uses the theoretical framework of Literary Ecocriticism with data collection techniques in the form of observation and interviews. The results of interviews conducted using purposive sampling showed that Maccera Tappareng is not only a ritual but also a means of managing the Lake Tempe ecosystem in a sustainable manner. The Maccera Tappareng tradition contains ecological values, which include rules that must be obeyed by fishermen, such as the prohibition on destroying the ecosystem lakes and throwing rubbish in the waters. This shows that the Maccera Tappareng tradition plays a role in managing freshwater fisheries resources in a sustainable manner and strengthening social relations among fishing communities to preserve the environment in Lake Tempe. This study enriches our understanding of the Maccera Tappareng tradition, which is an example of the ecological wisdom of the Bugis community. The implications extend to understanding how to maintain a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, understanding the ecological values contained in the local cultural context as an effort to maintain environmental sustainability, and respecting the power of nature in everyday life.

Keywords: ecocriticism, Maccera Tappareng, ecological wisdom, Bugis community

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Introduction

In recent decades, humans' relationship with nature has increasingly become the focus of academics, practitioners and policy makers around the world (Abas et al., 2022; Mpofu, 2021). The ecological crisis caused by unlimited exploitation of natural resources has triggered climate change, loss of biodiversity and significant environmental degradation. In the midst of these global challenges, it is important to explore and preserve traditional practices that contain ecological values (Gandotra & Agrawal, 2020; Winslow, 2022). One tradition that attracts attention is Maccera Tappareng, a ritual of the Bugis community in South Sulawesi which emphasizes the close relationship between humans and aquatic ecosystems. This tradition is not only a symbol of cultural identity, but also reflects the principles of sustainability which can be valuable lessons in dealing with modern ecological issues (Rahman et al., 2019). South Sulawesi, especially the Bugis tribe, the place where the Maccera Tappareng tradition developed, is one of the areas with high biodiversity in Indonesia (Tabbu & Amrullah, 2022). However, data shows that this region faces serious threats to its aquatic ecosystem. Ministry of Environment and Forestry report, around 30% of the total water area in South Sulawesi experiences moderate to heavy pollution due to human activities such as agriculture, excessive fishing and coastal infrastructure development. At the same time, another report from the Global Mangrove Alliance noted a decline in the area of mangrove forests in this region by 18% in the last decade. This situation emphasizes the importance of studying and applying local wisdom as contained in the Maccera Tappareng tradition to preserve the environment while strengthening cultural identity. The Maccera Tappareng ritual, which literally means “purifying the lake,” is a form of respect for the water resources that have supported people's lives for centuries. However, modernization and globalization have threatened the sustainability of this tradition (Abas et al., 2022). Shifting cultural values among the younger generation as well as economic pressures that encourage the exploitation of natural resources are major challenges (Triadi & Ismoyo, 2022). Previous research by Nasir et al. (2022) shows that the younger generation of the Bugis tend to lack understanding of the symbolic meaning of Maccera Tappareng, which contributes to the weakening of this practice (Nasir et al., 2022). In addition, a study by Mustamin et al. (2016) revealed that the influence of foreign culture through digital media has caused a decline in interest in local traditions (Mustamin et al., 2016). On the other hand, research on Maccera Tappareng is still limited to cultural and anthropological perspectives, without in-depth analysis of its ecological contribution. For example, Nasir et al. (2022) explores these ritual values in the context of strengthening cultural identity, but does not link them to the principles of environmental sustainability (Nasir et al., 2022). This deficiency reflects the gap in the literature in integrating ecocritical approaches, namely studies that highlight the relationship between literature, culture, and the environment (Garrard, 2012; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). This approach is relevant for understanding how ecological values can be translated into practices that support environmental conservation. Most research on local traditions in Indonesia focuses on cultural and social aspects, but does not relate their findings to contemporary ecological challenges. The study by Maulana et al. (2023) on traditional rituals in East Java, for example, identified that such traditions have the potential to support environmental conservation, but the research does not provide sufficient empirical data to support this claim (Maulana et al., 2023). The same thing was found in Syamsuddin et al. (2023) research on the local wisdom of the coastal communities of Sulawesi. The qualitative approach used in this study yields rich insights into cultural values, but does not provide a framework for measuring the ecological impacts of these traditions (Syamsuddin et al., 2023). Moreover, most existing research tends to be descriptive in nature without developing practical solutions for integrating local traditions into environmental policy. For

example, the analysis of Yusuf and Sari (2021) regarding agricultural traditions in Kalimantan only touches on social aspects without discussing how these traditions can be applied to deal with modern problems such as climate change or decreasing water quality. Thus, there is an urgent need for research that combines in-depth analytical methods with practical approaches in supporting the preservation of local traditions (Yusuf & Sari, 2021). This research aims to answer the gap in the literature by analyzing the Maccera Tappareng tradition using Garrard's ecocritical approach. This approach will not only explore the ecological values contained in these traditions, but also explore how these values can be applied in the context of today's environmental challenges (Garrard, 2004). By integrating cultural and environmental analysis, this research is expected to provide a new perspective that goes beyond the limitations of previous research. This research will also use empirical data to evaluate the ecological impact of the Maccera Tappareng practice. This data will be collected through in-depth interviews with ritual practitioners, direct observation, and analysis of related documents. This approach is expected to make a significant contribution in linking local traditions with environmental sustainability strategies, as well as providing practical recommendations for involving local communities in preserving aquatic ecosystems.

Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich literature on the relationship between humans and nature in the context of local traditions. This research also makes an important contribution to the development of an ecocritical approach in cultural studies. Practically, the results of this research can be used by local governments, community organizations, and policy makers to design tradition preservation programs that are in line with environmental sustainability goals. Through in-depth exploration and an innovative analytical approach, this research will not only complement the limitations of previous studies, but also offer new insights that are relevant to facing today's ecological challenges. Thus, the Maccera Tappareng tradition can be recognized as a model of local wisdom that contributes to environmental preservation and sustainable development.

Literature Review

Maccera Tappareng Tradition

The Maccera Tappareng tradition in the Bugis tribe, especially around Lake Tempe in Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi, is a ritual that is closely related to preserving nature and the lives of fishermen. In Bugis language, "Maccera" means offering blood, and "Tappareng" refers to the lake. This ritual involves offering blood to the lake as a form of prayer for the safety of the fishermen and the hope of abundant fish catches. This tradition is not only a ceremony, but also a form of spiritual connection between humans and nature, where the Bugis people believe that lakes are places inhabited by spirits who must be respected and looked after in order to get good results in fishing activities (Syamsuddin et al., 2023). This ritual is carried out as a form of respect and protection for Lake Tempe, which has very important ecological and cultural values for the Bugis people. Blood offerings are carried out by slaughtering animals such as buffalo or cows which are then brought to the lake to be given as a form of gratitude and a request for salvation. The Maccera Tappareng procession is also a symbol of the sustainability of local traditions which reflect ecological values in people's lives. Apart from that, with this ritual, the Bugis people hope that nature will continue to provide prosperity, avoid disasters, and support the survival of fishermen (Khaidir, 2020). The Bugis people also believe that the Maccera Tappareng tradition helps maintain the balance of nature and is a form of local wisdom passed down from generation to generation. The adaptation process in this society shows the importance of ecological knowledge conveyed through

traditional rituals. This also reflects how local culture plays a role in preserving nature and protecting natural resources through norms that have existed for a long time. In Lake Tempe, this tradition is not only a religious ritual, but also a tool for maintaining environmental sustainability and social relations within the Bugis community (Syamsuddin et al., 2023). In modern developments, Maccera Tappareng is also seen as a way to strengthen Bugis cultural identity and become a cultural tourist attraction. The existence of this lake and tradition helps the community to preserve nature while developing a culture-based economic sector. However, the big challenge faced is environmental damage due to deforestation which threatens the sustainability of the lake. Therefore, the sustainability of this tradition is very dependent on nature conservation efforts that continue to be carried out by the community together with the government and related institutions (Rismanto et al., 2024).

Ecocriticism

The term “ecocriticism” was first used by William Rueckert in 1978 to describe the application of ecological principles in the analysis of literary works (Rueckert, 1978). This concept focuses on the relationship between literature and physical reality, and how the two influence each other (Garrard, 2004; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). An ecocritical approach to literature, especially folklore, legends and myths, can be a way to convey local wisdom contained in the culture of a society. This wisdom not only reflects the values adhered to, but also functions as a basis for preserving and protecting the environment, through norms that are not written but are recognized by certain groups (Dumenil, 2022; Faizah, 2024). In this context, oral literature is considered more than just narrative, but rather as a container that stores ecological knowledge that is used by local communities to maintain balance with the natural surroundings (Arianto et al., 2021; Rishma & Gill, 2024). Folklore that depicts humans' relationship with nature can create collective norms that support environmental conservation efforts (Akhter, 2024; Anwar, 2020). Local wisdom contained in oral literature is not only an intellectual heritage, but also a form of ecological knowledge that continues to be passed on from one generation to the next, through a continuous process of cultural adaptation (Bhattacharyya, 2022). Thus, ecocriticism in oral literature opens up insight into how ecological values can be integrated into everyday life.

The Relationship Between Humans and Nature From the Perspective of Local Traditions

The study of the relationship between humans and nature has become one of the main focuses in ecological and cultural studies (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). According to Bhattacharyya (2022), local traditions often reflect ecological principles that support sustainability. This tradition integrates environmental ethical values that are manifested through ritual practices, resource use, and ecosystem management (Bhattacharyya, 2022). Research by Thanakong and Kaowiwattanakul (2024) shows that indigenous traditions can play a role in preserving local ecosystems by reducing overexploitation and strengthening environmental awareness in local communities (Thanakong & Kaowiwattanakul, 2024). In the Indonesian context, Faizah (2024) analyze the representation of nature in the story Jagapati Bumi as a literary environmental study. The results of the analysis show that the myths in this book not only function as entertainment, but also as educational media that instill the values of environmental conservation (Faizah, 2024). This research is relevant as a comparison to examine how the Maccera Tappareng tradition plays a role in preserving aquatic ecosystems in South Sulawesi.

Previous Research on Maccera Tappareng

Research on the Maccera Tappareng tradition is relatively limited and mostly focuses on cultural and historical aspects. The study by Nasir et al. (2022) studied the symbolism in the Maccera Tappareng ritual, with an emphasis on the spiritual meaning and identity of the Bugis community. However, this research does not link this tradition to ecological issues or its potential for sustainability in facing modern challenges (Nasir et al., 2022). Meanwhile, analysis by Khaidir (2020) states that this tradition has ecological components, such as the use of local plants and the prohibition of fish exploitation during rituals (Khaidir, 2020). However, the research did not explore how these values can be applied in the context of environmental sustainability. This research identifies that the Maccera Tappareng tradition has the potential to become a model for culturally based environmental conservation, but no research has yet explored this potential in depth.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. This approach was chosen because it aims to explore in depth the meaning, ecological values and cultural practices of the Maccera Tappareng tradition (Kogen, 2024; Leavy, 2017). This research also adopts an ecocritical framework to connect the cultural and ecological aspects contained in this tradition. This research was conducted in the coastal area of Wajo Regency, South Sulawesi, which is one of the centers for implementing the Maccera Tappareng tradition. This region was chosen because it still practices this tradition actively, even though it is facing modernization pressures. Research participants consisted of local traditional leaders (5 people): Individuals who lead the Maccera Tappareng ritual and have in-depth knowledge of traditional values. Local community members (10 people): Representation of different age groups (older generation, adults and youth) to identify different perspectives on traditions. Environmental observers (3 people): Experts or practitioners who have knowledge of ecological conditions and the relevance of this tradition to environmental conservation. The participant selection technique used purposive sampling with the criteria of direct involvement in traditions and the ability to provide relevant information (Maxwell, 1996). The research instruments used in this study include a semi-structured interview guide, a checklist for observation, and documentation based on Garrard's eco-critical framework (Garrard, 2012). Data for this study were collected using a combination of methods to ensure validity and triangulation of results (Creswell, 2009). Participatory observation involved the researcher engaging directly in the Maccera Tappareng ritual to understand the interaction between the community and the environment, focusing on ecological symbols, local resource utilization, and human interactions with the aquatic ecosystem. Additionally, documentary analysis was used to examine written records, photos, and traditional archives related to the ritual, alongside literature on local traditions and ecological data from government sources.

For data analysis, the study followed Leavy (2017) three-step process. First, data reduction involved summarizing, simplifying, and focusing on aspects relevant to the research objectives. Transcripts were reviewed, and key themes were identified. Second, the reduced data were presented through narratives, tables, and conceptual maps to illustrate the relationships between elements of the Maccera Tappareng tradition and its ecological values. Lastly, conclusions were drawn and verified by comparing data across sources to ensure consistency and validity, with an in-depth analysis of emerging themes based on eco-critical theory (Leavy, 2017).

Results and Discussions

Results

This research explores the relationship between humans and nature in the Maccera Tappareng tradition through analysis based on Greg Garrard's six ecocritical indicators: wilderness, pastoral, apocalypse, dwelling, animism, and ecocentrism. Below are the main findings expressed in detail according to these indicators (Garrard, 2012).

Wilderness: Nature as a Sacred Entity

The wilderness indicator reflects society's view of wild nature as a space that must be respected. In the Maccera Tappareng tradition, the lake Tempe as the main location of the ritual is treated very sacredly. The Bugis people believe that lakes have spiritual entities that must be respected, so any action that disturbs the balance of the ecosystem can invite disaster. For example, before starting the ritual, people usually perform a special prayer led by Sanro (traditional leader) to ask for permission and protection from the lake's guardian spirit. Offerings in the form of local produce such as rice, fish and coconut are provided as a symbol of respect for nature.

Pastoral: Living in Harmony With Nature

Pastoral indicators describe the relationship between humans and nature in simple harmony. In the context of Maccera Tappareng, the Bugis community shows a pattern of interaction that combines human needs and environmental sustainability. For example, the use of natural materials such as bamboo to make *Lawasuji*, a type of bamboo fence in the shape of a rhombus made of woven bamboo that functions to store food / offerings during rituals. *Addudupa-dupang* (incense), Incense is believed by the Bugis community as the main tool in carrying out a tradition, both oral and written traditions. *Lopi-lopi* (boat) which comes from the Bugis language which means boat, is used to transport offerings, ritual leaders or *maccua pakkaja*, and the community who carry it out, all of which are transported to a special location where the maccera tappareng is held which is believed by the surrounding community to be a sacred and sacred place. The flag, which is used as a sign that the surrounding community has carried out the Maccera Tappareng tradition. This tradition encourages a mindset that supports nature conservation while meeting daily needs in a way that does not damage the environment.

Apocalypse: The Ecological Threat That Lurks

Apocalypse indicators reflect the threat of ecological damage caused by human activities. In the Maccera Tappareng tradition, there is concern that modernization can damage the ecosystem and eliminate traditional values. For example, economic pressures have fueled overfishing with destructive gear, such as large trawl nets, that do not adhere to the principles of fish selection based on size and type. This not only threatens the sustainability of fish in the lake Tempe but also violates traditional norms that have been passed down. In addition, water pollution is a real threat to the lake where the ritual takes place. Domestic waste from *Bola Mawang* settlements around the lake, such as plastic and detergent, has changed the water quality. Many respondents stated that the presence of pollution reduces the sacredness of ritual sites, and this makes the Maccera Tappareng tradition face major challenges to remain relevant and effective in preserving the ecosystem.

Dwelling: Human Connectivity and Housing

In the Maccera Tappareng tradition, the lake is not only a place for rituals but also a source of life for the Bugis people, who depend on fishing and irrigation. This ritual reminds people of the importance of maintaining the lake as an integral part of their living space. For example, during the dry season, people use lake water to irrigate rice fields, but they still comply with traditional rules not to drain the water excessively.

Animism: Belief in Life in Nature

Animism indicators reflect the belief that every natural element has a spirit or life. In the context of Maccera Tappareng, the Bugis people believe that the lake *Tempe* has a spiritual “guardian” who is called by a certain name. This belief makes them very careful in interacting with the lake. For example, there are restrictions on using chemicals or cutting certain plants around the lake without ritual permission. Animist practices are also seen in the special prayers recited during Maccera Tappareng. This prayer is addressed to the guardian spirit of the lake to ask for blessings, protection and continuity of life for the community. This shows that humans' relationship with nature is not only material but also spiritual, where every action towards nature is carried out with awareness of the existence of non-human entities within it.

Ecocentrism: Sustainability as Main Focus

In the Maccera Tappareng tradition, the Bugis community has local wisdom that upholds environmental sustainability. For example, during the ritual, they only catch fish that are suitable for harvest, while small fish or those deemed “not yet ready” are released back into the lake. This practice shows a deep understanding of natural resource regeneration. Ecocentric values are also visible in education for the younger generation. Children are invited to participate in the ritual with the aim of introducing them to the values of sustainability. For example, children are taught how to make offerings from local ingredients such as coconut or banana, while also being given an understanding of the importance of protecting the lake ecosystem. This shows that the Maccera Tappareng tradition not only functions as a traditional ceremony but also as a tool for cross-generational ecological education.

Discussions

The Relevance of Ecocriticism in the Local Tradition of Maccera Tappareng

The results of this research confirm that the Maccera Tappareng tradition is not just a traditional ritual, but a real manifestation of the relationship between humans and nature in Bugis culture. Findings regarding the concept of lake sacredness (wilderness) show a deep respect for nature as an entity that goes beyond its ecological function. These results are in line with the views of Garrard (2004) who emphasizes that wilderness is the core of environmental sustainability because people understand nature as part of their spirituality. Thus, this tradition enriches discussions in ecocriticism about how local culture can contribute to environmental conservation through an approach based on traditional values (Garrard, 2004).

Ecological Harmony and Local Adaptation

Pastoral indicators in this tradition reflect harmony between humans and nature, where the material needs of society do not damage the ecosystem. Local wisdom such as restrictions on modern fishing gear is proof that the Bugis community has a sustainability-based adaptation mechanism to the environment. These findings are in line with research by Alvi et al. (2019) who stated that traditional communities have a local ecological knowledge system which functions to maintain natural balance (Alvi et al., 2019). Thus, the Maccera Tappareng tradition can be a model in developing a community-based approach to environmental conservation.

Ecological Challenges Due to Modernization

Discussions regarding apocalypse indicators reveal that modernization and unsustainable economic practices are a real threat to the lake ecosystem which is the center of this tradition. The findings regarding pollution and overfishing in the lake are in line with research by Rishma and Gill (2021), which shows that economic pressures often push local communities to abandon sustainable practices. Therefore, it is important to integrate modern policies that support conservation while still considering traditional values as the basis for regulations (Rishma & Gill, 2024).

Spirituality and Human Relationship With Nature

Findings about dwelling and animism highlight the connection between humans, dwelling, and spirituality. Belief in a spiritual entity that protects the lake provides an ethical basis for the Bugis people to protect their environment. This supports the argument of Mwale and Yahya who emphasize that spiritual values are often the main motivation for environmental conservation in indigenous communities (Mwale, 2023; Yahya et al., 2012). In this context, Maccera Tappareng provides an example of how spirituality can be the main catalyst for changing human behavior towards the environment.

Educational Value in Local Traditions

This tradition also shows that cross-generational education plays an important role in maintaining sustainable values. The findings regarding children's participation in rituals reflect the process of inheriting ecological values, which is in line with Murti (2019) views on the importance of experience-based education to create critical consciousness (Murti, 2019). Thus, the Maccera Tappareng tradition can be adopted as an inspiration for integrating environmental education into the formal curriculum in the region.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This research fills the gap in ecocritical studies which previously tended to ignore the role of local traditions in supporting ecological sustainability. Previous studies focused on literature and art, while this research shifts attention to direct cultural practices. By connecting Garrard's ecocritical indicators with local traditions, this research expands the scope of ecocriticism into the realm of anthropology and culture (Garrard, 2012). Theoretically, this research provides evidence that the concept of ecocriticism can be applied to analyze local culture, expanding its relevance beyond literary studies (Arseniev, 2021; Mu & Ma, 2024). Practically, the Maccera Tappareng tradition can be an inspiration in designing culture-based

environmental policies, especially in regions with a high level of cultural plurality such as Indonesia. This research also highlights the need for collaboration between government, indigenous communities and academics in creating a holistic approach to environmental conservation based on local wisdom. This discussion shows how Maccera Tappareng is able to answer research questions by providing evidence that this tradition not only maintains cultural values, but also makes a real contribution to environmental preservation amidst the challenges of modernization.

Conclusions

This research shows that the Maccera Tappareng tradition is a real representation of the meaningful relationship between humans and nature, as analyzed through Garrard's ecocritical indicators. This tradition combines elements of spirituality, ecological harmony and intergenerational education to create a model of environmental sustainability based on local culture. The findings show that the Bugis people view the lake *Tempe* as a symbol of sacredness (wilderness), a place that not only provides material benefits but also high spiritual value. This tradition also promotes ecological (pastoral) harmony through practices that limit overexploitation of natural resources. However, modernization and environmental challenges such as pollution and overfishing threaten the continuity of the values contained in this tradition. This reflects the relevance of the apocalypse indicator, where threats to the ecosystem also test the resilience of local culture in facing changing times. Overall, this research emphasizes the importance of involving cultural perspectives in the study of ecocriticism and environmental conservation.

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Effects of Adolescents' Fandom Activities on Smartphone Dependence Focusing on the Mediating Effects of Depression

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Abstract

Adolescents' fandom activities are being recognized as activities with important cultural characteristics, and their fandom activities were found to have a great influence on their emotional and mental state and growth. The purpose of this study was to examine how adolescents' fandom activities affect their dependence on smartphones, and to examine whether the negative psychological state of depression mediates fandom activities and smartphone dependence. In this study, data from the 3rd year of the Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey 2018 (KCYPS 2018) longitudinal panel established by the National Youth Policy Institute (NYPI) were used. This study included 1,088 adolescents who answered positively to the question 'Do you have a favorite celebrity or athlete?'. Descriptive statistical analyses and mediating effect analysis was used to achieve the purpose of this study. In Conclusion, First, it was confirmed that the effect of fandom activities on depression had a positive significant effect, which means that the more active the fandom activities, the higher the depression of adolescents. Second, fandom activities have a positive effect on smartphone dependence, which means that as fandom activities increase, adolescents' dependence on smartphones also increases. Finally, it was confirmed that there is a mediating effect of depression on the effect of fandom activities on smartphone dependence. Based on the results of this study, social welfare implications were proposed.

Keywords: fandom activities, smartphone dependence, depression, adolescents

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Introduction

Fandom activities are important cultural activities for teenagers, and belonging to and working as a member of the fandom becomes an activity factor that has an important influence on the process of forming their identity. According to previous studies, fandom is a comprehensive concept that includes cultural practices and cultural consumption groups that are formed by gathering individual fans through a specific stardom. It is characterized by “spontaneity,” which allows for the continual reproduction of signs and discourses about stars, as well as all related cultural phenomena mediated by fan activities (Lee, 2015; Oh & Kim, 2022).

Fandom activities, especially among adolescents, show great interest in popular culture and celebrities, and affect many aspects of their overall lives. It acts as an important factor in the process of forming adolescents' companionship and self-identity and also provides a space and opportunity to relieve various needs for recognition and belonging (An et al., 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018; Paik, 2015; Yoon, 2017). In addition, it has been found that through the process of relieving the stress from life and admiring the same star, they fully felt catharsis and fellowship and increased their satisfaction with life by forming relationships with peers and peers (Na, 2017). In other words, it was found that they experience a strong bond and a sense of belonging through fandom activities, experience strong recognition and attachment from others who have intimate relationships, form self-identity, and give the meaning of their existence (An et al., 2013). Recently, it has been shown that the influence of fandom activities on the formation of job views, external values, and beliefs has been remarkable, and through this, fandom activities are an important component of life activities for adolescents (Oh & Kang, 2018).

Meanwhile, since the 2000s, as the Internet and online communication became active, the focus of fandom activities began to shift from offline to online (Son, 2013). Online fandom activities have increased the use of media such as mobile phones and computers, and these media have been used as tools to strengthen online fandom activities (Seo & Yang, 2014). Among these various media, smartphones are by far the most accessible to teenagers, especially. Even now, most idol fans enjoy broadcasting and videos of their favorite celebrities through various online communities and apps including X (Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, and communicate with them through live broadcasts. In other words, fans are most easily obtaining information on objects they are interested in through smartphones. Furthermore, they search and download secondary products about their stars through smartphones and easily create secondary creations and share them with others (G. W. Kim, J. W. Kim, & Park, 2009). In addition, there have been major changes in the aspect of entertainment contents targeting the youth after the COVID-19 pandemic, the biggest change among which is that the main stage of activities has been moved from offline to online. Before the pandemic, offline activities such as concerts, fan signings, and fan meetings were prominent, but after the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus was forced to be on online activities. As a result, online concerts were largely activated, and online video call activities and live communication and communication centered on SNS within the fandom were carried out. The activation of these online fandom activities has led to changes in the peer relationship patterns and participation in the play culture of adolescents. For adolescents, and celebrities have more meaning than just objects of longing and are also used as tools to influence their self-identity formation while also escaping from their reality. As a result, it is a natural phenomenon that the dependence on mobile phones is also strong as the stimulation of adolescents to focus on online fandom activities has increased.

For adolescents, mobile phones are both a tool to express themselves and a tool that has the meaning of a cultural space that shares peer culture (Lee & Kang, 2007), so it is easy to lead to excessive use and dependence. Studies on excessive use of mobile phones have used the term “cell phone addiction” (Cho, 2009), where “cell phone addiction” means experiencing discomfort in real life due to excessive use of mobile phones without any clear purpose, and being unable to control them, and using them dependently and compulsively (Lee & Myung, 2007). This over-dependence leads to obsession with cell phone use while experiencing physical, psychological, and social maladjustment, feeling satisfaction when used more and more often, and experiencing extreme anxiety when stopped (Jeong & Lee, 2020). According to a study by Kim and Jo (2019), “cell phone dependence” refers to a phenomenon of showing an anxious reaction when a cell phone is not available, and psychological dependence on an object called a cell phone with psychological stability and feeling separation anxiety from a cell phone. Although the degree of behavior can be considered to be lower than addiction, previous studies have shown that mobile phone use and dependence act as a factor that hinders the healthy development of adolescents (Bae et al., 2020).

On the other hand, adolescence is the period of greatest psycho-emotional growth and change in the entire life cycle, so it is also a period of psycho-emotional weakness, and experiencing psycho-emotional stability increases the likelihood of having a healthy life throughout life. As such, it is necessary to study various approaches for psycho-emotional stability and health in adolescence, and academia has discussed the factors affecting adolescents' psychology and emotions by classifying them into personal factors, family and school factors, and social factors. However, the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred after 2019 and the advent of the un-tact era due to the pandemic have caused individual adolescents to experience psycho-emotional difficulties and greatly changed the form of culture that the youth group has pursued. Since the late 2019 pandemic, social distancing has been implemented due to the coronavirus pandemic, and as opportunities and areas for outside activities have been greatly reduced, people are more likely to release energy in life by anti-compulsory measures (Joo et al., 2021). In addition, adolescents were limited to indoor and outdoor physical activities, school life, and activities with peers, which soon acted as a factor leading to social isolation, negatively affecting adolescents' physical, social, and psychological adaptation (Jang, 2021).

In particular, social distancing and quarantine due to COVID-19 have been strengthened, and the psychological and emotional health of adolescents has begun to emerge as a social problem. According to previous studies, while adolescents' happiness has decreased due to COVID-19, negative psychological and emotional factors such as depression, social atrophy, attention deficit, and hyperactivity disorder have increased. Students' overall satisfaction with school life has decreased due to the formation of companionship and difficulty in communicating with peer relations due to school restrictions, and there is also a concern about the deterioration of social and relationship formation ability (Kim & Park, 2021; Park, 2021). In addition, according to the results of a survey conducted by the ChildFund Korea (2021), the risk group of depression among adolescents after COVID-19 reached 43.2% of the total, indicating that it is necessary to take a closer look at Corona Blue among adolescents.

On the one hand, it can be seen that fandom activities and depression act as mutually influencing factors through previous studies that examined the motivation or motivation to start fandom activities and previous studies that analyzed the negative effects of fandom activities (Oh & Kang, 2018). In particular, negative psychological states such as depression were found to have various effects on adolescents' concentration on fandom activities.

According to previous studies examining the motivation for starting fandom activities, negative psycho-emotional states are affecting the degree of immersion in fandom activities (Oh & Kang, 2018). It can be seen that various psychological factors, especially negative psychological states, are intertwined with adolescents' fandom activities through the fact that low self-esteem and low life satisfaction are linked to fandom activities, that adolescents' participation in fandom activities is an important component of life activities, and that fandom activities have a great influence on adolescents' companionship, self-identity formation, and resolution of various needs for recognition. Therefore, through this study, we want to examine how adolescents' fandom activities have affected their dependence on smartphones, and at the same time, we want to examine how the negative psychological state of depression plays a mediating role between online fandom activities and smartphone dependence.

The research problems of this study are as follows:

1. Do adolescents' fandom activities affect their dependence on smartphones?
2. Does depression mediate the relationship between adolescents' fandom activities and smartphone dependence?

Method

Subject of Study

In this study, data from the 3rd year of the Korean Children and Youth Panel Survey 2018 (KCYPs 2018) longitudinal panel established by the National Youth Policy Institute (NYPI) were used. The time of investigation is 2020, which is a pandemic situation. KCYPs 2018 is a longitudinal panel for confirming the growth and development of children and adolescents, and sampling was allocated in proportion to the number of students in 17 cities and provinces, and sample schools were selected at random by classifying co-educational. This study included 1,088 adolescents who answered positively to the question 'Do you have a favorite celebrity or athlete?'

Research Tool

Smartphone Dependence

The self-diagnosis scale for smartphone addiction by Kim et al. (2012) was used. There were 15 questions, and 3 questions were reverse-coded. From "not at all (1)" to "very much (5)," the higher the score, the higher the dependence on smartphones.

Fandom Activities

This scale was adapted by revising and supplementing the items related to fandom activities by Kim et al. (2020). Fandom activities consist of 5 questions for online activities and 4 questions for offline activities. Responses are asked from 'not at all' to 'multiple times a week', and the higher the score, the higher the degree of participation in fandom activities.

Depression

This study used the 10 questions depression scale from the simple psychiatric Diagnosis Test developed by Kim et al. (1984). Each question of depression consists of a Likert 4-point scale

from “not at all (1)” to “very much (4),” and the higher the score, the more severe the degree of depression is with an average of 10 questions.

Others

Variables known to affect smartphone dependence in previous studies were input as control variables. They are gender, self-esteem, parental attitude, and peer relations. Gender was converted to male adolescents 0 and female adolescents 1. Self-esteem was measured using a scale developed by revising and supplementing the existing questions of Kim et al. (2020), who adapted and used the original items from Rosenberg (1965). Four negative questions out of 10 questions were reverse-coded. The higher the score, the higher the self-esteem. For the parenting attitude, 24 questions on the Korean version of the motivational model for adolescents by Kim and Lee (2017) were used. The 12 questions representing negative parenting attitudes were inverse-scored, and the higher the average, the more positively adolescents perceive the parenting attitude. For the friend relationship, 13 questions on the peer relationship quality scale of Bae et al. (2015) were used. Five questions measuring negative relationships were reverse-coded, and the higher the score, the more positive the peer relationship was.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to understand the demographic background of the subjects and the characteristics of the main variables, and then the correlation between the main variables was confirmed. Finally, a mediating effect analysis was conducted to confirm the effect of fandom activities on smartphone dependence and the mediating effect of depression. SPSS 22.0 and process macro 4.0 were used.

Results of Analysis

General Characteristics of Survey Subjects

Demographic and sociological characteristics are shown in “Table 1.” Male adolescents accounted for 45.2% and female adolescents 54.8%. As for the residential area, 51.4% were in the metropolitan area and 48.6% were outside the metropolitan area, which was 2.8% higher in the metropolitan area. The average monthly household income was 51.3% for more than 5 million won, 19.9% for more than 4 million won-less than 5 million won, and 16.4% for less than 3 million won-4 million won, indicating that the income level of respondents was generally high. The education level of fathers and mothers is 70.6% and 68.4% for those who graduated from college or higher, respectively. The types of fandom activities in which adolescents mainly participate are viewing and uploading photos and videos (53.7%), SNS, and blogs, commenting (36.3%), fan club/fan cafe activities (21.5%), books, CDs, DVDs, and photo books (16.2%), and making or purchasing goods (14.0%). It was confirmed that online participation was more active than offline activities.

As a result of conducting a basic analysis with the correlation of major variables (Table 2), it was confirmed that fandom activities, smartphone dependence, and depression were positively correlated ($p < .001$), and all were normally distributed.

Table 1
General Characteristics of the Study Subjects

Classification	People (%)	Classification	People (%)
gender	male 492(45.2)	fan club/fan cafe activities	234(21.5)
	female 596(54.8)	Writing fan letters, sending messages	64(5.9)
Residence Area	the metropolitan area 559(51.4)	Fandom activities (online)	Commenting on social media, blogs, etc 395(36.3)
	outside the metropolitan area 529(48.6)		View and upload photos and videos 584(53.7)
Household Income	Less than 2 million won 53(4.9)	Fandom activities (offline)	Making or purchasing goods 152(14.0)
	More than 2 million won - less than 3 million won 82(7.5)		Attending the fan meeting 5(.5)
	More than 3 million won - less than 4 million won 178(16.4)		going to a broadcasting station /performance hall/event hall, etc 50(4.6)
	More than 4 million won - less than 5 million won 217(19.9)		Send a gift 19(1.7)
	More than 5 million won 558(51.3)		Buy books, CDs, DVDs, and photo books 176(16.2)
father's educational level	a high school graduate or lower 276(25.4)	mother's educational level	a high school graduate or lower 324(29.8)
	a college graduation or higher 768(70.6)		a college graduation or higher 744(68.4)
	Not sure/not applicable 44(4.0)		Not sure/not applicable 20(1.8)

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Key Variables

variable	Correlation Analysis						
	Fandom activities	Depression	Smart phone dependence	Gender	self-esteem	Parenting attitude	peer relationship
Fandom activities	1	.110***	.126***	.343***	-.051	.042	.120***
Depression		1	.296***	.081**	-.615***	-.378***	-.391***
Smart phone dependence			1	.091**	-.269***	-.319***	-.269***
Gender				1	-.044	.061*	.106***
self-esteem					1	.459***	.449***
parenting attitude						1	.452***
peer relationship							1

$n = 1,088$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Mediating Effects of Depression in the Relationship Between Fandom Activities and Smartphone Dependence

We analyzed the effect of fandom activities on depression (model 1), confirmed the direct effect of fandom activities on smartphone dependence (model 2), and finally confirmed the mediating effect of fandom activities and depression on smartphone dependence (model 3).

First, it was confirmed that the effect of fandom activities on depression had a positive significant effect ($\beta = .07$, $p < .001$), which means that the more active the fandom activities, the higher the depression of adolescents. Next, it was analyzed that fandom activities have a positive effect on smartphone dependence ($\beta = .08$, $p < .001$), which means that as fandom activities increase, adolescents' dependence on smartphones also increases. Finally, it was confirmed that there is a mediating effect of depression on the effect of fandom activities on smartphone dependence ($\beta = .11$, $p < .001$). Bootstrap was conducted to confirm whether the magnitude of the indirect effect of the mediating model was statistically significant (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). As a result, it was confirmed that the Direct effect (.073), Indirect effect (.008), and Total effect (.081) were all significant. Taken together, it is judged that when adolescents' fandom activities increase, depression increases and their dependence on smartphones increases.

Table 3

Mediating Effects of Depression in the Effects of Fandom Activities on Dependence on Smartphones

[model 1] Fandom Activities -> Depression				[model 2] Fandom Activities -> Dependence on Smartphones				[model 3] Fandom Activities · Depression -> Dependence on Smartphones			
B(se)		t		B(se)		t		B(se)		t	
constant	4.74	0.13	36.03***	constant	3.69	0.13	28.41***	constant	3.16	0.19	16.53***
Gender	0.06	0.03	1.96	Gender	0.07	0.03	2.47*	Gender	0.07	0.03	2.26*
self-esteem	-0.67	0.04	-18.11***	self-esteem	-0.10	0.04	-2.72**	self-esteem	-0.03	0.04	-0.61
parenting attitude	-0.13	0.04	-3.27**	parenting attitude	-0.26	0.04	-6.61***	parenting attitude	-0.24	0.04	-6.25***
peer relationship	-0.21	0.04	-5.05***	peer relationship	-0.19	0.04	-4.56***	peer relationship	-0.16	0.04	-3.97***
Fandom activities	0.07	0.02	3.54***	Fandom activities	0.08	0.02	4.12***	Fandom activities	0.07	0.02	3.72***
								Depression	0.11	0.03	3.70***
R ²	0.41			R ²	0.16			R ²	0.17		
F	151.96***			F	40.32***			F	36.28***		

$n=1,088$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4

Verifying the Significance of Mediating Effects (bootstrap)

Classification	Effect	se	LLCI	ULCI
Direct effect	.073	.0196	.034	.111
Indirect effect	.008	.0035	.002	.016
Total effect	.081	.0196	.042	.119

Figure 1

Mediating Effects of Depression in the Effects of Fandom Activities on Dependence on Smartphones



Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how adolescents' fandom activities affect their dependence on smartphones, and to examine whether the negative psychological state of depression mediates fandom activities and smartphone dependence. As mentioned in the introduction, adolescents' fandom activities are being recognized as activities with important cultural characteristics, and their fandom activities were found to have a great influence on their emotional and mental state and growth. Therefore, it is judged that extensive research on adolescents' fandom activities should be continued in the future. The conclusion of this study is as follows. In addition, fandom activities are a culture that has already been established in the youth generation, and due to the development of media, it is a social phenomenon that youth can easily access through the Internet and smartphones. Therefore, rather than forcibly controlling the use of smartphones, social support should be provided so that it can be a positive activity to relieve various stresses in life and strengthen a sense of belonging and solidarity through peer relationships (Na, 2017).

Second, it was confirmed that depression increases as fandom activities increase, and these results are consistent with the research results of Oh and Kang (2018). However, there is a limit to uncovering the specific process and reason for fandom activities to be linked to adolescents' negative mental state, that is, depression, through the results of this study. Since it is difficult to materialize the cause only with quantitative research, it is judged that it is necessary to investigate and study it later, including qualitative research methods.

Third, it was confirmed that depression mediates the process of fandom activities on smartphone dependence. There are positive aspects of fandom activities, such as experiencing a sense of bond and belonging in relationships with peers and forming self-identity, but it has been confirmed that excessive immersion in fandom activities can have a negative effect on increasing the negative psychology of depression and strengthening dependence on smartphones. It is necessary to conduct education on the psychological emotions and use of smartphones of adolescents who engage in fandom activities, and to conduct campaigns so that adolescents can recognize the mechanisms and risks of being excessively immersed in fandom activities in online spaces such as the Internet and smartphones. In order to increase access to campaigns for adolescents, it will be necessary to conduct related campaigns on online media where they often work. It is also necessary to approach the depression of adolescents from various perspectives. In addition to providing individual counseling services for adolescents, a wide range of youth depression solutions should be presented, including

changes in the perception of social members to alleviate youth depression and institutional improvement to bring about the creation of a youth-friendly environment.

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Evolving Identities: A Spatio-Temporal Analysis of Slovenian Urban Morphology and Architectural Design

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Abstract

This research investigates the evolution of contemporary morphological and architectural patterns in Slovenia, Europe, aiming to understand how to regulate future development to strengthen spatial identity through design. While traditional architecture has long been a focus, this research expands to post-World War II typologies, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between historical and contemporary urban forms. A novel method, the “Mappi Method,” utilizes Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to analyze morphological patterns and identify key elements contributing to a strong sense of place. By applying this method to a comprehensive dataset of Slovenian settlements, we aim to uncover insights into the spatial characteristics that define Slovenian spatial identity by design. The findings will have significant implications for urban planning, architectural design and heritage conservation. By identifying essential elements of Slovenian spatial identity, we can develop evidence-based strategies to guide future development and preserve cultural heritage. The results can inform national spatial planning policies, local development plans and professional guidelines for architects and urban planners, as well as contribute to the development of curricula in secondary and university programmes. In the long term, this research aims to contribute to a more sustainable and culturally sensitive approach to urban development in Slovenia. By identifying key elements of Slovenian spatial identity, we provide a valuable tool for policymakers, planners and designers. Additionally, applying the “Mappi Method” to other cultural contexts can advance our understanding of how spatial patterns shape cultural identity and inform sustainable urban development worldwide.

Keywords: place identity, identity by design, architecture, urban design, morphology

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Introduction

The concept of spatial identity, closely linked to the *genius loci* or spirit of place, remains a central concern in contemporary urban design and planning theory. It relates to the visual, functional and symbolic coherence of built environments that reflect local culture, history and landscape (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Relph, 1976). In the Slovenian context, spatial identity has long been embedded in traditional architectural and settlement forms, shaped by regional materiality, topography and climate (Drozg, 1995; Fister et al., 1993). However, recent decades have witnessed a growing disconnection between these inherited spatial logics and contemporary development patterns, raising critical questions about the resilience and transformation of spatial identity under new urbanization pressures.

Post-World War II developments, particularly in the second half of the 20th century, introduced standardized building typologies and planning practices that often disregarded local context in favor of efficiency and functionality (Fikfak et al., 2023; Pogačnik, 1996). More recently, the influence of global architectural trends, commodification of space and deregulated land use policies have led to increasingly fragmented and visually incoherent environments (Grom, 2022; Gantar et al., 2021). These shifts have resulted in a tension between tradition and transformation, where spatial identity is neither lost nor preserved in linear ways but reconfigured through overlapping morphological patterns.

Despite policy-level aspirations to maintain or strengthen spatial identity (such as those articulated in the *Strategija prostorskega razvoja Slovenije*, SPRS, 2004), there remains a lack of systematic tools to assess how contemporary architectural and urban forms contribute to or erode spatial distinctiveness. While previous research has extensively documented traditional urban and architectural typologies (e.g., Melik, 1960; Fister, 1993), fewer efforts have focused on integrating these insights with spatial data analytics and post-2000 morphological change detection.

To address this gap, this paper presents findings from the development and application of the “MAPPI Method” (*Metoda za ugotavljanje Arhitekturno Pogojene Prostorske Identitete*), a novel approach to identifying, classifying, and evaluating spatial identity through both quantitative (GIS-based) and qualitative (field-based) methods. By analysing a broad dataset of Slovenian settlements and cross-referencing historical and current urban forms, the method allows us to investigate not only where identity persists, but how it evolves and what design features contribute to its continuity or disruption.

The aim of this paper is to present how the identification of the key morphological and architectural elements that shape the spatial identity of Slovenian settlements is foreseen through the newly developed Mappi approach and how such methodological framework may be capable of informing future planning, architectural design, heritage management and education. The paper contributes to a growing body of knowledge on adaptive regionalism and culturally sensitive spatial development (Frampton, 1983; Lefaivre & Tzonis, 2012) and offers tools to balance the needs of transformation with the imperative of place-rooted continuity.

Methods

Research Objectives and Approach

This study applies a mixed-method approach that integrates spatial analysis, architectural typology assessment and GIS-based morphometric methods to examine how built form contributes to spatial identity across Slovenian settlements. The objective is to identify spatial patterns and architectural characteristics that reinforce or erode local and regional distinctiveness, particularly in the post-WWII era.

The MAPPI Method

To support systematic assessment, the Method for determining Architecturally Conditioned Spatial Identity (in Slovene – Metoda za ugotavljanje Arhitekturno Pogojene Prostorske Identitete - MAPPI) was developed. This method offers a novel, scalable framework that integrates:

- GIS-based quantitative analysis of settlement morphology,
- qualitative fieldwork to capture design characteristics based on digital on-site qualitative and qualitative mapping, and
- temporal typologization of built structures into pre-1970, 1970–2004, and post-2004 categories.

MAPPI was designed to bridge the scales of architectural and urban analysis. Its goal is to identify and evaluate “morphological units” (MEs) based on both physical structure and their embedded spatial identity indicators.

Data Sources

For the GIS-based quantitative analysis of settlement morphology analyses that were done in the office, the gGeospatial datasets from the Surveying and Mapping Authority of the Republic of Slovenia (GURS) were used, among others:

- building footprints, construction years and building heights,
- historical typological studies, such as those by Fister et al. (1993), and regional classifications from the Slovenian architectural landscape framework.

Additionally the on-site fieldwork in selected settlements across the country were done, in order to record attributes such as facade treatment, roof forms, materials and stylistic elements.

Analytical Workflow

The MAPPI method unfolds in the following principal stages:

- preliminary GIS-based clustering,
- morphological patterns were detection based on four spatial dimensions: year of construction, building footprint, height and volumetric size. Clustering was performed using algorithms, which allowed differentiation of distinct spatial regimes,
- typological classification - each cluster was interpreted through architectural typologies: traditional, standardized single-family (post-war) and multi-unit typologies.

Based on the insights from the analyses of GURS collected datasets using Mappi method, the data from the field work was integrated (architectural and other spatial characteristics were verified through systematic fieldwork using QField and QGIS, recording 41 architectural attributes per building).

Synthesis of morphotypes is the next step - overlays of clustered spatial data and qualitative field indicators were used to define representative morphological entities (MEs), each bearing distinctive identity traits. Each ME was classified by its contribution to spatial identity: TVG – Traditional, OK – Standardized, and ROP – Variegated or eroded pattern. In the last step comparative and temporal analyses were done and the results were interpreted across multiple settlements to identify spatial and temporal patterns, deviations and identity shifts.

Results

Identification of Morphological Patterns

The application of MAPPI revealed three dominant typologies of the morphological tissues within Slovenian settlements:

- A) TVG – Traditional morphologies: found in historical cores and older settlement extensions, these areas exhibit coherent spatial composition, morphological pattern and architectural elements, they are aligned with regional topographies and socio-cultural practices,
- B) OK – Standardized morphologies: predominantly post-WWII developments characterized by repetition, simplified layouts and functionally driven design. These morphologies divert from traditional local identity but follow consistent structural patterns,
- C) ROP – Variegated morphologies: emerged in the neoliberal era, these areas are marked by fragmented urban tissue, stylistic discord, and weakened place identity. Visual clutter and loss of morphological coherence are dominant features.

Spatial Distribution and Temporal Shifts

Traditional cores (TVG) remain present but are increasingly interfered by both OK and ROP patterns. The 1970–2004 period largely introduced standardized forms that prioritized function and cost-efficiency, resulting in spatial homogeneity and erosion of regionally distinctive characteristics. Post-2004 developments further amplified the fragmentation, introducing market-driven designs often disconnected from place context.

Elements of Spatial Identity

This study and namely its field work is ongoing and aims to understand the state of the art across the whole national territory, however it is possible to preliminarily list the most important elements that contribute (or not) to preserved spatial identity. Among other the list includes:

- building placement and orientation within the plot,
- typology-consistent roofscape,
- continuity of material usage and facade articulation,
- scale and proportionality within local context,
- and last but not least: integration of open/public spaces within settlement fabric.

Discussion

Interpreting the Patterns: Spatial Identity in Transition

The findings of this research highlight a complex and dynamic transformation of Slovenian urban morphology and architectural character. The coexistence of traditional (TVG), standardized (OK), and variegated (ROP) morphologies demonstrates how spatial identity is negotiated across time, policy and design paradigms. While TVG areas continue to anchor identity through recognizable formal, material and locational attributes, OK and ROP areas signify shifts away from locality-rooted design approaches.

The standardized post-war typologies (OK) emerged as a functional response to housing needs and industrial growth. However, their replication and detachment from local morphological logic have contributed to a gradual weakening of place-based coherence while on the other hand established new, largely spread patterns and typologies that establish new identity on its own terms. The ROP morphologies - characterized by stylistic inconsistency and weak spatial logic - exemplify the effects of market-driven development in the absence of strong design regulation. These findings confirm concerns expressed in previous literature (e.g., Drozg, 1995; Fikfak et al., 2023) about the erosion of distinct regional architectural identities and the rise of generic environments.

The Value of the Mappi Method

MAPPI emerges as a powerful diagnostic tool that enables both comprehensive and nuanced reading of urban form. Its integration of GIS-based quantitative data and field-based qualitative assessments facilitates a multi-scalar interpretation of spatial elements that influence spatial identity by urban and architectural design. One of the most important contributions of the method lies in its ability to reveal not only the current state of spatial character but also trajectories of change. The systematic mapping of architectural typologies and their spatial logic allows identification of critical thresholds - points where traditional spatial logic begins to dissolve.

By differentiating between traditional (TVG), standardized (OK) and variegated (ROP) morphological types, MAPPI offers a conceptual and analytical framework to understand how and where interventions are needed in directing current and future developments through urban and architectural policies and regulation. It aligns with contemporary calls for more responsive and culturally aware planning tools and can be applied across contexts with adequate data availability and local calibration.

Implications for Urban Planning, Architectural Design and Policy

The results of the study support the need for a policy shift from reactive to proactive spatial governance. Evidence shows that where planning tools and architectural design have retained or reinterpreted traditional patterns (TVG), spatial identity remains legible and valued. Conversely, in areas dominated by OK and ROP patterns, spatial cohesion and cultural continuity need to be addressed with greater care. Thus, future development should:

- prioritize adaptive regionalism, a design approach that balances tradition with contemporary needs,
- incorporate spatial identity indicators (as derived from MAPPI) into development guidelines, zoning and heritage protection tools,

- promote design literacy and contextual awareness among stakeholders, including architects, planners and developers,
- and foster multi-level coordination between national policy frameworks and local development strategies.

Furthermore, MAPPI results can support education and training by embedding spatial identity analysis into architecture and urban planning curricula. In this way, future professionals can be equipped with tools and awareness necessary for culturally grounded development.

Limitations and Future Research

While the MAPPI method proves robust and scalable, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The current study is based on selected settlement cases and is still in progress regarding full national coverage. While GIS data provides a strong foundation, the method's full potential is unlocked only when paired with fieldwork - an approach that is time and resource intensive.

Future research should extend the application of MAPPI to diverse geographical and cultural contexts, to test its adaptability. It should also refine classification criteria and integrate more socio-cultural and perceptual data, at both settlement and architectural scales. Participatory extensions of MAPPI to incorporate community perception of identity and place must also be explored in the future.

In a broader sense, the findings underscore the need for cross-disciplinary collaboration in defining and sustaining spatial identity - urban planners, architects, sociologists, geographers, landscape architects and local communities must co-produce knowledge and co-design environments that resonate with shared values.

Conclusion

This paper examined the evolution of spatial identity in Slovenian settlements through the lens of urban morphology and architectural typologies, using the MAPPI method that has been developed and is being tested in a national research project. By integrating GIS analysis and on-site fieldwork, the study identified three dominant morphological patterns - traditional (TVG), standardized (OK), and variegated (ROP) - each reflecting different periods and planning paradigms.

The results show that traditional morphologies remain strong carriers of spatial identity, while post-war standardization and recent fragmented development often disrupt local coherence and cultural continuity. This indicated the need to develop new tools to address current and future developments through the lenses of strengthening spatial identity by urban and architectural design. MAPPI has proven to be an effective tool for identifying these dynamics.

The study contributes to:

- methodological advancement through a replicable, data-informed approach to mapping identity,
- policy and planning, by offering criteria for regulating future development in line with spatial character,
- and also education and practice, by informing curricula and professional guidelines.

The study also shows that spatial identity by design is not static phenomena – even if it is measurable, designable and essential for culturally sensitive urban development, its dynamic nature calls for continuous monitoring, context-aware interpretation and adaptive, locally grounded design strategies. Tools like MAPPI can help integrate this awareness into everyday planning and design practice in Slovenia and possibly beyond.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

AI-assistive technology was used to check the initial structure of the paper and for the final language check (ChatGPT).

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Armed Mexican Villagers in *The Magnificent Seven*: American Gun Culture and Democracy

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Abstract

Though largely forgotten today, the 1960 American Western film titled *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by John Sturges and set in the 19th century, is a remake of an epic samurai action film *Seven Samurai* directed by Akira Kurosawa set in 1586 in Japanese history. Its radial displacement of time and space invites a series of questions about the roles of weapons. In the original film peasants have no access to weapons for self-defense and seven samurais with swords guard villagers. Kurosawa deliberately depicts peasants as helpless and unable to fight, though in historical actuality, at the point of 1586, Japanese peasants could arm themselves with swords. The 1960 adaption *The Magnificent Seven*, based on a faithful reproduction of the original, added a layer of complexity to the narrative by turning helpless Japanese peasants into Mexican villagers who bear arms to fight with seven American gunmen. Critics such as J. L. Anderson, who contrast and compare American gunfighters with Japanese samurais, somewhat downplay the agency of the anonymous Mexican people fighting with guns. However, I would argue that a different reading is possible by placing their relationship with weapons within American gun culture that changed and reinforced the images of guns as weapons for equality and democracy. I discuss the ways in which American gun culture functions as an informing context for self-defense of Mexican villagers by bringing an analysis to bear on the reading of *The Magnificent Seven* and weapons.

Keywords: gun culture, United States, Akira Kurosawa, Western film, democracy

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Introduction

Though largely forgotten today, the 1960 American Western film titled *The Magnificent Seven*, directed by John Sturges and set in the 19th century, is a remake of an epic samurai action film *Seven Samurai* directed by Akira Kurosawa set in sixteenth-century Japan. Its radial displacement of time and space invites a series of questions about the corollary changes in weapons used, swords and guns, and the role that the weapons play in each film. This transformation also raises broader questions about how national ideologies are embedded in cinematic depictions of violence, justice, and the right to self-defense. In comparing these films, we are not simply focusing on genres but also contrasting cultural narratives about who has the right to wield weapons, and by extension, wield power, and under what circumstances.

In the original film, peasants have no access to weapons to defend themselves and Kurosawa deliberately depicts peasants as helpless and unable to fight, though in historical actuality, at the point of the year 1586 in which the film is set, Japanese peasants could arm themselves with swords. The 1960 adaption *The Magnificent Seven*, based on a faithful reproduction of the original, added a layer of complexity to the narrative by turning helpless Japanese peasants into Mexican villagers who bear arms to fight side by side with seven American gunmen against the enemy.

Critics such as J. L. Anderson, who contrast and compare American gunfighters with Japanese samurais, somewhat downplay the agency of the anonymous Mexican people fighting with guns. However, I would argue that a different reading is possible by placing their relationship with weapons within American gun culture that evolved and eventually reinforced the images of guns as weapons for equality and democracy after World War II. This essay discusses the ways in which American gun culture functions as an informing context for the self-defense of Mexican villagers by bringing an analysis of historical background of guns and American society to bear on the reading of *The Magnificent Seven* and weapons.

The Sword: A Symbol of Japanese Samurai Power

Seven Samurai features the emergent close association between the swords and the class called samurai. Japan changed from a feudal society into a centralized nation-state modeled after European societies in the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and shortly thereafter the Japanese government banned civilians to wear swords in 1876, aiming to disarm the samurai warriors and to concentrate power in the hands of the government, bureaucracy, and the police. Historian Hisashi Fujiki observes that this legislation against swords was driven by the Japanese government to deprive the samurai warriors of the right to wear swords, as the samurai class represented the highest social status in the feudal Japanese society for a long time; instead, the Japanese government sought to monopolize the swords as a public and privileged symbol of status exclusively for the military, police, and bureaucrats (Fujiki, 2005). This symbolic control paralleled efforts to reshape the national identity, emphasizing state authority over individual agency. By limiting access to the sword, the state reinforced a hierarchy in which power was not distributed evenly but rather given selectively upon those in service of the government or its military aims. For instance, during World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy produced military swords, but only servicemen of high rank, such as officers and senior officers, as well as those in specific roles like cavalry and military police, were permitted to wear swords. This means that the Japanese government

reinforced the authoritative symbolism of the sword by placing its use in the hands of the upper classes, thereby making legible this power dynamic across Japanese society. Military swords were not actually the most modernized weapons but rather were an artifact associated with the social status.

But there is more to this story of swords. According to information from the Nagoya Sword Museum, those military swords served as a spiritual icon representing the soul of Japan and the Japanese race despite its fragility and impracticalness, and tellingly, the Japanese Imperial Army produced specific swords that were unsuitable for actual combats but were adorned with elaborate decorations for high-ranking officers to demonstrate their authority (Gunto).

This all changed when Japan lost World War II. After the war, Japan was occupied by the Allied powers and General Douglas MacArthur carried out the sword confiscation. According to Fujiki, though the Japanese government claimed that traditional swords were the legacy of Japanese history and the soul of the Japanese race, MacArthur deemed swords as a symbol of Japanese militarism and seized all swords in Japan, and he reports that the number of confiscated swords amounted to approximately 1.1 million (Fujiki, 2005). For instance, Fumio Tsuchiko, a journalist of swords, reveals that American soldiers invaded a house of private citizen and robbed about 150 Japanese swords and other equipment in December 1945 and it is known as *Habu Jiken* (Habu Incident); however, interestingly, some of those swords were spared from destruction by the U.S. occupying forces because swords considered to have aesthetic or artistic merit were not subject to confiscations (Tsuchiko, 2023). They are known as Akabane swords, currently displayed in museums across the country.

In *Seven Samurai*, a film made during the American military occupation of Japan, swords are depicted as exclusively accessible to or possessed by the samurai warriors throughout the story. Given the symbolic association of the sword with wartime Japanese militarism and a relic of Japan's feudal past, it is plausible that representations of common citizens bearing swords were deliberately avoided in Japan where occupation policies were aimed at demilitarization and democratization.

The Role of Guns in the American Gun Culture

One of the most notable differences between *The Magnificent Seven* and *Seven Samurai* lies in whether the villagers are portrayed as capable of taking responsibility for the safety and security of their own families, homes, and property. In Kurosawa's original film, the peasants hire seven samurai in exchange for food because they lack knowledge and resources for combat and self-defense. During the battle, the peasants assist the samurai only with non-lethal tools such as bamboo spears, and they never wield swords—even though they have multiple opportunities to take them from the enemy bandits.

By contrast, in *The Magnificent Seven*, the plot begins with Mexican bandits threatening to attack villagers if they refuse to provide food. After the gunmen are hired and arrive in the village, two of them discover a scouting party from the bandit group, kill them, and distribute their guns to the village's male members. Through their participation in the defense of the village, the Mexican peasants acquire a level of power seemingly equivalent to that of the gunmen and the bandits. This narrative shift is not incidental. Rather, I would suggest it reflects America's gun culture at a time when the film was being made in 1960. American gun culture significantly promoted the armed citizens as a democratic ideal, that is, as

individuals who assert their rights to life and property by resorting to violence when necessary. The villagers' self-defense is thus not just a plot development but a symbolic articulation of American political values.

In the previous section, I examined how the sword in Japanese history was deeply tied to social status and class. By contrast, guns in the United States were and still are understood in an entirely different cultural and ideological framework. That is, guns function not merely as weapons, but as signifiers of belief and identity. Mark Joslyn, for instance, argues that in the contemporary United States, oftener than not, "guns signify American core values of freedom, individual self-sufficiency, virtue, and citizenship" (Joslyn, 2017, p. 382). Similarly, Paul Froese describes the gun as "a type of sacred worldview and identity," and claims that "America's national passion for guns is a form of magical thinking, wherein the gun has taken on talisman-like powers to ward off evil and secure social respectability for a sub-set of Americans" (Froese, 2025, pp. 22–23). The historical process through which the gun came to carry such symbolic meanings warrants our critical attention. In his 1970 essay, historian Richard Hofstadter traced the beginning of America's gun culture back to the era of frontier and he suggests that, from the very beginning of the nation's founding, gun ownership signified a core American political principle (Hofstadter, 1970).

Yet this is not that simple, because the meaning of bearing arms completely changed after World War II as historian Andrew C. McKeivitt recently revealed in his important book *Gun Country*. He observes that "The Second World War and the Cold War provided the immediate inspiration for the growth and expansion of gun ownership and the justification for it"; hence, "the new gun capitalists built a mass gun market to feed a growing armed mass movement" (McKeivitt, 2023, p. 11). After World War II, a massive influx of firearms entered the U.S. domestic market, thereby transforming American gun culture from recreational tools to instruments of personal protection in the words of David Yamane (Yamane, 2022). He characterizes this historical shift in American gun culture focusing on personal protection as "Gun Culture 2.0," and he defines this new phase as being "centered on armed self-defense, or what I call the culture of armed citizenship," emphasizing the role of firearms in constructing a civic identity grounded in the right and duty to bear arms (Yamane, 2017, p. 1). Guns no longer stood for sport alone; but instead, they came to represent survival and freedom. The aforementioned historian Hofstadter also famously remarked that American people often tended to regard the right to bear arms as "the greatest protection of their individual rights and a firm safeguard of democracy" (Hofstadter, 1970, p. 58). By the 1960s, guns in America had increasingly become symbols of equality and civil rights, reflecting a broader ideological shift in terms of racial and gender politics. As Laura Browder writes, "the embrace of armed self-defense...began as a direct response to the violence, both governmental and extra-governmental" (Browder, 2006, 143). The right to bear arms—once conventionally reserved for white men—began to expand to include African Americans and women. As a result, a new American gun culture emerged, redefining who could claim the right to self-defense.

It is true that Firearms have been deeply embedded in American life since the nation's founding. But over time, guns also evolved from practical necessities to objects of leisure and recreation, eventually coming to symbolize self-defense, democracy, and individual freedom. This transformation in the cultural and emotional significance of firearms are reflected in the portrayal of Mexican villagers in the Hollywood adaptation of *Seven Samurai*. Unlike their Japanese counterparts, whose fate is tied to hierarchical power structures and traditional codes of honor, the Mexican villagers become co-defenders of their community. This

difference highlights not only the shift in weaponry but also the contrasting visions of collective resistance: one rooted in deference to class-based authority, and the other in the egalitarian ideal of the armed citizen.

Conclusion

More than a stylistic or narrative adaptation, the comparison between *Seven Samurai* and *The Magnificent Seven* reveals a cultural translation of political values through the representation of weapons and those who wield them. While Kurosawa's peasants remain subordinated within a rigid social hierarchy, unable to claim the sword or the power it symbolizes, Sturges' Mexican villagers arm themselves and, in doing so, transform into democratic actors. Their agency is not solely granted by the hired gunmen but emerges from an American ideology that frames self-defense as a civic virtue and firearms as tools of liberation.

This ideological shift reveals how *The Magnificent Seven* articulates a distinctly American vision of justice and empowerment, one that celebrates the armed individual as a protector of freedom and community. By focusing on the nameless villagers, the film reframes their role not as passive recipients of salvation, but as active participants in their own emancipation. The gun, in this context, becomes more than a weapon—it is a symbol of equality, resistance, and democratic participation.

However, this empowerment through arms is not without its own contradictions. While the film accepts armed resistance as a means of justice, it also reinforces the American myth that violence is necessary to achieve liberty. This raises enduring questions about how democracy, violence, and identity are interwoven in the American imagination. Ultimately, the transformation of weaponless peasants into armed citizens in *The Magnificent Seven* reflects not only a cinematic reinterpretation but a cultural assertion: that democracy is forged not just through laws and votes, but through the right to bear arms and the willingness to use them in defense of one's own life and liberty.

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A Brief Discussion on the Development of Geta in Ancient China and Its Transmission to Japan

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Abstract

According to existing data, geta was transmitted from China to Japan. After Tang Dynasty, Chinese geta was used as rain shoes and was no longer worn as everyday footwear, which led many people to regard geta as a type of “Japanese shoes”. This article attempts to utilize research findings from philology and archaeology to explore some historical topics. According to Chinese literature, geta originated during Spring and Autumn period, and from its emergence until Western Han Dynasty, it was merely a special type of footwear that was “suitable for walking in muddy places”. By Eastern Han Dynasty, it had become a popular type of footwear, and it was even an important item for women at weddings. The Wei-Jin and Southern-Northern Dynasties marked the “golden age” of geta, especially during the Southern Dynasties, when geta became an essential accessory for noble families. Additionally, according to Tang poetry, geta was still very popular during the Tang empires, but after the period, geta gradually became marginalized. On the other hand, historical materials from Japan tell us that as early as Tang periods, Japanese envoys brought geta to Japan, but we do not have literary evidence regarding the exact time of its introduction. Archaeological discoveries in Japan show that geta has already appeared at the Hōbuzan site and the Kamota site, suggesting that geta may have been transmitted to Japan during the Wei-Jin and Southern-Northern Dynasties, and had social influence during this period, which coincided with the peak popularity of geta in Chinese history.

Keywords: *geta* (wooden clogs), Sino-Japanese culture exchange, Wei-Jin and southern-northern dynasties

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Introduction

In the Western stereotype, geta are typical Japanese footwear. However, it is also well-known that in certain Chinese dynasties, geta were extremely popular and carried rich cultural connotations. How have Chinese and Japanese wooden clogs evolved? If we consider that Japanese wooden clogs originated from China, when were they approximately introduced to Japan? This paper aims to conduct a preliminary exploration around these questions and endeavors to demonstrate that the cultural connection between China and Japan may be more profound and intricate than we imagine.

“Ji” (屐) and the Origins of Chinese Wooden Clogs

The character “ji” (屐) was already recorded in Chinese dictionaries as early as the Eastern Han Dynasty. According to ancient Chinese scholars, it referred to a type of footwear designed for walking in muddy ground. Based on historical records, wooden clogs (木屐) may have originated during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. A popular legend from later generations claims that Duke Wen of Jin, a feudal lord from the Spring and Autumn period, specially crafted wooden shoes to commemorate one of his ministers. Although this legend was widely circulated, its historical accuracy is questionable. From a philological perspective, the earliest written account of wooden clogs might be found in the *Zhuangzi*, a text compiled during the Warring States period, which states: “Members of the Mohist school mostly wore coarse cloth clothing and wore wooden clogs and hemp shoes...” (Zhuangzi, trans., 2015, p. 575) Based on this record, we can infer that, in the eyes of many during the Warring States period, wooden clogs were a type of wooden footwear worn by the Mohist school as part of their ascetic practices. From this, we conclude that China already had wooden clogs during the pre-Qin period, and that they were a common, even rudimentary type of footwear.

The Development and Popularity of Chinese Wooden Clogs

According to Chinese historical records, during the Qin and Han dynasties, Chinese footwear was diverse. According to the Han dynasty’s system: people wore thick-soled shoes during rituals, thin-soled shoes when meeting the emperor, and only in informal settings were they allowed to wear wooden clogs (Sun & Zhang, 2015, p. 188). However, during the Eastern Han dynasty, wooden clogs became increasingly popular, even to the extent that they were prepared for women’s weddings. The *Book of the Later Han* (後漢書) records: “Elderly people in the capital all wore wooden clogs. On their wedding day, women would paint patterns on the wooden clogs with lacquer and then secure them to their feet with colorful ribbons.” The author of the *Book of the Later Han* believed this to be an abnormal phenomenon. However, from the mid to late Eastern Han period, wooden clogs began to gain popularity, and this trend seemed unstoppable. During the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period, wooden clogs finally entered their “golden age”, a result of the aesthetic preferences of the time. Especially during the Wei and Jin periods, cultural elites cherished freedom and strongly resisted the various regulations on clothing imposed by the Han dynasty system; thus, they regarded the freely wearable wooden clogs as their favorite footwear. By the time of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, young nobles in the Southern Dynasties almost universally wore wooden clogs. The *Yan’s Family Instructions* (顏氏家訓) records: “During the most prosperous period of the Liang dynasty, young nobles...all wore

high-heeled wooden clogs”. The author of the *Yan’s Family Instructions* did not approve of this phenomenon, but it was a historical trend, and he could do nothing about it.

The Decline of Chinese Wooden Clogs

According to existing records, during the Sui and Tang Empire period, wooden clogs may still have been quite popular. Li Bai mentioned wooden clogs in many of his works and even specifically referred to a type of socks worn with them. From his poetry, we find that he himself seemed to greatly enjoy wearing wooden clogs. His representative works suggest the following: first, ancient Chinese wooden clogs were generally equipped with ridges, meaning they were a type of high-heeled wooden shoes; second, the design of the ridges on wooden clogs had already reached a very high level in ancient China, both in terms of design by designers and craftsmanship by artisans; third, some wooden clogs were already being used as mountain-climbing shoes, which indicates that from this time onward, wooden clogs began to show signs of evolving into work shoes. After the collapse of the Sui and Tang Empire, the frequency of wooden clogs appearing in Chinese literature gradually decreased. Eventually, they were commonly used as rain shoes. During the Southern Song period, the poet Lu You mentioned wooden clogs as rain shoes in many of his works.

Why did wooden clogs in China transition from being a popular footwear to being used specifically as rain shoes? We speculate that this may have been due to the influence of the nomadic culture of the northern regions on the traditional clothing of the Central Plains after the establishment of the Sui and Tang Empire. Specifically, regarding footwear, according to the official regulations of the Sui and Tang Empire, formal occasions required the wearing of black leather shoes or boots, which were far more practical than wooden clogs. We know that in later Japanese culture, wooden clogs became increasingly popular. If we were to discuss the reasons behind this, we believe it is because, in terms of geographical environment and climatic conditions, wooden clogs were more practical than leather shoes or boots in Japan.

The Barefoot Tradition and the Emergence of Footwear in Japan

According to the Chinese historical text *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* (三國志), the lifestyle habits of ancient Japanese people (or a specific region of ancient Japan) are described: “People walked barefoot and did not wear shoes.” Another Chinese historical text, *The Book of Sui* (隋書), also describes the clothing habits of ancient Japan: “Their shoes were coated with lacquer and tied to their feet with ropes. Most people went barefoot.” Based on the records in *The Book of Sui*, during the reign of Empress Suiko, common people did not wear shoes, while nobles wore a special type of footwear (屨). According to the expression habits of ancient Chinese, we speculate that this special type of shoes (屨) might be hemp shoes and absolutely could not be wooden clogs (Sun & Zhang, 2015, p. 76).

It is important to note that in the portrait of Prince Shōtoku, he is depicted wearing black leather shoes, which were formal footwear during the Sui and Tang periods (Sun & Zhang, 2015, p. 613). Based on his portrait and the historical records in *The Records of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Book of Sui*, we can draw the following preliminary conclusions: First, during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the Japanese still had the habit of going barefoot. Second, during the Asuka period (538-710), nobles may have worn hemp shoes, while common people mostly went barefoot. We can confidently conclude that wooden clogs were not popular at that time. Third, after the Taika Reforms, Japanese nobles wore black leather shoes

or boots for formal occasions, while the situation for common people is unclear. In summary, the popularity of wooden clogs in Japan must have occurred after the Tang Dynasty in China.

Regarding the relationship between Chinese wooden clogs and Japanese wooden clogs, there are three main academic viewpoints. The first viewpoint holds that Japanese wooden clogs originated from China and are identical to Chinese wooden clogs. The second viewpoint argues that Japanese wooden clogs developed independently with little influence from Chinese culture. The third viewpoint suggests that wooden clogs were transmitted from China to Japan, where they were localized and became a representative footwear in Japanese traditional culture. However, there is no fundamental difference between Japanese wooden clogs and Chinese wooden clogs. This article leans toward the third viewpoint. How did Chinese wooden clogs spread to Japan? Many speculate that envoys to the Sui and Tang Dynasties, while learning Chinese culture, brought back not only various types of footwear popular in China at the time but also their manufacturing techniques. According to Japanese archaeological discoveries, relatively mature wooden clogs were already present in the Nara period (corresponding to the Tang Dynasty in China). This is sufficient to indicate that although they were not yet popular, Chinese wooden clogs had already been transmitted to Japan during the Tang Dynasty.

Japan's Earliest "Footwear" Artifacts

Some believe that Japanese wooden clogs developed independently, and they have an important piece of evidence: numerous "wooden clogs" from Yayoi period have been unearthed in Japan, suggesting that the Japanese could have independently developed wooden clogs based on these findings without the need for Chinese cultural influence. However, we believe this viewpoint is debatable. According to Japanese archaeological findings, the earliest "footwear" in Japan can be considered as the "tageda" from the Yayoi period. But is tageda a type of geta? Some scholars argue that it was a agricultural tool rather than footwear (Yamamoto, 2011). In the Toro site near Mount Fuji, tageda was discovered, featuring very thick soles. Researchers speculate that this was because the fields at that time were filled with water, and only by making the sole very thick could it function as a agricultural tool to assist in farming.

Undoubtedly, tageda is intrinsically linked to the "wet-rice cultivation culture". We align with a cohort of Chinese scholars in asserting that wet-rice cultivation culture spread to Japan from the lower Yangtze River basin in China. During the period spanning China's Spring and Autumn Period to the early Qin Dynasty, a significant wave of migration occurred from the middle-lower Yangtze region overseas (Wang, 2001, p. 69). It was likely these migrants who introduced both wet-rice cultivation culture and wooden clogs as agricultural implements to Japan. According to archaeological discoveries in China, the earliest known wooden clogs were unearthed at the Liangzhu Culture sites (c. 3300-2300 BCE). Given the absence of written records during the Liangzhu period, it remains uncertain whether these earliest Chinese clogs functioned as agricultural tools or footwear. However, inferences drawn from the societal development level suggest that the clogs discovered at Liangzhu sites likely served as agricultural implements. Viewed through this lens, tageda may also share cultural lineage with Liangzhu practices. We contend that regardless of whether tageda is classified as an agricultural tool or footwear, it is unlikely to be considered an independent innovation in Japan entirely unrelated to Chinese cultural influence.

Footwear in Japan Before the Edo Period

It is certain that wooden clogs had become extremely popular by the Edo period. Regarding what footwear Japanese people wore in earlier periods: during the Yayoi and Kofun periods, most Japanese walked barefoot. From the Asuka period, Japanese attire gradually aligned with Sui-Tang clothing styles. In the *Taihō Code* (701), there were dedicated *Costume Statutes*. Although these statutes were far less stringent than Sui-Tang systems, specifically regarding footwear, the *Costume Statutes* stipulated that formal occasions required thick-soled shoes or black leather shoes, while only informal occasions permitted straw sandals (Takahashi, 2016, p. 50).

Costume Statutes contains no specific references to wooden clogs. It is plausible that during the Asuka and Nara periods, Japanese nobility adopted black leather shoes and black leather boots, aligning exactly with the customs of Sui-Tang imperial aristocracy. Commoners likely went barefoot or wore straw sandals. A Japanese scholar contends that prolonged use of straw sandals correlates with dietary culture: before the Edo period, Japanese people had not developed customs of consuming beef or pork, hence animal hide footwear remained uncommon (Yamamoto, 2011).

During the Heian period, wooden clogs constituted one of multiple footwear options, though their usage remained limited. By the subsequent Kamakura period, picture scrolls (emaki) emerged as significant historical records. These emaki reveal that while some commoners went barefoot, others wore straw sandals or wooden shoes. Crucially, iconographic evidence alone suggests minimal functional variation between Kamakura-era and Edo-era wooden shoe designs.

Wooden Clogs: Tested With Artifacts

The earliest Chinese wooden footwear was unearthed at the Liangzhu cultural site (c. 3300-2300 BCE). Chronologically, Liangzhu correlates with Japan's Jōmon period, while Japan's earliest wooden-soled implements appeared during the subsequent Yayoi period (3rd century BCE-3rd century CE). We posit potential technological linkages between these primordial Chinese and Japanese specimens. Since scholarly research confirms the transmission of wet-rice cultivation techniques from China's ancient Wu-Yue territories (modern Zhejiang/Jiangsu) to Yayoi Japan (Mao, 1996), our deduction extends to possible transfer of rudimentary footwear production methods.

During the late Yayoi phase (100-300 CE), Japanese communities likely utilized wooden clogs primarily as agricultural implements rather than daily footwear. Concurrently in Han dynasty China (206 BCE-220 CE), archaeological evidence reveals these objects had evolved into culturally significant dress accessories. Chinese excavations of multiple Western Han tombs (e.g., Mawangdui, Hunan) have yielded diverse structural variations, with the most striking testimony coming from a lacquered wooden clog discovered in the 249 CE tomb of Zhu Ran, a Wu Kingdom general of the Three Kingdoms period. Han-to-Jin textual and material records collectively suggest these items transcended utilitarian functions to embody culturally embedded significance.

Archaeological evidence from Japan's Kofun period (4th-6th century CE) reveals technically sophisticated wooden clogs excavated at sites including Hobuzan and Kamata. These discoveries contemporaneously align with China's Jin to Southern Dynasties period (265-589

CE). Both historical texts like the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀) and Chinese records document frequent diplomatic exchanges between Japanese rulers and southern Chinese regimes. Crucially, Japan actively recruited specialized artisans during this era—notably the Nuhi (Costume Craftsmen Corps)—who likely transferred continental East Asian apparel culture to the archipelago (Wang, 2001, p. 127), corroborating the footwear technology transfer.

Wooden Clogs: Studied in Manuscripts

According to Chinese historical records, during the Kofun period (4th-6th century CE), Japanese monarchs frequently presented offerings when interacting with southern Chinese regimes. Following diplomatic conventions, these regimes likely reciprocated with gifts. Although conclusive evidence is lacking, wooden clogs were highly prevalent in southern China at that time. Thus it is reasonable to surmise that even if Japanese envoys received no such gifts, they could have observed the prevalence of wooden clogs in China. According to Japanese historical sources, a wave of migration occurred during this period, which included substantial numbers of immigrants from China's Wu-Yue region (modern Jiangsu/Zhejiang) (Wang, 2001, p.143). It would have been a logical outcome for these migrants to introduce Wu-Yue attire and contemporary Chinese artifacts to Japan.

During Japan's Asuka period (538-710 CE), the nation began large-scale adoption of Chinese cultural elements. Although definitive records of clog transmission are absent, Japanese documents note that Prince Shōtoku lectured on Buddhist sutras while holding a horsetail whisk (麈尾) (Wang, 2001, p. 171). Both horsetail whisks and wooden clogs were signature items favored by cultural elites during China's Wei-Jin and Southern-Northern Dynasties. While no literature confirms Prince Shōtoku's connection to clogs, his documented use of the whisk suggests he would unlikely have been ignorant of clogs. Additionally, Japanese accounts record that Kūkai (774-835 CE) cited *Shishuo Xinyu* (世說新語), confirming he studied this classic in Japan and proving its arrival in Japan by 797 CE at the latest (Ma, 1989). Given clogs' prominence in *Shishuo Xinyu*, this supports the postulation that both the text and clog culture reached Japan during Empress Suiko's reign (592-628 CE). However, due to formal footwear regulations mandating black leather shoes for official occasions, clogs were precluded from widespread popularity.

During Japan's Nara period (710-784 CE), the vigorous adoption of Sui-Tang cultural models would seemingly make the transmission of wooden clogs appear inevitable, yet scant documentation exists to confirm this process. We may, however, propose a hypothetical framework: within the sartorial domain, Japanese institutional priorities centered on emulating Tang court-prescribed footwear (notably black leather shoes and boots), potentially overlooking pre-Tang footwear traditions popularized during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 CE).

According to Japanese scholarship, wooden clogs or similar footwear appeared in Heian-period literary works such as the *Tale of Utsubo* (ca. 10th c.) (Takahashi, 2016, p. 335), indicating nascent popularization among commoners (though possibly non-ridged variants). During the subsequent Kamakura period (1192-1333), clogs gained pervasive popularity among warrior and peasant classes – amply evidenced in visual arts beyond this paper's scope. Why this surge? We propose a social transformation thesis: Originally functioning as plebeian footwear in China, clogs remained culturally incompatible with Japanese aristocratic hegemony. The Kamakura era's socio-political realignment, marked by ascending warrior

and peasant influence, catalyzed their dissemination. Ultimately, these groups' preferences propelled clogs toward their Edo-period (1603-1868) zenith.

Conclusion

This paper posits shared origins for Japanese and Chinese clogs, with clogs originating in China and later disseminating to Japan through specific conduits. Documentary evidence inadequately clarifies the transmission specifics, yet artifacts and pictorial records enable tentative dating of its introduction. Pre-Tang cultural contact, Japanese residents largely eschewed footwear. During Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods, aristocracy gained access to physical clogs and could acquire artisans with clog-crafting skills, yet cultural penetration remained limited in this era. Widespread adoption commenced in the Kamakura period, by which time clogs had been marginalized in China. Divergent trajectories in both nations stemmed inherently from clog properties: Their adaptability to Japan's climate, terrain, and lifestyle, whereas in China, competitive disadvantage against later footwear (e.g. boots) caused progressive diminishment of their influence, culminating in virtual disappearance from Chinese culture.

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Exploring Traditional Health Practices and Indigenous Well-being: A Qualitative Study of Healing Practices Among the Lumad and Mananambal in Siayan, Zamboanga

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Abstract

This study looks at traditional health practices and their place in indigenous well-being. It focuses on traditional healers within the Lumad and Mananambal communities of Siayan, Zamboanga del Norte. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed for this research, in order to study the lived experience, beliefs, and rituals among traditional healers, thereby highlighting the spiritual, cultural, and ecological dimensions of healing. Data were obtained by using in-depth interviews and participant observations, which allowed for detailed narratives from healers and community members regarding their practices and significance to individual and collective well-being. Findings indicate that traditional healing practices of the Lumad and Mananambal have deep spiritual, ecological, and communal roots. Healers perceive health as being in harmony with the material, emotional, and spiritual worlds, or call upon ancestral spirits and use plant medicines obtained sustainably from their environment. The healing practices are not only therapeutic but also a means of reproducing and reifying traditional and cultural identity and interpersonal relationships. In the same vein, however, one can mention the problems of cultural marginalization, ecological degradation, and the conflict between medical epistemologies. A basic theme seen in this research is the need to preserve and integrate indigenous healing practices into broader health systems because of their potential to foster holistic well-being and cultural sustainability. Such policies call for protecting indigenous knowledge respecting the environmental and sociopolitical pressures affecting these communities.

Keywords: traditional health practice, indigenous people, lumad

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Introduction

How do we continue to protect life and health the way our forefathers and mothers did? Indigenous people typically fare worse in health outcomes, disability, and general quality of life compared to the rest. Women are more vulnerable because they lack education opportunities, economic capabilities and are relatively more exposed to natural disasters. Still, indigenous women have to assume a great responsibility for the overall well-being of their families and communities (Baird & Batty, 2022).

Integration with traditional medicine and indigenous knowledge systems supports agency and culture. Preserved generationally, these practices provide a sustainable platform for health and wellness. They support the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in providing access to affordable drugs and health care among indigenous communities.

This paper examines the significance of traditional health practices in the indigenous community and evaluates its role in well-being. It seeks to answer the question:

- What is the essence of the Traditional Health Practices and Indigenous Well-being of the Lumad and Mananambal in Siayan, Zamboanga del Norte

Literature Review

The traditional knowledge of ethnomedicine of indigenous communities, such as the Lumad and Mananambal, includes local plants used in the treatment of snake bites and other infections. Long-term sustainability of medicinal plant resources ensures continued biodiversity conservation through these practices. The relationship highlighted above encapsulates the harmony that exists between traditional healing practices and environmental stewardship (Bourgeois & Argueta, 2020). In addition, spiritual and cultural aspects are also important in healing. For example, rituals carried out by the Mananambal of Siquijor focus on community identity and respect for nature (Baguio, 2020). Such practices not only maintain health knowledge but also strengthen the spiritual and ecological bonds within indigenous groups.

Generally, although some traditional healers team up with contemporary health care systems, the confluence of traditional healing practices with non-traditional medicine faces barriers. These practices, though proven to work, like curing venomous bites (Zhou & Javadi, 2022), are not widely accepted because they remain untested by biomedicine and from research. In addition, the colonization of their health systems has led to a loss of recognition and support. Efforts by global health bodies, including the WHO, aim to revitalize and integrate these practices into broader health frameworks, emphasizing culturally sensitive policies and training indigenous health workers (Hughson, 2019).

The preservation of traditional health practices is also tied to sustainability and climate adaptation. Indigenous knowledge contributes to forest conservation, with programs like reforestation in Siquijor helping protect “forest pharmacies” essential for healing (Mabalayan & De Guzman, 2022). Nevertheless, threats from deforestation and habitat loss, especially within Lumad domains, have affected the availability of medicinal plants. Such conservation efforts as the National Greening Program pursue their goals in this regard (Bali & Amio, 2020).

Moreover, the context of healing practices incorporates gender issues, where female custodians exist within health knowledge and are primarily in charge of childbirth and spiritual care, ensuring its intergenerational transmission (Mendez, 2021).

The global acceptance of traditional medicine and the ethical concerns surrounding the commodification of indigenous knowledge need to be addressed by respectful partnerships that respect intellectual property rights. Policies aiming at integrating indigenous health systems into modern healthcare protect cultural heritage while promoting safety and accessibility (Johnson, 2022; WHO, 2021). Future research must, therefore, center on addressing issues of ethics in collaboration, cross-disciplinary validation, and policies that support integration that is equitable in nature into global approaches towards healthcare.

Research Question

This research questions the following: How do the Lumad and Mananambal describe their most significant experiences as regards Traditional Health Practices and Indigenous Well-being?

Objectives

- Discovery of the basic but essential substance of the traditional health practices and indigenous well-being experienced by the Lumad and Mananambal in Siayan.
- Examination of the cultural, spiritual, and practical dimensions embedded in these practices.
- Find themes from participants' lived experiences and make recommendations to help maintain such practices.

Methods

Design: The study uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore perceptions and lived experiences of traditional healing.

Participants: Ten individuals were selected: five Lumad (Subanen) and five Mananambal with extensive traditional healing experience.

Data Collection: Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide, translated into Subanen when necessary. Open-ended questions explored medicinal plant use, rituals, and community roles of healers.

Data Analysis: Colaizzi's method guided analysis. Key statements were extracted, meanings were formulated, and themes were identified. Findings were verified with participants.

Results

Descriptive Findings

The descriptive findings reveal that both Lumad and Mananambal of Siayan, Zamboanga del Norte rely heavily on traditional healing practices which are well grounded in their culture belief and spirituality. The healing practices comprise tuob (herbal steam inhalation), hilot (massage therapy), and medicinal plants used- these three being effective and sustainable,

especially for places difficult to access where even modern health care has not yet arrived. Common herbs used include lagundi for respiratory problems, guava leaves for healing wounds, and sinaw-sinaw for kidney-related diseases, which are prepared through boiling, pounding, and steaming processes to extract their medicinal properties. These are also passed on through generations to ensure cultural continuity while reinforcing community identity.

The health and spirituality relations did have strong relations according to the findings of the indigenous healing systems. Pasubay or healing rituals are a part of this holistic approach, healing the body, emotions, and spirits. The remedies range from herbs to spiritual rituals and include hilot massage techniques, exemplifying the Lumad and Mananambal belief in treatment-holistic approaches. These are practices that seek relief from respiratory and joint aches, fractures, and kidney disorders, besides offering them a way to balance body, mind, and spirit.

There is the integration of Lumad with Mananambal practices because they frequently use the same medicinal plants with similar techniques for healing. This simply means that they share an indigenous knowledge system that transcends multiple lines of community. For example, the above communities employ herbs like lagundi and guava leaves, among others, for relief from respiratory conditions and digestive difficulties, and musculoskeletal pain. Besides, traditional healing systems are a form of useful methods but also become an aspect of supporting cultural roots through ceremonies that have been integrated and transcended through generations.

The study further established sustainability in these practices. Since most of the medicinal plants are readily available, their use is economical and environmentally sound. The practices keep in line with the people's conservation efforts regarding their natural resources, just like the forest-based medicinal plants that have remained in use over time due to controlled harvesting techniques. The use of such traditional methods also means the issue of preserving traditional knowledge, coupled with efforts to integrate indigenous knowledge into broader frameworks of healthcare provision.

In summary, the health practices of the Lumad and Mananambal are vital to their cultural identity, ecological sustainability, and community well-being. Their healing methods, aside from serving the purposes of physical health care, reinforce their spiritual and cultural connection to the environment. The findings of this research emphasize preserving these practices and ensuring that they gain recognition and integration into modern health systems.

Themes Identified

Traditional Healing Practices: Herbal medicine, hilot, and steam inhalation or tuob are the most common traditional healing practices of the Lumad and Mananambal. These are drawn deeply from their beliefs; they are logical, eco-friendly remedies used to cure any kind of ailments. Most of the people use lagundi and guava leaves as remedies to any sicknesses, such as respiratory conditions, wounds, and muscle pains.

Cultural and Spiritual Significance: Healing practices have spirituality rather than healing in them. Rituals such as pasubay, which form a ritual with herbs, are at the heart of cultural ideas on health. Such practices come as indispensable components of preserving harmony and balance within the individual and for the collective good of the community. These deep

linkages of health to cultural identity stand enhanced through such passed-on practices from generation to generation.

Sustainability and Environmental Contact: The use of indigenous, natural medicines shows a strong relationship with the environment. Healing systems among native people are highly sustainable because herbs and plants are obtained in such ways that there is always supply. Ecological conservation is also enhanced and promoted by these healing systems, like all others in society. The use of locally available flora for medicinal use is evidence of ecological knowledge integrated into these traditions.

Supporting Quotations

Traditional Healing Practices: Herbal remedies, massage techniques like hilot, and steam inhalation (tuob) are considered in Lumad and Mananambal healing practices to address various dimensions of health-from the physical to the spiritual aspect. These processes can be very practical and sustainable alternatives to modern medicine, especially for remote locations. Remedies such as lagundi and guava leaves are some of the most common used for ailments like respiratory problems, wounds, and muscle pain.

Cultural and Spiritual Significance: Healing practices are not only therapeutic but also fulfill spiritual purposes. The combination of practices such as pasubay through rituals and herbal remedies points to the relationship between health and spirituality. In the view of medicine men, such rituals must be performed to achieve balance and harmony in individuals and within the community. It is these very healing practices that further strengthen the culture-health relationship. As they are passed from generation to generation, their importance goes forward for health.

Link to the Environment through Sustainability: The use of locale-specific, natural remedies indicates a strong link to the environment. Indigenous healing practices emphasize sustainability, whereby herbs and plants are harvested in a manner that ensures their future availability. Such traditions are also ecological preservation practices, and in these communities, they fit into broader conservation policies. Such emphasis on locale-specific plants to be used for medicinal purposes points out the ecological knowledge present within these traditions.

Discussion

Insight From Findings

Traditional Health Practices as a Main Healthcare Provider

The findings strongly suggest that traditional health practices are essential to the Lumad and Mananambal, especially the reliance on tuob and hilot as main healthcare providers, especially considering no ample modern medical centers are available. They become the fundamental source of health care, relatively inexpensive and accessible in addressing such diseases as respiratory problems, muscle ache, and infection. This dovetails with international research on aboriginal health, which indicates a significant relationship to traditional practices in healthcare for people in rural settings. Thus, especially in indigenous settings, similar herbal and manual therapies have been part of studies within these contexts that indicate practical, accessible solutions where conventional healthcare is lacking.

This reliance on traditional practices demonstrates that healthcare is inherently adaptable, where knowledge of local resources and community-based techniques can effectively meet the healthcare needs of isolated populations. The participants' stories confirm that these practices have stood the test of time, showing resilience and adaptability that suggests their effectiveness.

Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions in Healing Practices

Deeply spiritual in character, one of the most profound discoveries about traditional health practices is that they are highly spiritual in character. Pasubay rituals and invocations reveal how the Lumad and Mananambal community incorporates spirituality into healing, as the two command blessings from deities and respect for nature's spirit. This blending of culture and spirituality indicates that curing is not only a physical measure but rather a measure to treat both emotional and spiritual requirements, which is a holistic health principle.

Such an integration of spirituality into health practices can be seen as a form of cultural resilience, as these practices continue to thrive amidst modernization efforts and represent the strength of indigenous beliefs in preserving health and cultural identity. Rituals are held intact and spirit guides invoked in the process, upholding the values of respect for the environment that sustains their natural pharmacy and community harmony that strengthens social bonds. This aspect opens possibilities of understanding health from a holistic perspective, as such practices translate that physical wellbeing is closely related to emotional, social, and even spiritual wellbeing.

Economic Access and Viability

The accessibility and affordability of such traditional healing methods have major socioeconomic advantages in these aspects for the Lumad and Mananambal communities, so that they may, through available means of their natural environment, be able to dispel health issues without the financial pressures of conventional medical remedy. For example, tuob needs only herbs and boiling water, while hilot requires only simple tools and herbal oils from locally found herbs. The practices are sustainable, as they depend solely on the individuals involved and do not need secure external supplies, which makes one not dependent on external healthcare facilities.

This also accords with global health recommendations by bodies like WHO, which embrace traditional medicine as complementary to modern health-care systems. In resource-limited settings, indigenous practices thus provide a sustainable model of health care that diminishes the formal health care systems' burden through effective treatment at low or no cost.

Comparison With Prior Studies

Holistic Nature of Traditional Health Practices

The holistic approach identified in the Lumad and Mananambal communities - integrating physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being - reflects themes common in indigenous health studies globally. Other similar findings have been observed by Dela Cruz and Santos (2020) and Oledan (2017) in studies conducted with Filipino indigenous groups where, in the Lumad and Mananambal perspectives, health is not only the absence of illness but also a form of stability, considering spiritual and emotional health. These studies before this one, including

Bottorff et al. (2011), were always a focus on how such views of holistic health perspectives are always much more crucial for addressing indigenous populations' diverse needs, in which traditional healing provides more than just physical care but strengthens social and spiritual harmony within the community.

In contrast, Western models of healthcare, which might have health compartmentalized into physical health, spiritual health, and emotional well-being, an overall framework evidenced in the Lumad and Mananambal practices, aligns closely with calls to integrate mental, physical, and spiritual health into healthcare models that would better serve culturally diverse populations. This more expansive understanding of well-being implies that such timeless practices are, by extension, subordinated to mainstream healthcare, particularly in culturally rich contexts.

Spiritual and Cultural Dimensions of Healing

These ancient practices, of course thus resonate spiritually with the perspectives given in research on indigenous health practices in the Philippines and other regions. For example, Oledan (2017) states that a consultation with a spirit guide, rituals, and use of amulets characterize traditional Filipino healing practices, all leading toward the view of health and spirituality as worldwide interconnectivities. These are also featured in the Mananambal practice of Siquijor, who regards spiritual rituals as part and parcel of the healing process (Baguio, 2020).

That the Lumad and Mananambals invoke spiritualism in their practice reflects international research that elucidates how belief systems played a giant part in the indigenous people's health system, by giving psychosocial support to and enforcing cultural cohesion. How spiritualism gives the conceptual aspect of therapy towards the furthering of resilience and more meaning in the healing process is an idea integrative health disciplines increasingly value.

Economic Reach and Sustainability of Traditional Healing Practices

Several economic advantages have been found with traditional practices, as identified in this study and earlier research. These are accessible practices with readily available natural resources that make the practices very sustainable and not expensive to communities in remote areas. Traditional healing practices have been traditionally valuable in impoverished communities economically and socio-economically because they are inexpensive and accessed easily. Furthermore, Mabalayan and De Guzman (2022) indicate how sustainable use of plants like lagundi and sinaw-sinaw will add to the preservation of the environment while continuing to give health care beyond the reaches of formal medical facilities.

These results support the suggestion that indigenous practices are low-cost and contribute to local biodiversity conservation. Together, the Lumad and Mananambal practices illustrate an autarkic healthcare approach anchored on ecological knowledge, which could be impactful for sustainable healthcare systems, particularly in resource-constrained, rural settings.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer and Cultural Identity

The findings of the present study reveal that health practices of the Lumad and Mananambal are heavily embedded in the realm of culture and are passed on from generation to

generation, a factor seen in other studies concerning the indigenous health systems practiced by Filipinos. Indeed, healing knowledge passed down from one generation of elders to another is very important as shown in Bengwayan (2020) and Mendez (2021). These practices represent a very significant key to preserving cultural identity and continuity. In the case of the Lumad and the Mananambal, such practices also represent a key aspect of social cohesion; they fortify interrelations within communities and ensure that cultural knowledge is passed on to the next generations.

Compared to other research studies like that of Hughson (2019), which is how modernization impacts indigenous practices, there is still a preservation of culture by the Lumad and Mananambal communities with respect to what is happening to them. The collective approach in knowledge fosters well-being for its community members and impacts on their level of cultural pride. Such practices depict their involvement in an indigenous health system, which also depicts identity, continuity, and contention with external influence and modernization.

Environmental and Social Issues

Similar to most other research on indigenous health practices, this paper details the depletion of medicinal plants because of the on-going process of deforestation and land conversion as it affects the Lumad and Mananambal. Studies similarly natured were also found in Bali and Amio (2020), who identified how environmental degradation affects the sustainability of indigenous health practices in the Philippines. This will pose a great threat through the loss of habitats, and this use of medicinal plants will further threaten the traditional health resources.

This finding is supported by the wider indigenous knowledge systems literature that calls for concerted conservation efforts in protecting such essential natural resources. According to Baguio (2020) and Mabalayan and De Guzman (2022), the preservation of Indigenous Traditional Health Practices and biodiversity coupled with it results from environmental protection. Enjoining the indigenous communities in the conservation effort through conserving the environment and the cultural heritage of traditional medicine together would be an important way.

Potential Integration With Modern Health Care

The common thread that came out in indigenous health studies is that their applications could indeed find their way into the modern systems of health care; and this is what the present study supports, by underlining the importance of culture-sensitive health care. Previous studies, including a few done by Zhou and Javadi (2022), demonstrated that indigenous knowledge may fill in the gap when it comes to the application of modern medicine—especially to the marginalized. The deep understanding of their communities and resources among the Lumad and Mananambal healers makes them valuable partners with public health initiatives across culturally diverse settings. This, however, implies mutual respect and a policy framework that accounts for the work of traditional healers. That aside, it is interesting that findings in this study resonate with the recommendations from WHO and other scholars such as Hughson (2019), who recommend inclusive healthcare policies whereby traditional practices shall be embraced as complementary yet not competing health systems. Prudent regard by modern healthcare providers for traditional healers will enhance healthcare outcomes in understudied communities through culturally responsive care that bridges existing healthcare disparities.

Implications for Practice

The findings of the study call for the promotion of holistic health approaches by combining spiritual and emotional well-being with physical health in health care. This should apply to all health professionals, but these models will be especially important in culturally diverse or rural areas. Such areas include cultural competency training for the health workforce, which would promote respect and appreciation of spiritual practices as healing interventions that may make health environments more inclusive and effective.

Promote Holistic Health: Include spiritual and emotional aspects in care, especially in diverse and rural settings.

Acknowledge Traditional Healers: Recognize them as key health providers and integrate them into the healthcare system.

Preserve Knowledge: Support intergenerational transfer through community education and documentation.

Conserve Resources: Partner with communities for conservation and sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants.

Improve Rural Access: Use mobile clinics and hybrid systems to enhance healthcare reach.

Limitations

Low generalization: Since it can be only applied to the culture and environment of the Lumad and Mananambal, the generalization level may be low and the least applicable to most other indigenous or rural groups.

Qualitative Bias: These are findings based on qualitative information, such as interviews that will perpetuate the bias and not represent the experience or practices of larger groups.

Not Tracked Long-Term Outcomes: The study did not follow the long-term outcomes of health users in traditional health versus those using modern medicine.

Partially Ineffective Approach on Environmental Degradation: Though the research talks about the effect of environmental degradation on the availability of medicinal plants, it fails to describe their deep ecological effects or measures of conservation strategy.

On Limitation: The study only discussed the possibility of interconnection between the system of modern health care and the system of traditional medicine but did not mention any sort of challenge or barrier toward such integration.

Narrow discussion on Socioeconomic Factors: The study showed that socioeconomical access to such traditional practices yet failed to discuss broader socioeconomics factors that may influence healthcare choices.

Healer Focus: The study is fundamentally based on the perspective of the traditional healers, out of the views of people who would prefer to go for modern medical care.

Cultural Homogenization Assumption: The study assumes a degree of cultural homogenization within communities that likely will smoothen out health care practices and beliefs.

Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer: The study provides some evidence of knowledge transfer, but the paper does not take seriously any mechanisms or issues that emerged among the younger generations.

Impact of Modernization: The study did not look deeper into how modernization or external pressures affect traditional health practices in communities.

Future Directions

Expand to Other Communities

More indigenous and rural communities would have to be included in the future study so that findings can be generalized to a much larger extent.

Comparative studies would open more scope as such research can provide understanding regarding traditional health practices and diversity and commonalities in such practices.

Future Studies

Future studies should combine clinical effectiveness and prevalence in traditional health practices with more quantitative methods, such as surveys or randomized controlled trials. This would reinforce qualitative insights with empirical evidence and build a stronger understanding of these practices.

Monitor Long-Term Health Outcomes

Investigations about long-term health effects should be carried out on the patients who rely only on traditional health practices. For instance, recovery rates, general health and well-being can be compared between both the groups with traditional healthcare systems and modern healthcare systems.

Environmental and Ecological Impacts-Carry Studies

The effects of environmental degradation like deforestation and climatic changes should also be measured regarding the availability of medicinal plants. It is to be ascertained whether these conservation methods are sustainable, as they mix or do not mix with the practice of traditional health care systems.

Integration Into Modern Medicine

Discuss practical barriers and challenges of incorporating traditional healing practice in a modern health system. This includes models of collaboration and the policy framework that could lead to mutual respect from traditional healers and doctors and other providers.

Discuss Socioeconomic Factors

Future research may further explore the linkages of broader-scale socioeconomic factors-poverty, education, and migration-that influence health decisions and the viability of alternative health practices. That would provide a greater picture of the factors affecting access to healthcare and health practices in the countryside and other underserved communities.

Evaluate Inter-generational Transmission of Knowledge

Investigate the mechanism and challenges associated with the transmission of traditional health knowledge to the next generations. Awareness of how such things as modernization, migration, or a shift in education may affect the transmission can help preserve and adapt traditional healing practices.

Analyzing the Role of Modernization

Globalization and other extrinsic strains on indigenous health practices are the other topics that should be explored in future research. This may be achieved by ascertaining the rate at which the current younger generation takes or resists change in or about traditional health practices regarding these changes.

Develop Culturally Sensitive Health Policies

Traditional practices will find places in the formal setting of healthcare in most rural or resource-poor settings while developing healthcare policies. Some frameworks to be established can help make it easy for modern service providers and traditional healers to collaborate.

Explore the Role of Technology

Investigation of what domain of role technology might be used as a way of keeping and communicating the indigenous, learned health knowledge. It can be of great help record and share the traditional healing practices of the indigenous peoples through electronic means, for keeping and sharing.

Conclusion

In the Lumad and Mananambal communities, these practices remain strongly alive, mainly for those not able to access modern health facilities. Although they are neither in any profession nor hold any formal degree, hilot and tuob can reach out to most common issues in health matters to embrace a holistic approach in health in harmony with all its physical, spiritual, and emotional aspects. These results indicate these communities maintain resiliency and flexibility relying on low-cost, sustainable indigenous healing methods rooted deep into cultural practices. Major gaps identified in this course of study include the lack of long-term health outcomes, relatively little exploration of the effect of environmental factors, and difficulty in integration with modern healthcare systems. These gaps should be covered in future research by using quantitative methods and discussing the impacts of the degradation of the environment on medicinal resources, as well as how the integration into the broader health care systems can work. The paper calls for increased recognition towards the

importance of traditional medicine towards cultural preservation and sustainable health care and urges policies that respect and incorporate indigenous health systems into mainstream health care models.

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Research on the Dissemination of Academy Culture in Sichuan Bashu Region Under the Background of Mutual Learning of Civilizations

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Abstract

Chinese academies emerged in the Tang Dynasty; their functions gradually evolved from book repair and collection to reading and learning. Their service targets ranged from individuals to the public, and they could cultivate talents and spread culture. The civilization of Bashu Academy not only benefited from the exchange and mutual learning between ancient Shu culture and other cultures, but also from the “Southern Silk Road” that has lasted for thousands of years and crossed centuries. As a trade and cultural inheritance road, it inherits not only a culture, but also a spiritual force. The academy culture in the Bashu region has shaped the urban character of “openness, innovation and creativity” and the humanistic characteristics of “broad mindedness and friendliness.” This points out the direction for promoting the development of world civilization and provides a good strategy for resolving conflicts between civilizations. Civilizations communicate through diversity, learn from each other through communication, and develop through mutual learning. The exchange and mutual learning among different countries, ethnic groups, and cultures in the world can enhance the humanistic foundation of a community with a shared future for mankind, spread and exchange each other's cultures, and promote the mutual learning of civilizations.

Keywords: Sichuan region, academy of classical learning, cultural revitalization

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Introduction

From the beginning to the middle of the 20th century, that is, during the period from 1900 to 1949, Chinese society experienced earth - shaking changes. Politically, the feudal imperial system collapsed, the Republic of China was founded, and then it plunged into the turmoil of warlord scuffles, and the Chinese Civil War. Economically, the traditional natural economy gradually disintegrated, and the economic aggression of Western powers coexisted with the difficult development of national capitalism. In the cultural field, the trend of Western learning spreading to the East was surging. The New Culture Movement advocated democracy and science, which severely impacted the traditional Confucian ideology and cultural system.

The Sichuan region had a unique position in this special historical environment. Located in the southwest inland with a strategic terrain, it was relatively independent politically. Although the warlord's situation was complex, it also provided a relatively stable space for the development of local culture to some extent. Economically, as the "Land of Abundance," Sichuan had a solid agricultural foundation and relatively developed commerce, providing a material guarantee for the development of cultural undertakings. Culturally, Sichuan had a long-standing historical and cultural tradition, with Confucianism deeply rooted. Moreover, the folk culture was rich and diverse, such as Sichuan opera and Shu brocade. All these laid a solid cultural foundation for the revitalization of the academy of classical learning culture.

In this period, there were many examples of the revitalization of the academy of classical learning culture in the Sichuan region. Take the Zunjing Academy in Chengdu as an example. During the years from 1900 to 1949, the Zunjing Academy actively carried out reforms. It not only retained the traditional courses of studying Confucian classics but also introduced Western scientific courses such as mathematics, physics, and humanities courses like Western history and philosophy in line with the trend of the times. It cultivated many talents who made great achievements in the fields of culture and education, such as Wu Zhiying and Liao Ping. They achieved remarkable results in the research and dissemination of Confucian classics and had a profound impact on the cultural development of the Sichuan region. Another example is the Longmen Academy in Chongqing. It made bold innovations in management mode, establishing a board of directors composed of local gentry, scholars, and social elites to be responsible for the operation and development decisions of the academy. This effectively integrated various resources and ensured the continuous development of the academy, becoming a model of academy management in the Sichuan region at that time. These specific examples of academy revitalization fully reflect the vitality and exploration spirit of the revitalization of the academy of classical learning culture in the Sichuan region during the special historical period.

The innovation of this research lies in those previous studies on the academy culture during this period mostly focused on the national macro - level, while this research focuses on the Sichuan region and deeply analyzes its unique cultural revitalization phenomenon. At the same time, through multi - dimensional analysis, it reveals the internal connections among the revitalization of the academy of classical learning culture, local society, politics, and economy, filling the gap in the research of regional academy culture in this specific period and providing a new perspective and empirical basis for a comprehensive understanding of the development process of Chinese academy culture.

Research Significance

This research is of great significance in multiple aspects. From a historical perspective, it helps to fill in the gaps in the study of the cultural history of Sichuan during the early 20th century. Understanding the revitalization of academies of classical learning can provide a more comprehensive picture of how local cultures responded to the challenges of modernization (Hu, 1934).

In the field of education, it offers valuable lessons for modern educational research. The efforts to combine traditional and modern educational elements in the academies during this period can inspire contemporary educators to explore more effective ways of integrating traditional culture into modern education.

Culturally, it is crucial for understanding the inheritance and transformation of Chinese traditional culture. The “cultural revitalization of the academy of classical learning” in Sichuan was an important attempt to preserve and innovate traditional Chinese culture in the face of external cultural impacts.

Literature Review

Previous studies on the history of Chinese education and culture during the period from 1900 to 1949 have mainly focused on the overall transformation of the educational system, the spread of Western - style education, and the influence of major national - level cultural movements. For example, scholars like Hu Shi and Liang Qichao's works have emphasized the role of the New Culture Movement in promoting modern ideas and Western - style education across China (Liang, 1921).

Regarding the academies of classical learning, some research has been done on their historical development in ancient China. However, there is a lack of in - depth studies specifically on the revitalization of academies in the Sichuan region during this period. (Zhou, 2010) briefly mentioned the survival status of some academies in Sichuan during the early 20th century in his research on the overall decline of traditional academies in China, but did not explore the revitalization phenomenon in detail.

In recent years, local cultural research in Sichuan has gained momentum. Some scholars have studied unique cultural traditions and local educational institutions in Sichuan. However, the “cultural revitalization of the academy of classical learning” has not been a central topic in these studies. This research aims to bridge this gap by conducting a comprehensive and in-depth study on this phenomenon.

Research Methods

Historical Document Research

This study undertakes an extensive collection of diverse historical documents spanning the Sichuan region from 1900 to 1949. These include official archives, local chronicles, private memoirs, and academy - specific annals. During the document - screening process, precedence is given to materials amassed by authoritative institutions and those with clearly - defined publication or composition dates. In assessing the reliability of documents, a comparative analysis of documents from disparate sources is conducted, alongside an

examination of the congruence between the document content and the historical backdrop of the era, as well as the author's stance and credibility. For instance, when documenting the sources of academy funds, a comparison between official financial records and the academy's internal accounts is made to ensure the veracity of the information. Nevertheless, this method has its limitations. Owing to their age and suboptimal preservation conditions, some documents may be incomplete or damaged. Moreover, conflicting viewpoints may exist among different documents, necessitating meticulous discrimination on the part of researchers.

Educational decrees and regulations issued by the local government during that time were also studied. These documents provide insights into the government's attitude towards the revitalization of academics of classical learning and the policies implemented to support or regulate them. In addition, personal diaries, letters, and works of local scholars who were involved in the academy - related activities were analyzed. These first-hand materials can reveal the inner thoughts and motivations of the people behind the revitalization movement (Chen, 2019).

Case Study

Several representative academies of classical learning in Sichuan, such as the Zunjing Academy in Chengdu and the Longmen Academy in Chongqing, were selected for in-depth case studies. For the Zunjing Academy, which was one of the most famous revitalized academies, research focused on its curriculum reform. By examining the course offerings, textbooks used, and teaching plans, we can understand how it adapted to the new social needs while still maintaining its traditional cultural essence (Qian, 1952).

The Longmen Academy was studied in terms of its management model. Through researching the rules and regulations of the academy, the selection and management of teachers, and the relationship between the academy and the local community, we can explore the unique features of its operation during the revitalization period.

Content Analysis of Cultural Relics

Cultural relics related to the academics of classical learning in Sichuan, such as steels, couplets, and educational utensils, were analyzed. Steles inscribed with the academy's history, educational philosophy, and donation records can provide important historical facts. For example, a steel in the ruins of an academy in Leshan was found to record the fundraising activities for the academy's renovation in 1925, which reflects the support from the local community.

Couplets hung in the academy buildings often contain profound cultural connotations and educational ideas. By analyzing these couplets, we can understand the values and educational goals emphasized by the academies during the revitalization period (Liu 30).

The Background of the “Cultural Revitalization of Academy of Classical Learning” in Sichuan Region

The Decline of Traditional Confucian Education and Its Impact

The abolition of the imperial examination system in 1905 was a major turning point for traditional Confucian education. In Sichuan, many academies that had been relying on the imperial examinations for student enrollment and development suddenly lost their direction. The number of students in traditional academies decreased significantly, and some academies even faced the risk of closure (Zhao, 1999).

However, this decline also led to a re-thinking among local scholars and the gentry. They realized that simply following the old - fashioned Confucian educational model was no longer viable in the new era. This led to an exploration of new ways to preserve and develop traditional Confucian culture, which was one of the important driving forces for the revitalization of academic classes.

The Influence of the New Culture Movement

The New Culture Movement, which began in the early 20th century, had a far - reaching impact on China. In Sichuan, it brought new ideas such as democracy, science, and Western - style education. On one hand, the New Culture Movement challenged the traditional values and educational concepts of the academies of classical learning. On the other hand, it also inspired the reform of these academies.

Some scholars in Sichuan, while influenced by the new ideas, believed that traditional Confucian culture still had its value. They tried to combine the essence of traditional culture with the new ideas brought by the New Culture Movement. For example, in the curriculum of revitalized academies, modern scientific knowledge was added while still retaining traditional Confucian classics courses. This attempt to blend the old and the new was a unique feature of the “cultural revitalization of the academy of classical learning” in Sichuan (Liang, 1921).

Local Social and Cultural Conditions in Sichuan

Sichuan had a unique geographical location, being relatively isolated from the rest of China in ancient times. This isolation led to the preservation of a rich and unique local culture. The local people had a deep - rooted sense of identity with traditional culture, and Confucian values were widely respected.

The Sichuan region also had many scholars and gentry who were well-versed in traditional Confucian learning. These people played a crucial role in the revitalization of academies of classical learning. They used their influence and resources to raise funds, recruit students, and promote the development of the academies. For example, in some small towns in Sichuan, local gentry would donate land and money to rebuild and operate the academies, and scholars would volunteer to teach in these academies, sharing their knowledge of Confucian classics and traditional culture.

The Manifestations of the “Cultural Revitalization of Academy of Classical Learning” in Sichuan Region

Curriculum Reform in Revitalized Academies

The revitalized academies of classical learning in Sichuan underwent significant curriculum reforms. While still emphasizing traditional Confucian classics such as the “Four Books” and “Five Classics,” they also incorporated new courses. For example, modern scientific knowledge, including mathematics, physics, and chemistry, was introduced. In some academies, courses on Western history and culture were also offered.

The teaching of traditional classics also changed. Instead of simply rote - memorization, more emphasis was placed on in-depth understanding and practical application. Teachers would encourage students to discuss and analyze the classical texts in relation to real - life situations. For example, when teaching the “Analects of Confucius,” students were asked to discuss how Confucian teachings could be applied to solve social problems in the early 20th - century Sichuan.

Changes in Teaching Methods

In addition to curriculum reform, teaching methods in the revitalized academies also changed. Traditional lecture - based teaching was combined with more interactive teaching methods. For example, group discussions, debates, and seminars were organized. In a seminar on Confucian ethics, students would be divided into groups to discuss different ethical issues, such as the relationship between individuals and society, and then present their viewpoints to the whole class (Wang, 1997).

The use of modern teaching aids also became more common. Some academies introduced blackboards, projectors, and laboratory equipment for teaching scientific courses. This not only improved the teaching effect but also made the learning process more interesting for students.

Management and Organizational Changes

The management and organizational structures of the academies of classical learning in Sichuan also changed during the revitalization period. In the past, academies were often managed by a single master or a small group of scholars. In the revitalized academies, a more modern management system was established.

A board of directors was formed, consisting of local scholars, gentry, and businesspeople. The board was responsible for making major decisions regarding the academy's development, such as curriculum planning, teacher recruitment, and financial management (Qian, 1952). The recruitment of teachers also became more formalized. Teachers were required to have a certain educational background and teaching experience. In some academies, teachers were even required to pass an entrance examination before being hired.

The Impacts of the “Cultural Revitalization of Academy of Classical Learning” in Sichuan Region

Impact on Local Culture

The “cultural revitalization of the academy of classical learning” had a profound impact on local culture in Sichuan. It played a crucial role in preserving traditional Confucian culture. Through the teaching of classical texts and the promotion of traditional cultural activities in the academies, Confucian values such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness were passed on to the younger generation.

The academies also became centers for cultural innovation. The combination of traditional and modern cultures in the academies led to the emergence of new cultural ideas and works. For example, some scholars in the academies began to write poems and essays that combined classical literary forms with modern themes, which had a certain influence on the local literary and cultural circles.

Impact on Local Education

In the field of education, the revitalized academies of classical learning in Sichuan provided an alternative educational path. They complemented the Western-style schools that were emerging during that time. While Western - style schools focused more on modern scientific and technical knowledge, the academies emphasized traditional cultural education and moral cultivation.

The academies also trained many talents with a solid foundation in traditional culture. These talents played important roles in various fields in Sichuan, such as education, culture, and local governance. Some of them became teachers in local schools, passing on their knowledge of traditional culture to more students. Others became cultural scholars, dedicated to the research and promotion of Sichuan's local culture (Sun, 2022).

Impact on Local Social Values

The revitalization of academies of classical learning also had an impact on local social values. The emphasis on Confucian ethics in the academies influenced the moral concepts of the local people. For example, the values of respecting elders, being filial to parents, and being honest and trustworthy were further promoted in society.

The academies also promoted a sense of community. Through various cultural activities and educational exchanges, people from different social classes in the local community were brought together. This helped to strengthen the social cohesion in Sichuan during a period of social transformation.

Challenges and Limitations of the “Cultural Revitalization of Academy of Classical Learning” in Sichuan Region

Resistance from the New Educational Trend

Although the revitalized academies of classical learning in Sichuan tried to adapt to the new era, they still faced resistance from the new educational trend. The advocates of Western-

style education believed that traditional academies were backward and could not meet the needs of modern society. They criticized the academies for their emphasis on classical learning and their relatively slow pace of modernization.

This led to a certain degree of marginalization of the academies in the overall educational landscape. The government's investment in Western - style schools was much larger than that in the academics of classical learning, which made it difficult for the academies to develop on a large scale.

Financial Difficulties

Financial problems were another major challenge for the revitalized academies. The main sources of funding for the academies were donations from local gentry, tuition fees from students, and government subsidies. However, during the period from 1900 to 1949, Sichuan was often in a state of war and social unrest. The economic situation was unstable, and it was difficult for the local gentry to continuously donate large amounts of money.

The tuition fees were also limited, as many students came from poor families. The government subsidies were insufficient due to financial constraints. As a result, many academies faced difficulties in maintaining normal teaching activities, such as lacking funds to purchase teaching materials and paying teachers' salaries (Zhang, 1983).

Limited Influence Beyond the Local Area

The “cultural revitalization of the academy of classical learning” in Sichuan was mainly limited to the local area. Although it had a certain impact on the local culture, education, and society, its influence on the national and international levels was relatively small.

This was mainly because the revitalization movement was mainly driven by local forces, and there was a lack of effective promotion channels at the national and international levels. In addition, the unique local characteristics of Sichuan's academies also made it difficult for them to be widely recognized and accepted in other regions (Liu, 2021).

Conclusion

The “cultural revitalization of the academy of classical learning” in the Sichuan region from 1900 to 1949 was a remarkable cultural phenomenon that emerged in the context of China's social transformation. It was a complex response to the challenges posed by the decline of traditional Confucian education, the influence of the New Culture Movement, and the encroachment of Western - style education (Li, 2017).

The revitalized academies underwent substantial changes in curriculum, teaching methods, and management. These transformations not only preserved and transmitted traditional Confucian culture but also adapted it to the modern era, thus having a profound impact on local culture, education, and social values. They became centers for cultural innovation, training grounds for talent with a solid foundation in traditional culture, and promoters of social cohesion.

However, this revitalization movement was not without its challenges. Resistance from the new educational trend, financial difficulties, and limited influence beyond the local area

hindered the full - scale development of the academies. These limitations remind us of the complexity and difficulty of cultural revitalization in the face of historical change (Zhou, 2010).

Despite these challenges, the efforts of local scholars and gentry in Sichuan to revitalize the academies of classical learning are of great significance. They demonstrated the tenacity and adaptability of traditional culture in the face of modernization. Their experiences provide valuable lessons for contemporary cultural inheritance and educational innovation.

For future research, it is necessary to further explore the long - term impact of this cultural revitalization on the development of Sichuan and China. Comparative studies with other regions can also be conducted to better understand the commonalities and differences in the revitalization of academies of classical learning across the country. This will help to enrich our understanding of the historical development of Chinese education and culture and provide more in - depth insights for contemporary cultural and educational undertakings.

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Leveraging Cultural Mapping in Readings in Philippine History: A Pedagogical Approach to Heritage Preservation

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Abstract

Cultural heritage is a cornerstone of community identity, yet its preservation remains challenging amid modernization. This paper explores how the *Readings in Philippine History (RPH)* course at National University Clark enables students to actively engage in heritage preservation and cultivate deeper cultural appreciation through cultural mapping. Nine sections of RPH students from the Architecture and Civil Engineering programs conducted a final requirement involving the identification, documentation, and evaluation of heritage structures within their local communities. Using the Cultural Mapping Toolkit by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), students analyzed the significance of heritage structures and proposed preservation strategies informed by global models. Thematic analysis of student outputs—including heritage churches, ancestral houses, museums, and public buildings—yielded three key findings: (1) students experienced a shift from passive learning to active cultural engagement; (2) students recognized heritage's potential to support local economies and community sustainability through tourism and livelihood generation; and (3) students rediscovered their cultural identity through immersive interaction with heritage sites, prompting greater awareness, pride, and advocacy. These findings were evaluated using a rubric assessing cultural appreciation and suggested preservation methods' feasibility. This pedagogical case study demonstrates how cultural mapping effectively nurtures students' sense of identity, advocacy, and historical consciousness. This approach exemplifies the intersection of education, cultural preservation, and community engagement, providing a strong argument for incorporating heritage education into higher education curricula.

Keywords: cultural mapping, heritage preservation, Philippine history, community engagement

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Introduction

Cultural heritage, encompassing tangible and intangible assets, is a cornerstone of community identity, reflecting historical experiences, collective memory, and cultural continuity (Assumma & Ventura, 2014; Pillai, 2013). However, heritage preservation faces numerous challenges in an era of rapid modernization and globalization. Historic environments frequently suffer from neglect, inadequate management, and a general lack of community awareness about their cultural value (Duxbury et al., 2015; Longley & Duxbury, 2016). These challenges underscore the urgent need for more innovative, community-centered, and educationally embedded approaches to heritage preservation.

In the Philippines, heritage structures embody rich historical narratives and cultural diversity. Recognizing their significance, the State has enacted Republic Act No. 10066, which provides for the protection and conservation of the national cultural heritage. This legislation acknowledges the need to safeguard cultural properties against threats such as neglect, destruction, and the adverse effects of modernization and economic development pressures (Republic Act No. 10066, 2010). Consequently, fostering a broader public consciousness regarding heritage value is essential for preservation and sustainable community development (Duxbury et al., 2015; Pillai, 2013).

Recent scholarship emphasizes cultural mapping as a valuable method for raising community awareness, documenting heritage assets, and supporting strategic planning for sustainable local development (Longley & Duxbury, 2016; NCCA, 2019). Cultural mapping involves systematic identification, documentation, and interpretation of local heritage resources and engages community stakeholders in recognizing and safeguarding their cultural assets (Assumma & Ventura, 2014). Moreover, integrating cultural mapping into education, particularly within history curricula, has provided transformative learning opportunities beyond mere academic knowledge to encompass personal reflection, civic responsibility, and cultural advocacy (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2000).

Recognizing this potential, this study explores how integrating cultural mapping into the tertiary-level course *Readings in Philippine History (RPH)* at National University Clark could facilitate deeper cultural awareness and active preservation advocacy among students. The course was structured around a final requirement involving students from Civil Engineering and Architecture programs identifying and documenting local heritage structures, assessing their cultural significance, and proposing preservation strategies guided by the NCCA's Cultural Mapping Framework.

The rationale behind incorporating cultural mapping into the RPH course aligns closely with transformative educational principles, as articulated by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2000). According to Mezirow, transformative learning involves critical reflection on previously held assumptions, leading learners to experience a perspective transformation characterized by deeper personal meaning and greater civic engagement (Kitchenham, 2008). Through guided reflections and practical cultural mapping experiences, students are expected to develop enhanced cultural appreciation, greater awareness of heritage's role in community identity and livelihood, and a more substantial commitment to preservation efforts.

Thus, this study aims to evaluate how the cultural mapping process embedded within the RPH course transforms students' perceptions of heritage, promotes cultural identity, and

encourages advocacy for sustainable community heritage preservation. Drawing upon thematic analyses of student outputs and reflections, the paper highlights transformative outcomes, emphasizing the potential of cultural mapping as an educational strategy for heritage preservation and community engagement.

Problem Statement

Amid rapid modernization and urbanization, local heritage structures in the Philippines are increasingly at risk due to neglect, limited public awareness, and inadequate preservation mechanisms. Despite institutional efforts toward safeguarding cultural heritage, community engagement and youth participation remain insufficient, posing challenges to the sustainability of heritage preservation initiatives. Given the educational sector's potential for fostering heritage awareness and active preservation, there is a pressing need to explore innovative pedagogical approaches. This study addresses this need by integrating cultural mapping into the tertiary-level course *Readings in Philippine History* (RPH), aiming to examine how such an approach can enhance students' cultural appreciation, historical awareness, and preservation advocacy.

To address this problem, the following research questions guide this study:

1. How does integrating cultural mapping in the RPH course influence students' perceptions and appreciation of cultural heritage?
2. In what ways do students' cultural mapping outputs reflect their understanding of heritage as integral to community livelihood and identity?
3. How do students' reflections demonstrate transformative learning experiences, particularly regarding their roles as heritage advocates?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a pedagogical case study design to explore how integrating cultural mapping in the *Readings in Philippine History (RPH)* course influences students' appreciation and advocacy for cultural heritage. A pedagogical case study provides an in-depth exploration of educational innovations within authentic contexts, making it particularly suitable for examining learning processes and academic outcomes (Yin, 2009).

Participants

Participants included undergraduate students enrolled in nine sections of the RPH course at National University, Clark, during the academic year 2024–2025. These sections comprised students from the Civil Engineering and Architecture programs. Heritage structures were deliberately selected to align closely with the professional disciplines of the participants. Each class section was subdivided into three groups, each assigned a specific heritage structure for documentation and analysis.

The cultural mapping project was integrated as the final requirement of the course and consisted of the following phases:

Phase 1: Heritage Structure Assignment

Course instructors selected and assigned specific local heritage structures to student groups, matching each site to the students' disciplines and potential professional interests. Heritage sites included historic churches, ancestral houses, municipal buildings, public markets, schools, and other culturally significant landmarks in Pampanga and surrounding communities.

Phase 2: Heritage Documentation and Assessment

Each student group documented their assigned heritage structure through site visits, historical research, community interviews, and photographic evidence. The groups then evaluated their structures' cultural and historical significance using the Cultural Mapping Toolkit: A Guide for Participatory Cultural Mapping in Local Communities provided by the NCCA (2019).

Phase 3: Preservation Proposal Development

Students developed proposals for sustainable preservation, drawing on international best practices such as UNESCO and ICOMOS guidelines. Proposals considered practical methods, including scientific and traditional conservation, adaptive reuse strategies, environmental sustainability, and community involvement.

Phase 4: Personal and Reflective Narratives

Individually, students produced reflective essays guided by structured questions, describing their learning experiences, shifts in understanding, appreciation of heritage, and emerging sense of cultural responsibility and advocacy.

Data Collection and Sources

Primary data sources included:

- **Group Outputs:** Documentation reports, significance assessments, and preservation proposals.
- **Individual Reflections:** Essays detailing personal insights, shifts in perception, and appreciation developed through cultural mapping activities.

All outputs and reflections were submitted electronically through the university's learning management system (LMS).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis process involved:

1. Data Familiarization: Comprehensive review of student submissions.
2. Initial Coding: Systematic identification of codes related to shifts in perception, heritage's relation to livelihood and sustainability, and identity formation.
3. Theme Identification: Categorizing codes into broad themes reflecting students' experiences, insights, and proposed methods.
4. Refinement: Reviewing and refining themes for coherence and alignment with research objectives.

The thematic analysis aimed to systematically illustrate the students' emerging appreciation, community engagement, and cultural advocacy due to their participation in cultural mapping.

Ethical Considerations

The following ethical guidelines were observed:

- **Informed Consent:** Students provided consent through a structured online form (Microsoft Forms), clearly explaining study objectives, voluntary participation, and confidentiality assurance.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Student identities were anonymized in data reporting, using general identifiers (e.g., “student A, [Heritage Structure] Group”).
- **Data Management:** Collected data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Findings and Discussion

Shift in Perception – From Passive Learning to Cultural Awareness

A central finding from the thematic analysis was a notable shift in students’ perceptions of cultural heritage. Initially, students expressed limited, often superficial understandings of heritage, primarily viewing it as static historical artifacts or merely old structures. However, active participation in cultural mapping expanded their perspectives significantly, recognizing heritage as dynamic, community-oriented, and integral to their cultural identity.

Analysis of reflective essays revealed repeated patterns of students’ transformative experiences. Many students articulated initial passive understandings of heritage as historical relics disconnected from their daily lives. One student, for example, reflected:

Before starting this project, I believed that cultural heritage was simply about old structures or artifacts... After accomplishing the project, I realized that cultural heritage is much more—it’s a vital part of our identity, connecting us to our roots. (Student A, Museo ning Angeles group)

Similar shifts were echoed across multiple reflections, highlighting a collective journey from passive observers of history to active participants in cultural understanding and advocacy. Another student described their realization:

Initially, I saw cultural heritage just as buildings and monuments preserved for aesthetic purposes. Through the cultural mapping project, I came to see them as important markers of our history, embodying the struggles, triumphs, and stories of our community. (Student B, Holy Rosary Parish Church group)

These personal accounts illustrate that cultural mapping activities challenged students’ assumptions, resulting in deeper insights and broader conceptions of heritage significance. Students actively engaging with heritage sites and local communities triggered meaningful reflection, fostering enhanced awareness of cultural heritage as living, evolving, and deeply intertwined with community identity.

Furthermore, student documentation showed rigorous engagement with both tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage, indicating a thorough reconsideration of what constitutes heritage value. This comprehensive approach allowed students to document structures and capture narratives and emotional connections that communities held toward their heritage assets.

This finding aligns with previous studies highlighting cultural mapping as an effective pedagogical tool for developing active cultural awareness (Duxbury et al., 2015; NCCA, 2019). The active, reflective process embedded within the cultural mapping exercise provided students with practical opportunities to experience firsthand the value of heritage beyond theoretical classroom discussions.

Overall, this key finding underscores the pedagogical value of cultural mapping in transforming passive historical education into an active, reflective, and meaningful cultural learning experience.

Heritage and Livelihood – Linking Heritage to Local Sustainability

Another prominent theme emerging from the thematic analysis of student outputs was the strong recognition of heritage as a vital component for supporting local economies and sustainable community development. Initially, students rarely considered heritage to have practical economic implications. However, throughout the cultural mapping activities and community interactions, students became increasingly aware of heritage's potential as a foundation for economic sustainability, especially through tourism, local businesses, and livelihood generation.

Numerous students explicitly connected heritage preservation to economic opportunities in their reflective essays. For example, one student group assigned to document the Pampang Public Market emphasized the role heritage plays in economic sustainability, noting:

The Pampang Public Market plays a vital role in promoting sustainable tourism, supporting nearby craftsmanship, and ensuring a thriving local community. Heritage preservation directly contributes to local economic growth and stability. (Student C, Pampang Public Market group)

Such insights illustrate students' growing understanding that heritage preservation extends beyond cultural and historical importance—it actively fosters local economic resilience. Another group working on Our Lady of Grace Parish Church also highlighted the financial dimension of heritage, emphasizing how local festivals and religious events generate income, sustain jobs, and foster economic vitality:

Heritage preservation has a direct impact on economic development through sustainable tourism. Festivals and religious events generate revenue that maintains heritage sites and supports the broader community economy. (Student D, Our Lady of Grace Parish Church group)

Students assigned to ancestral homes and historical landmarks similarly recognized how adaptive reuse of heritage structures could lead to economic revitalization. For instance, students assigned to the Aquino Ancestral House noted:

Heritage sites attract tourists, help local businesses thrive, and create employment. Preservation strategies, like adaptive reuse, can sustain heritage while generating new economic activities and opportunities. (Student E, Aquino Ancestral House group)

These reflections collectively indicate a significant shift in student perception from viewing heritage solely as a historical relic to recognizing it as an active participant in local economic

and community life. The proposals students developed further reinforced this understanding. Recommendations often included strategies to incorporate local artisan skills, tourism initiatives, traditional craftsmanship, and small businesses into preservation efforts, emphasizing the need for heritage management strategies that integrate cultural and economic sustainability.

This theme aligns with literature on cultural mapping and sustainable development, highlighting how effectively heritage preservation can drive economic resilience and sustainability when actively embedded within local development strategies (Assumma & Ventura, 2014; Duxbury et al., 2015). Indeed, students' insights reinforced that sustainable heritage preservation should simultaneously preserve cultural identity and foster local economic well-being.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate how the cultural mapping project successfully guided students toward deeper insights about heritage's multidimensional benefits—cultural, social, and economic—and underscored the importance of integrating economic sustainability within broader heritage advocacy and preservation initiatives.

Heritage and Identity – Rediscovering Identity Through Cultural Immersion

The final key finding emerging from the thematic analysis of student outputs highlights how cultural mapping significantly influenced students' sense of identity, belonging, and pride. Many students reported a deeper connection to their cultural roots and local identities, fostered by immersive experiences during the heritage documentation and community engagement processes.

Initially, many students described feeling disconnected from their local cultural identities, often perceiving heritage as distant or irrelevant to their lives. However, direct immersion in heritage sites and meaningful interactions with local community members prompted powerful reflections on identity, belonging, and pride.

One student assigned to document the Municipal Hall of Concepcion, Tarlac, captured this sentiment succinctly:

Cultural heritage is the heart of our identity, connecting us to our past while shaping our future. Preserving it fosters a sense of belonging and pride, reminding us of our roots and the struggles and achievements of those who came before us. (Student F, Municipal Hall of Concepcion group)

Such reflections were common across multiple groups and illustrated a widespread realization among students that heritage structures serve as powerful symbols of community identity and historical continuity. For example, students who documented the Museo ning Angeles recognized how heritage reflects deeper identity dynamics:

This museum is more than just a preserved structure—it's a source of pride for Kapampangans and a representation of our rich cultural identity. This experience showed me heritage as a living part of our society, not just something remembered but something that shapes our present and future. (Student G, Museo ning Angeles group)

Students who engaged with religious heritage structures, such as the Holy Rosary Parish Church and Our Lady of Grace Parish Church, reported enhanced emotional and spiritual connections, emphasizing these sites' role in community bonding and shared cultural experiences. For instance, one student reflected:

I now see heritage as alive, something that defines us as a community. Visiting the church and engaging with community members gave me pride to say—this is our story. (Student H, Our Lady of Grace Parish Church group)

These personal narratives indicate that cultural mapping increased students' knowledge about heritage and significantly transformed their individual and collective identities. The process helped them rediscover historical roots, community pride, and a stronger sense of local identity, profoundly influencing their understanding of heritage as a fundamental part of their social and cultural fabric.

These findings align with existing literature suggesting cultural mapping's potential as an educational approach to actively reconnect younger generations with their cultural heritage and enhance their cultural identities (Longley & Duxbury, 2016; NCCA, 2019). Such immersive educational practices foster deeper personal meaning and motivate long-term community advocacy and preservation commitments.

This key finding underscores the transformative potential of cultural mapping in heritage education, highlighting how direct immersion, documentation, and reflective practices can empower students to reclaim and advocate for their cultural identity, heritage, and community.

Synthesis and Analysis of Findings

This study examined how integrating cultural mapping into the *Readings in Philippine History (RPH)* course shaped students' cultural perceptions, appreciation of heritage, and development as heritage advocates. The results demonstrate the effectiveness of cultural mapping as an innovative pedagogical approach in addressing the challenges of limited public awareness and engagement in heritage preservation.

A central finding from students' reflections revealed a significant shift in their perceptions of heritage, from passive and superficial understandings to active, engaged cultural awareness. Initially viewing heritage predominantly as historical relics, students transformed their views through immersive participation and reflective practices. They began recognizing heritage as dynamic, meaningful, and interconnected with community life and contemporary identity. Reflections like “After accomplishing the project, I realized cultural heritage is much more—it connects us deeply to our roots,” illustrate how experiential learning encouraged meaningful reconsideration and active cultural appreciation among students.

Students' outputs further revealed a comprehensive understanding of heritage as integral to community livelihood and sustainable development. Through cultural mapping, they acknowledged that heritage preservation goes beyond historical and cultural value—it actively supports local economic sustainability, community resilience, and livelihood generation, particularly through tourism, crafts, and adaptive reuse initiatives. Students demonstrated nuanced awareness of heritage's multidimensional importance by emphasizing its practical economic roles.

Additionally, the study showed how cultural mapping significantly influenced students' sense of cultural identity and community belonging. Immersive interaction with local heritage sites allowed students to rediscover personal and collective identities, fostering pride, a more profound sense of belonging, and an advocacy mindset. Reflections repeatedly emphasized heritage as essential to community identity, such as, *"Preserving cultural heritage fosters a sense of pride and identity, reminding us who we are and where we come from."* These transformative insights demonstrate cultural mapping's potential to empower students as proactive, culturally aware citizens.

These findings directly address the identified gaps in heritage education, illustrating cultural mapping as a valuable pedagogical strategy. By actively engaging students with heritage, fostering practical appreciation of its community significance, and encouraging transformative identity formation, cultural mapping enriches students' educational experiences. It cultivates sustained advocacy and responsible heritage stewardship.

Implications

This study reveals several essential implications based on the three key findings of the cultural mapping project implemented within the *Readings in Philippine History (RPH)* course:

Educational Implications – Active Cultural Engagement

The apparent shift in student perceptions—from passive observers to active participants—highlights the effectiveness of experiential and reflective pedagogical approaches. Cultural mapping significantly enhances students' cultural awareness and critical engagement with heritage, suggesting that active and immersive learning methods can transform how history and culture are taught at the tertiary level.

Economic and Community Sustainability

Students' recognition of heritage's role in supporting local economies emphasizes the necessity of framing heritage education within broader community and sustainable development contexts. By explicitly connecting heritage preservation to livelihood opportunities, educational institutions can foster practical, economically relevant perspectives among students, promoting heritage as both culturally valuable and economically viable.

Identity and Community Belonging

The powerful transformations in students' sense of identity and belonging demonstrate the deeper potential of heritage education to foster community cohesion, personal pride, and cultural advocacy. Educational initiatives rooted in direct engagement with community heritage can significantly strengthen individual and collective cultural identities, cultivating students' long-term commitment to heritage preservation.

Recommendations

Grounded in the implications from the key findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Integration of Cultural Mapping Into General Education

Given the demonstrated effectiveness in transforming students' cultural awareness, educational institutions should institutionalize cultural mapping as a key component of general education history courses. This systematic integration would ensure that more students experience meaningful interactions with heritage and develop deeper appreciation, identity formation, and advocacy skills.

Emphasis on Economic and Sustainable Community Heritage

Curricula and cultural mapping projects should highlight heritage's economic and community sustainability. By integrating these practical dimensions into teaching, educators can enhance students' appreciation of heritage's multifaceted importance, equipping them to recognize and advocate for heritage preservation as a pathway to community resilience and economic growth.

Support for Identity-Based Educational Initiatives

Educational programs should prioritize activities that deepen students' cultural identities and community connections. Initiatives such as heritage site immersion, storytelling workshops, community dialogues, and reflective exercises should be regularly embedded within courses. These identity-based approaches will cultivate personal meaning and sustained heritage advocacy among students.

Collaboration With Local Heritage Stakeholders

Educational institutions are encouraged to actively collaborate with local heritage groups, community leaders, and cultural institutions. These partnerships will help ground cultural mapping activities within authentic community contexts, ensuring students' learning experiences are meaningful, community-oriented, and mutually beneficial.

Long-Term Evaluation of Cultural Impact

Future research should assess the long-term impacts of cultural mapping on students' cultural attitudes, professional paths, and community engagement. Such longitudinal studies would provide comprehensive evidence of the sustained effectiveness of cultural mapping in fostering heritage awareness, identity formation, and advocacy.

By adopting these recommendations, educational institutions can optimize the transformative potential of cultural mapping, significantly enhancing student learning experiences, community identity, and sustainable heritage preservation efforts.

Conclusion

This pedagogical case study examined how integrating cultural mapping into the tertiary-level course *Readings in Philippine History* effectively enhanced students' cultural awareness, appreciation, and advocacy for heritage preservation. Through active engagement, documentation, and critical reflection on heritage sites, students experienced a meaningful shift from passive recipients of historical knowledge to proactive, culturally-aware advocates.

Three significant findings emerged from this research. First, students transitioned from passive learning to active cultural engagement, revealing cultural mapping as a powerful experiential teaching tool. Second, students recognized heritage preservation's integral role in promoting community economic sustainability and livelihood, thus appreciating heritage's multidimensional importance. Third, immersive experiences allowed students to rediscover and articulate their cultural identities, strengthening their sense of community belonging and personal advocacy.

These insights have broader educational and community implications. They illustrate the effectiveness of cultural mapping in fostering a deeper connection between students and their heritage, supporting educational strategies that emphasize active learning, sustainable community development, and identity formation. Consequently, the study strongly recommends institutionalizing cultural mapping within history curricula, enhancing economic and community dimensions of heritage education, prioritizing identity-focused educational approaches, and forging stronger community partnerships.

In conclusion, cultural mapping has proven to be a transformative educational strategy. It empowers students to engage with heritage meaningfully, strengthens community ties, and ensures heritage education's relevance in contemporary society. By immersing students in their local culture, they gain an awareness of their heritage, which plays a vital role in the bigger picture of heritage preservation. As students transition from passive learners to committed stewards of cultural heritage, educational institutions play a crucial role in nurturing responsible, culturally engaged citizens prepared to advocate for sustainable community heritage preservation.

Declaration of Assistance and Ethical Use of AI and Digital Tools

This study acknowledges the use of AI language models, specifically OpenAI's ChatGPT, to assist in refining and improving the clarity, readability, and academic tone of the manuscript. Additionally, Grammarly software was employed to check for grammar, spelling, and style consistency throughout the manuscript.

All AI and digital assistance was carefully reviewed and critically integrated by the researchers to ensure alignment with academic integrity standards and the authentic voice of the study. No content was generated by AI without verification by the researchers. Student reflections and outputs were anonymized, and the research team conducted all data analysis. This statement affirms that while digital tools facilitated certain aspects of the writing and presentation process, the intellectual analysis, interpretations, and final decisions remain with the authors.

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Tactics in Networked Social Movements: Case Study of “Be Water” and the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement

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Abstract

The era of social media was said to be a great step of decentralization of discourses, while voices of minorities could be more easily heard. In social movement context, the usage of social media had been increasing, along with an optimistic view that usage of social media can encourage interactions and assemble of power (Wang et al., 2013). The highly-recognized strategy of “Be Water” is closely related to this background. Protestors used social media to communicate, discuss tactics and call for rallies, which had further influenced the social movements in Catalonia, Chile and Belarus. However, instead of celebrating the usage of network and social media in social movements, this article focuses on the limited effects of the “Be Water” tactic. With a panoramic view to the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (Anti-ELAB), this article analyzes two major incidents, the Polytechnic University conflict, which is a recognized major radical conflict; and the 616 protest, which is claimed to have the highest attendance throughout the whole Anti-ELAB. Online discourses from web forums, news reports and printed literatures are used for a textual and discourse analysis. While, I suggest that the online tactics in social movements did not completely change a social movement, while the difficulties and oppression faced by protestors are not being solved by these tactics. It is hoped to show that “Be Water” strategy and use of social media should not be too optimistically viewed, while lots of oppression are still remaining unsolved in social movement fields.

Keywords: Anti-ELAB, Anti-Extradition Bill Movement, be water, networked social movement, social movement tactics

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Introduction

The use of internet and social media in social movement scenes had been emerging. To discuss this phenomenon, Castells (2012) introduced the notion of **Networked Social Movement**, referring to the decentralized structure and self-driven action in social movements of internet era.

Networked Social Movement was treated as a great leap of speech freedom and democracy, especially in terms of how discussions and interactions are liberalized during online activities (Lin & Cheng, 2001; Su et al., 2022). Several studies (e.g., Lin & Cheng, 2001; Wang et al., 2013) had pointed out that decentralized social media make the spreading and interchanging of information much more efficient than before, which is important during a social movement scene where situations may change really fast. Moreover, the decentralized information spreading can avoid domination and framing from traditional media, whose reports were long criticized to be discursively affecting the social movement scene and introducing bias to the whole movement (Castells, 2012; Rucht, 2004). Other edges include the virtuality of internet that erased the territory barrier of mobilization and cross-region cooperation during actions (H. Lin & Cheng, 2001), and the decreasing costs in spreading information (Ruijgrok, 2017).

These discussions had led to an overall optimistic view towards the effects of social media on social movements (Chen et al., 2016). No matter in terms of media reporting, mobilization and discussions about social movements' actions, network and social media had given a more tentative and utopian future to social movements. Research like Eltantawy and Wiest (2011), Sommerfedlt (2013) and Wang (2017) had employed the classic theory of resources mobilization to describe this digital utopian view, which the improvement of communication technology was defined as an evolved resource that can be used by social movements. Empirical studies like Xie (2014) and Lee (2014) had also shown positive relations between using social media and political participation.

However, there are also researchers that questioned the importance of social media in social movement scenes. For example, Gladwell (2010, Oct) criticized the weak ties and low participation commitment of networked social movements' participants as slacktivism (a compound word of Slack and Activism), while Morozov (2011) further questioned on how much actual actions will online participants do for a social movement. These claims can be categorized as a form of cyber-dystopian (Nye, 2004), which is in contrast of the optimism that discussed in the last paragraph. Also, some scholars proposed a third route naming skepticism (see Lin, 2012; May, 2002), who emphasize that the distribution of resources online is still unfair and shaped by political, economic and social relations. Thus, in skepticism believers' eyes, going online had neither changed the actual situation of social movement nor contributed to a more liberated society.

There is not yet a solid conclusion that cyber-utopian, cyber-dystopian or skepticism is correct. However, in the actual social movement scene, the usage of social media, as to bring social movements new imaginations and possibilities, had become a normal practice within the recent decades (Chen, 2019; Chen et al., 2016). In this article, the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement (henceforth Anti-ELAB) in Hong Kong within 2019 to 2020 was chosen as a case study. The Anti-ELAB is one of the most concerned political movements in Sinophone society, while also the largest social movement in Hong Kong (Foundation on Asia-Pacific Peace Studies, 2019; Liu, 2021). The Anti-ELAB had significantly emphasized its decentralization and flexibility strategies during protests, which was later named "Be Water",

borrowing from the famous line of Bruce Lee, the local kungfu artist (Zhang, 2021). Article from *the Financial Times* further elaborated this strategy in a somehow poetic way:

‘Be strong like ice’ when confronted by police or violent vigilante groups; ‘be fluid like water’ in order to disrupt many parts of the city at once and stretch police resources; ‘gather like dew’ for ‘flash-mob’ protests that are hard to prepare for; ‘scatter like mist’ to avoid arrest and fight another day. (Anderlini, 2019, September 2)

The “Be Water” strategy had much linked with online activities from participants and protesters. Su et al. (2022) mentioned the usage of instant messaging (IM) software Telegram within protestors, which had better privacy and anonymity affordance than the other IM software like WhatsApp and Facebook which is used in the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Other common online tools include the LIHKG forum, which is also an anonymous platform where protesters and online participants can disseminate information, discussing strategies or rally locations and call for new actions (Lee, 2020). Protesters form Telegram channels or create posts on LIHKG forum to disseminate protest news, and radical protestors also use secret Telegram groups to discuss topics like confronting, buying weapons or flash-mob protests (Su et al., 2022). According to the interviews done by the documentary “Revolution of Our Times” (Team of “Revolution of Our Times”, 2022), there are also groups that helps protestors finding vehicles to leave the protest scene, offering unwanted gears in protest or even providing online medical consultation for injured frontline protesters.

Thus, Su et al. (2022) made a conclusion that the affordances of communication technology affected the Anti-ELAB movement and how the protesters “Be Water.” However, from Lee’s perspective (2020), instead of providing a chance of liberation, the interference of social media had actually led to problems like disinformation and aggravated the information politics.

This article’s problématique started from the above diverse opinion towards the usage of social media in Anti-ELAB. Does social media help liberate the actual scene of Anti-ELAB? Does the strategy of “Be Water” really being accentuated by the usage of social media? Throughout this article, I will hold a skepticism view and to argue that the use of social media in Anti-ELAB does not contribute to liberation, while this also does not affect the notion of “Be Water”. In the later sections, I will go for an overview of the concept of “Be Water” in different social movements; while also, the usage of social media in two major scenes in the Anti-ELAB, the Polytechnic University conflict (henceforth PolyU Conflict) and the 616 Protest will be further discussed and analyzed.

(Networked) Social Movements and “Be Waterness”

Obviously, before the Anti-ELAB, “Be Water” was not a concept or slogan that was used within social movement contexts. However, considering the characteristic that the notion of “Be Water” has, that may not be something brand new to social movements.

“Be Water,” as a social movement strategy, emphasizes its flexibility and decentralization (Zhang, 2021). Tai (2019 Dec) also added that anonymity is a feature of “Be Water,” extending the metaphor that protesters leave no stain for tracing. These three descriptions had been the common recognition of the notion of “Be Water.” However, tracing back to the

social movements before, I suggest that these three features are not only shown in and after the Anti-ELAB. I will discuss some cases in the following paragraphs.

Flexibility

Social movements were defined as a group of people with common goals or aims continuously interacting with elites, governments or people with power (Ho, 2005). In this sense, the strategies of protesters vary in different movements, as to face different types of opposition or fit into different contexts. For example, in green activism groups, protesters raise plants on land that does not belong to them, as a flexible participation that allow people from worldwide to join (Hardman et al., 2018). West German students in 1960s used humorous tactics to promote their protest, as to gain spotlights and discussions (Teune, 2007). China protesters holding blank white paper, instead of propaganda slogans, to show their anger to the Chinese government's pandemic measures, as to prevent being accused by the government (Huang & Kung, 2022). These examples demonstrate that social movements' participants are always needing to create new strategies to face the predictable oppression from the authorities.

In the Anti-ELAB, protesters' flexibility was mainly reflected in their quick mobilization. Protesters gathered fast when rallies were called and dispersed fast when riot police came. Also, protests took place in anywhere in Hong Kong in a "flash-mob" sense, as to consume the power of the riot police, which were described as a form of guerrilla (Wong, 2023). However, it is worth reminding that guerrilla, as a strategy, had been well developed in social movement context (Bloom et al., 2021). Wickham-Crowley (2022) added that guerrilla movements are useful when the authority is tightening the freedom or showing serious oppression. Under this concept, I would like to add a note, that facing serious oppression and tightening freedom is somehow common in social movement scenes, which is the main reason why social movements (including Anti-ELAB) are "guerrillarize." The use of social media may be a tool that helps spread the thought and tactics on guerrilla protests; however, were not a key feature that made guerrilla protests happen.

Decentralization

Decentralization had been a key feature in networked social movements, as it is believed that the emerging social media can break the domination of discourse from the traditional media (Castells, 2012). Under this decentralization process, people with different social capital became equal on social media, and thus voices of minorities and oppressed groups could be more easily heard (Chen et al., 2016).

In the Anti-ELAB, decentralization is also a core notion and strategy, naming MouDaaiToi (無大台, No Main Organizer). It is a well-known slogan during the movement (Ma, 2020). However, it is worth noted that, the decentralization in Anti-ELAB is mainly based on a correction from the defeat in the Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Ho, 2020). In the Umbrella Movement, protesters occupied and stayed at the main roads in Hong Kong for 79 days. Protesters and organizers promote slogan of "Protest peacefully" (和平抗爭) and suggest protester to show their courage by sitting right on the road to let the riot police to arrest them; which had later been criticized as the reason of unsuccessful social movement (Passion Times, 2016). This defeat had led to the emerging groups of valiant activists after 2014 (Chan & Ng, 2017). They despise the traditional democratic groups that usually takes a mild and peaceful stance in social movements, for example, the Civil Human Right Fronts and the Hong Kong

Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, who are always the organizer of major demonstrations and rallies in Hong Kong (Chan & Ng, 2017). In other words, the decentralization strategy in Anti-ELAB is mainly due to a distrust to usual organizers, but not a result of the emerging social media usage. Again, in this case, social media can only be treated as a tool or accelerant that made decentralization **more** possible.

Anonymity

In protest scenes, especially when the risk of being arrested is high, people tend to go for anonymous plans, in order not to be traced by the authority (Ho, 2005). In the Anti-ELAB, anonymity is shown on the black bloc tactic of protesters which make their identity hidden in the actual scene (Ma, 2020). Protesters used a black bloc costume with gas masks to block their whole body, mainly to ensure that police will not be able to trace them afterwards by their clothing or faces (Ma, 2020). However, it is worth noted that black bloc, or masks like the “V for Venetta” mask, is already a well-established social movement gear, which is commonly used in protests like the German black bloc movement in the late Cold War period and the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. In other words, the anonymity strategy of Anti-ELAB in protest scenes is quite universal and common.

If we put our attention back to online, the use of Telegram and LIHKG forum, which I discussed in the previous section, is also a sense of anonymity. Protesters relied on the encrypting function of Telegram and delete their conversation messages time to time to prevent being traced (Su et al., 2022). Under this high concern on anonymity, protesters are safer when discussing tactics online, as it is believed that the police will monitor online speeches and discussions (Ma, 2020). In a cyber-utopian perspective, these measures seem to use social media well and accentuated freedom of speech. However, here I would like to argue that these kinds of secret, private conversations can still be accomplished even without social media — just imagine the secret societies like XingZhongHui (興中會) by Sun Yat Sen during the late Qing period. There is always a need to have secret conversations during social or political movements, while social media is just a new field that provides a virtual place for protesters to sit down and discuss. Moreover, it is also a doubt that did those social media like Telegram and LIHKG forum really do their job to protect the protesters’ anonymity, or is actually leading to another route of governmental monitoring (this will be discussed further in the case study section). To conclude, the usage of gears or tools to hide the actual identity, no matter at the protest scene or online, is not a strategy that invented under the notion of “Be Water”. Instead, it is a certain outcome when the authority tries to use different ways to monitor or trace the identity of protesters, no matter if we are in a web era or in the 1900s.

The previous paragraphs discussed the three characteristics of “Be Water.” While it is clear that, after all, “Be Water” as a strategy, is just a constructed notion after the Anti-ELAB commenced, as to describe the action of protesters or even the whole social movement.¹ It is not realistic to expect any special power of “Be Water” which made Anti-ELAB totally different from other previous social movements. Also, these features of “Be Water” is not tightly related to social media. Similar strategies were always there, while social movement examples before the web era had shown also their strategies of how to “Be Water”. In other words, “Be Water” did not pop out due to the usage of social media. In the next part of case studies, I will go through two significant incidents in the Anti-ELAB and evaluate the

¹ The Anti-ELAB was once named “Water Revolution,” under the notion of “Be Water.” For such naming, see news article by Anderlini (2019 September 2).

interaction between the usage of social media, “Be Water” strategy and the actual scene of the movement.

Scenes in Anti-ELAB

In this article, two major scenes in the Anti-ELAB were chosen for case study, which is the PolyU Incident and the 616 Protest. PolyU Incident refers to the conflict of protesters and riot police around the Hong Kong Polytechnic University during 13th to 29th November, 2019. Within the PolyU Incident, riot police proposed a blockade for more than a week on protesters staying inside the PolyU and bombarded them with tear gas and water cannon vehicles, while protesters resisted with Molotov cocktails and bricks (Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020). The PolyU Incident was described as the biggest confront between protesters and riot police within the whole Anti-ELAB.

The second scene chosen for case study is the 616 Protest on the 16th June, 2019. It was the biggest-ever protest in Hong Kong history, which the organizer claimed for a two-million participants joining the rally.² This rally was concerned and highlighted by major media worldwide, like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*; while they addressed the rally as orderly and peaceful (Bradsher & Victor, 2019, June 16). The choosing of these two scenes is aimed to include the major incidents in the Anti-ELAB, especially to address both the both the Valiants and the WoLeiFeis.³ So, a rather radical protest and a comparatively peaceful protest scene is chosen for analysis. Below, I will go deep into these two scenes and discuss their usage of social media during the protest.

PolyU Incident

The PolyU incident was described as the biggest confront of protesters and police during the Anti-ELAB. Commencing on the 11th November, 2019, the incident elevated within a few days, while the police proposed a blockade to the whole campus of PolyU on 17th November, after several serious conflicts with the protesters (for more about PolyU incident, see Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020). The police defined the whole PolyU incident as a riot, while it is claimed that all people staying inside or entering PolyU would be arrested and charged. The blockade continued for nearly two weeks, with no medical aid or food were allowed to enter the campus. During the blockade, 1377 protesters were arrested, and unknown numbers of protesters escaped successfully through abseiling from pedestrian bridges, climbing out the campus to the railway tracks or even by crawling through the sewerage (Yeung, 2019, Nov 29). The PolyU incident was described as a humanitarian disaster (Mann, 2019).

The protesters in PolyU were originally aiming to support the labor strikes actions by paralyzing transportations in Hung Hom metro station and the Cross-Harbour Tunnel, both right next to the PolyU. However, after the blockade started, the major focus of protesters

² The actual number of participants claimed by the organizer, Civil Human Rights Front, is two million plus one. The added one refers to Mr. Leung Ling-Kit, who committed suicide when showing banners supporting the Anti-ELAB one day before the 616 protest. His suicide was also a reason of the large number of participants in the 616 protest.

³ WoLeiFei is a Hongkongese abbreviation of Wo (和, Peaceful), Lei (理, Rational) and Fei (非, Non-violent). This notion is commonly used in the Anti-ELAB referring to the protesters who will not directly confront the police, but to take a rather peaceful attitude during demonstrations. For more discussion on this concept, see Ma (2020).

quickly shifted to “how to escape.” Under the strategy of “not dividing the Valiants and WoLeiFeis” (和勇不分), finding routes to escape the PolyU had become a mission of protesters that could not join the actual protest scene, while they were described as keyboard fighters or keyboard supporters.

To understand the online discourse of PolyU Incident, I used PolyU (理大) and Polytechnic University (理工大學) as keywords and archived a total of ten discussions about the incident in the LIHKG forum. They all have more than 500 comments and 500 likes, which shows their popularity among all posts related to the incident. These posts mostly started during the PolyU Incident, as a form of live discussion, including strategy negotiation, real-time information sharing or sharing of online news. After grouping those discourses together, it is found that disinformation is filled in online discussion about PolyU incident. For example, a post with more than 1700 likes is named “PolyU may be the second June fourth incident,” and stating that the China People’s Liberation Army had started marching in the city, which will soon enter PolyU and commence a massacre. The post is echoed by tons of comments, while most of them did not raise any question about where the information is from. Another obvious disinformation topics included like “Protesters arrested in PolyU is sent to China by railway,” “Protesters had invented chlorine gas bottle as weapons against the police,” which are all similar situation of disinformation with no obvious evidence provided.

Disinformation within the Anti-ELAB is discussed in Lee (2020). Lee (2020) argued that the tons of disinformation had led to distrust within protesters; also, under the scheme of not having a responsible group in charge, the problem of disinformation had accelerated, as no one is capable to give a strong-enough clarification to the situation. This had led to several problems in the PolyU Incident. First, one of the major missions of online supporters should be finding paths for protesters inside PolyU to leave safely. However, under these disinformation, any secret route posted on online forums may be considered suspicious, or can be a trap of the police. This mistrust had weakened the power of “Be Water,” as online protesters cannot effectively get their job done through a highly-engaged usage of social media as a protest platform.

616 Protest

The 616 Protest on the 16th June, 2019 was at the very beginning of the entire Anti-ELAB, and was when the well-known “Five Demands” of the Anti-ELAB protesters formed. Right before the day of the Protest, the then Chief Executive, Ms. Carrie Lam had posted a suspend of the ELAB, but the protesters demanded for a total withdraw of the law. The unsatisfactory reply of Carrie Lam had led to a huge amount of crowds onto the street. Also the day before the Protest, a Hongkonger named Leung Man Kit commit suicide at the Pacific Place, an iconic building on the normal demonstration route, with banners and slogans supporting the Anti-ELAB movement. This had also emotionally affected crowds to step onto the street, while Leung Man Kit, with his yellow raincoat, had then become a symbolic icon of the whole movement.

Under these reasons, the 616 Protest eventually brought 2 million plus one Hongkonger to the street, according to the Civil Human Rights Front who organize the protest.⁴ Unlike the latter

⁴ The actual number of protesters is unknown and disputable, while figures from pro-government groups and pro-democracy groups showed big difference. For example, the estimated protester numbers were just 380000 from the Hong Kong Police. This will be discussed further in the below paragraphs.

protests that protesters were separated into Valiants and WoLeiFei groups, the 616 Protest can be described as peaceful and of good order. At the time, protesters were not aiming to arm themselves and fight against the riot police. Instead, they were trying to show how peaceful and civilized can Hong Kong protesters be. They consciously perform themselves as peaceful protesters, and just alike every social movement (see Rone, 2022), protester try to gain media coverage by showing their good image. “Not visually satisfying” (畫面唔靚) even became a common critique to Valiants who enact rather radical confrontation to the police force. Due to the clear aim of gaining media support, I used this protest as a case to show how online discourses may interfere the aim of the protesters.

The essence of a mass protest can be the number of participants. Attendance in protest is always a contested figure in social movements (Tilly, 2004), where both sides will tend to propose a number conducive to their stance and discourse. The official number of participants in the 616 protest was 2 million plus one and 340,000 respectively, according to the organizer and the police force’s claim. The huge difference had led to questions from medias, especially from foreign press who may not be able to witness the event (see Scarr et al., 2019, June 20). Many scholars and organizations tried to use scientific way for a more accurate measure, for example, Lee Hong-yin had estimated a figure of 892,000 to 1,442,000 using big data prediction (cf. Lin, 2019). Post-legislative council member Edward Yiu had claimed a number between 1,120,000 to 1,840,000 based on a population calculation formula (see EcyY, 2019). These figures, with a clear calculation method stated, had higher credibility than the previous two figures from the official. However, the number of 2 million plus one is too well-established that attracted news media to use. In online discourse, serious echo chamber effect had also restrained discussions about the actual protest figure. At the end, no foreign media or major local media had quoted the above measurements, while a questionable figure had dominated discourses on news media and online platforms.

This shows another weakness of networked social movements. From an optimistic view, social media had made many discussions possible, especially for the minorities (Chen et al., 2016). However, under the recent evolution of online algorithm, an obvious echo chamber is made, while questioning an established discourse (or figure of protest) became increasing difficult. In fact, it had even provided a room for disinformation or misinformation to spread, as information can easily be communed under a viral phenomenon. In this sense, social media platform had still a long way to go, before stating itself liberating the freedom of speech.

Conclusion: The Myth of “Be Water” and Networked Social Movements

This essay is not trying to go against the notion of “Be Water.” In fact, “Be Water” as a social movement strategy, had long been proved effective, although using some kinds of different names like guerrilla protest (see Bloom et al., 2021). The main concept of “Be-waterness” like decentralization, anonymity and flexibility is also shown in the Anti-ELAB even without online participation. So, what I am arguing is that the social media environment did not actually prepare a better environment to enhance this notion. Instead, under a highly-anonymous sphere, it is easy for disinformation or penetration of the government to hide within protesters’ online discourses. This brought me to another Anti-ELAB notion of “Catching Spy” (捉鬼), referring to what the protester did to spot police or pro-government citizens hidden in protesters’ crowd, who will create violent scene and provide reasons for the true police to come and arrest the protesters. Catching Spy is not always a successful action (see Ho, 2025); however, it is obvious that comparing to catching in real protest scene,

catching spy in online platform will be much more difficult. This had led to an unresolvable problem of online protest, that anonymity must have to face.

It is no doubt that networked social movement had its own strengths. For example, in terms of mobility, social media is undoubtedly an important tool to reach as much people as possible. However, even for this claim, there are still critiques arguing that the mobilized crowd in social media is just a form of slacktivism (Piat, 2019). This debate actually concluded this article: networked social movement is not a liberation, but instead a totally different environment of social movements, where new pros and cons both emerged. It required new bunch of strategies and epistemologies towards social movements in a new form. Before we can celebrate for a liberation of speech, much more researches and conceptualization works are yet be done.

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Cross-Cultural Interpretations of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in Southeast Asia: A Review

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Abstract

This literature review examines the state of research on the presence of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a Chinese classical literature, in several Southeast Asian countries. The study aims to explore the cultural significance, adaptations, and interpretations of the novel within the region, highlighting its enduring influence across diverse contexts. Using a search of literature from 2000 to 2024 on mainly Google Scholar, the review emphasizes how elements of the novel—loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism—manifest in Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In Vietnam, research documents the integration of the novel's characters and narratives into folklore and resistance traditions. In Thailand, studies reveal its influence on folk tales and traditional theater. In Malaysia and Singapore, scholars emphasize its role in media, political discourse, and educational materials within Chinese communities. In Indonesia, the novel's themes are shown to merge with local folklore and contemporary adaptations, reflecting historical Sino-Southeast Asian interactions. This review provides evidence of the novel's enduring popularity across the region while identifying gaps in the literature, particularly in comparative studies and underexplored cultural dimensions, paving the way for future research into its cross-cultural interpretations.

Keywords: Southeast Asian folk culture, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, cultural adaptation, cross-cultural influence

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Introduction

The classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义)(hereafter, RTK), attributed to Luo Guanzhong (罗贯中) in the 14th century (G. Luo, 2004), is a monumental work of historical fiction and one of the “Four Great Classical Novels” of Chinese literature. The novel’s historical backdrop is the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 CE), a time marked by the fragmentation of the Han Empire, widespread war, and the eventual division of China into three rival states: Wei, Shu, and Wu (Besio & Tung, 2012; Chittick, 2001). This era, often romanticized in Chinese culture, represents both the chaos of disunity and the aspiration for reunification. The narrative vividly portrays legendary figures such as Liu Bei (刘备), Cao Cao (曹操), Guan Yu (关羽) and Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮), whose political cunning and martial prowess symbolize the era’s ethos. The novel captures the complex interplay of loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism. These themes are deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy and Daoist thought, which advocate for moral righteousness, wise leadership, and balance in governance. Widely celebrated for its complexity and philosophical insights, the novel has left an indelible mark on Chinese literary tradition and cultural identity (Eoyang et al., 2021; Mair, 2001). As a semi-historical account, the novel intertwines documented events with fictionalized episodes, contributing to its dual role as both a historical and cultural artifact (De Crespigny, 2010; Vaughn-Lewis, 2009).

Research on RTK has flourished in China, where scholars have extensively analyzed its historical accuracy, literary artistry, and philosophical underpinnings (Fan & Li, 2021; Sun, 2022; Teck Foo, 2008; Zhao & Xu, 2024). Beyond China, studies in Japan (Batson, 2023; Kai, 2017) and Korea (Kwon, 2023; Miao, 2009; Yuan, 2019) have examined its influence on local literature, theater, and popular media, underscoring the novel’s regional significance. In Western academia, it has been translated (Fang & Hou, 2024; C. Liu, 2018; W. Liu & Zou, 2023) and explored through the lens of comparative literature and cultural studies, often focusing on its themes of power, morality, and identity (Clark, 2012; Eoyang et al., 2021; Lei, 2014; J. Luo, 2022). Despite its global reach, however, less attention has been paid to its reception and adaptations in Southeast Asia (SEA), where the novel’s influence manifests uniquely within diverse cultural landscapes.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the cross-cultural interpretations of RTK in SEA. Specifically, it seeks to explore how the novel’s themes resonate with local traditions and societal values in SEA countries including Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. By synthesizing existing literature, the review highlights the novel’s enduring legacy in the region while identifying underexplored cultural dimensions and potential avenues for future research. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel’s global and regional significance, emphasizing its role as a bridge between Chinese and SEA cultural histories.

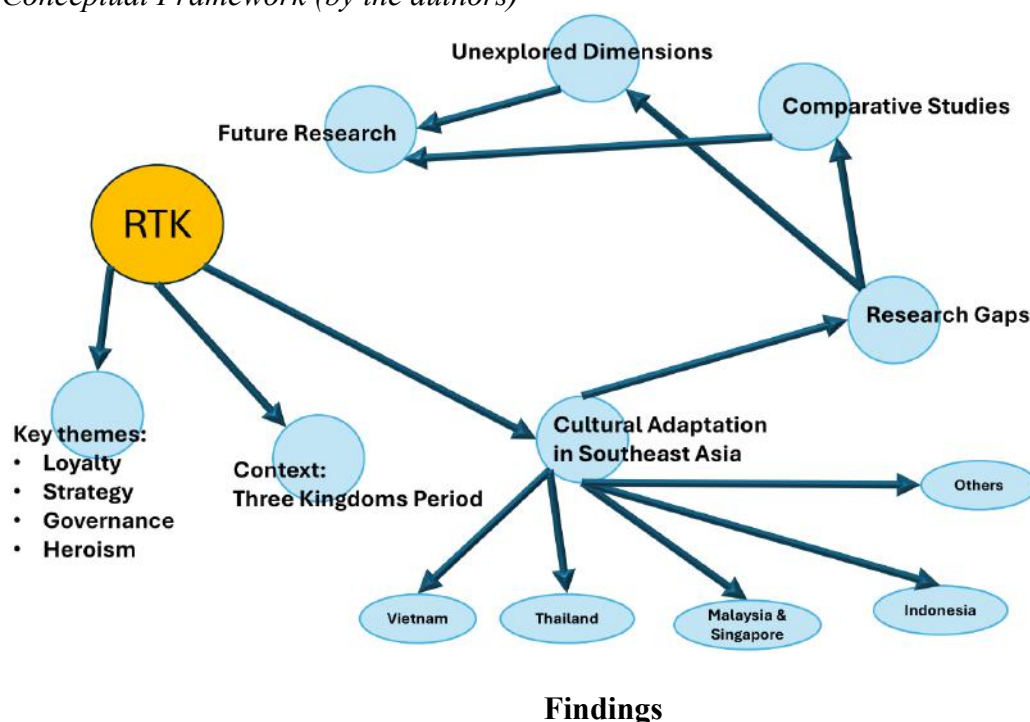
Methodology

This literature review employs a qualitative synthesis of studies published since 2000. Search terms included “Romance of the Three Kingdoms,” “Southeast Asia,” “cultural adaptation,” and country-specific combinations. The search language was limited to English only. Selected studies encompass journal articles, book chapters, and dissertations that address cross-cultural interpretations and adaptations of the novel in the region. This methodology enables an examination of thematic patterns, national adaptations, and research gaps.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework to represent the relationships and thematic connections outlined in the manuscript. At its core is the RTK, a classic literary work. The framework highlights key themes such as loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism, connecting them to their historical and cultural adaptations across SEA. Each region—Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore, and Indonesia—is explored individually, emphasizing how these themes are localized within their cultural contexts. Additionally, the framework identifies research gaps, including the need for comparative studies and exploration of new cultural dimensions. These gaps pave the way for future research directions.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework (by the authors)



Vietnam

Vietnam's culture is influenced by the principles of Confucianism, which emphasize hierarchy, loyalty, filial piety, and the cultivation of moral integrity (Tho, 2016). In Vietnam, RTK occupies a firm position in folklore and cultural traditions, mainly via verbal propagation. It's influence has a history with the migration of the Chinese to the Southeast region, who worship Guan Yu as a special way of existence (Bui et al., 2024). The first full text Vietnamese translation of RTK was known to be published in 1907, consisting of 31 illustrated volumes. In 1909, another translated version was introduced in northern Vietnam. Subsequent reprints and adaptations followed, including different versions published during and after Vietnam war (Fang & Hou, 2021).

The novel has also significantly influenced Vietnamese cultural practices and media. Guan Yu (Hue Khai, 2013) and Zhuge Liang (Wikipedia, n.d.-a) are celebrated as paragons of loyalty and wisdom, respectively. These figures have transcended their original context to become symbols of moral excellence in Vietnamese storytelling and even religious practices. Especially, Guan Yu is often worshipped as a deity in numerous Vietnamese shrines, reflecting his status in local traditions (Hue Khai, 2013; Wikipedia, n.d.-c). Vietnamese

theater and television have further emphasized the novel's narrative depth and ethical themes. Traditional *cailuong* (local opera) has integrated elements of the novel, blending them with indigenous musical and storytelling forms. Theatrical adaptations of RTK have been widely present in Vietnam since the early 20th century. Currently, there are over 40 scripts and adaptations of RTK performed on the *cailuong* stage (Dang, 2021).

In Vietnam, RTK is known to be popular as a tool for teaching moral values and strategic thinking. The novel's lessons on governance and diplomacy are often cited in academic discussions on leadership and political science. However, there are significant literature gaps in research focusing on this topic. Similarly, it is believed that the RTK video games have been particularly popular in East and SEA, including Vietnam. Yet, a lack of research has led to persistent literature gaps regarding the popularity and impact of these games.

Thailand

In Thailand, RTK has influenced folk tales, traditional theater, and storytelling traditions. Studies highlight how its themes have been localized, often blending with Thai folklore and Buddhist principles. Thai adaptations of the novel—including serialized dramas and performances—emphasize the moral lessons of loyalty and leadership. The novel's enduring appeal is evident in the continued production of Thai-language translations and popular adaptations. In 1802, to revive Thai classical literature after the Thai-Burmese War, the King of Bangkok ordered to translate the RTK, known as *Samkok* (Dilokwanich, 1985). Over the next two centuries, *Samkok* gained immense popularity and was highly praised by Thais, producing numerous adaptations, translations, and re-creations. Chapters like “Borrowing Arrows With Thatched Boats” (草船借箭) were later included in Thai secondary school textbooks (Fang & Hou, 2021). The comics adaptation of RTK which were popular in Thailand in recent decades (Verstappen, 2017). In Thailand, RTK has permeated cultural traditions, particularly through its integration into folk narratives and traditional theater. The novel, locally known as *Sam Kok* (Dilokwanich, 1985), has been adapted into *Likay* (a form of traditional Thai folk theater), showcasing its themes of loyalty, heroism, and strategic thinking. These performances often reinterpret the novel's characters and events through a distinctly Thai lens, blending Chinese historical narratives with Buddhist moral teachings (Thak, 2018).

The novel's influence in Thailand extends beyond traditional performances to modern adaptations. Thai television has produced multiple series based on RTK, presenting the epic tales in serialized drama formats (Chinadaily, 2019). These productions have introduced the novel to a broader audience, emphasizing the moral and strategic lessons that resonate with Thai cultural values. For instance, the depiction of Zhuge Liang as a wise strategist aligns with Thai admiration for intelligence and leadership, while the loyalty of Guan Yu inspires reflections on personal and familial obligations (Iamsa-ard et al., 2023). Furthermore, the Thai Chinese community has played a crucial role in preserving and promoting the novel's legacy. Chinese schools in Thailand often include *Samkok* in their curriculum, using it to teach lessons on governance, morality, and historical consciousness (Iamsa-ard et al., 2023). This educational emphasis highlights the novel's enduring role as a cultural bridge between Chinese heritage and Thai society (Thak, 2018).

Despite its popularity, there are gaps in comparative studies that examine how Thai interpretations of RTK differ from those in other SEA countries. Additionally, more research

is needed on the impact of digital media and gaming adaptations of the novel within the Thai context, which could shed light on its evolving reception among younger audiences.

Malaysia and Singapore

Malaysia and Singapore present a unique context where the novel's influence intersects with Chinese diaspora communities. Scholars emphasize its presence in Chinese-language media, educational materials, and political discourse. For example, the novel's themes of governance and strategy have been cited in discussions of political leadership within Chinese-majority communities. Additionally, adaptations of the novel in television, films, and video games have reinforced its cultural resonance in these multicultural societies.

In Malaysia and Singapore, RTK holds a unique position, reflecting the cultural and historical experiences of their significant Chinese diaspora communities (Fang & Hou, 2021). The novel, often read in its original Chinese or translated into English and Malay, serves as both an educational tool and a cultural touchstone. In schools and cultural institutions, it is used to impart lessons on morality, governance, and strategy, reinforcing connections to Chinese heritage. The translation of the RTK first appeared on the Malay Peninsula, translated into Baba Malay and was gradually published in Singapore (BiblioAsia, 2016). In 1992, in Malaysia released a Malay comic adaptation. In 2012, the Malay translation of the RTK was launched in Malaysia thanks to the efforts of publishing houses and the government, which widely disseminated RTK in Malaysia (Fang & Hou, 2021).

In Malaysia, the novel has found its way into local media and entertainment, with adaptations that blend traditional narratives with modern elements (Wikipedia, n.d.-b). For instance, Chinese-language newspapers and television channels frequently reference the novel, drawing parallels between its characters and contemporary political figures. These adaptations often highlight the novel's enduring relevance in discussions of leadership and ethics within Malaysia's multicultural context (WACCCE, 2019). In Singapore, through its bilingual policy, the government has been committed to creating a pool of bicultural talents, by supplementing the teaching of Chinese language with classes on Chinese literature and culture (Li & Qu, 2016). The novel plays a role in fostering cultural identity among Chinese Singaporeans. The themes of loyalty and governance resonate deeply, often used in public discourse and educational curricula to emphasize the importance of moral leadership and collective responsibility. Cultural festivals and literary events occasionally feature dramatizations or discussions of the novel, showcasing its continued relevance in Singaporean society.

Both countries have also embraced digital and gaming adaptations of RTK, with mobile games and online platforms providing new ways to engage with its narratives (Wikipedia, n.d.-d). These adaptations, localized for Malaysian and Singaporean audiences, often incorporate multilingual support and culturally specific marketing, making them accessible to diverse demographics (Wu & Chen, 2020). This digital engagement underscores the novel's adaptability and its ability to connect with modern audiences across generations. However, there remains a lack of comparative research exploring the differing receptions and adaptations of the novel in Malaysia and Singapore. Future studies could examine how each country's unique sociopolitical and cultural contexts shape their interpretations of this Chinese literary classic.

Indonesia

In Indonesia, RTK has merged with local folklore and contemporary adaptations, reflecting the historical interactions between Chinese and Indonesian cultures. Studies note its integration into Wayang theater, where characters and themes are reinterpreted within Javanese and Balinese traditions. Wayang, a traditional form of puppet theater, includes various types such as wayang kulit (leather shadow puppets) and wayang golek (three-dimensional wooden puppets), and is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of Java and Bali (Chandra, 2019). The dramatic stories depicted in wayang performances often draw from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as local adaptations of cultural legends (Chandra, 2019).

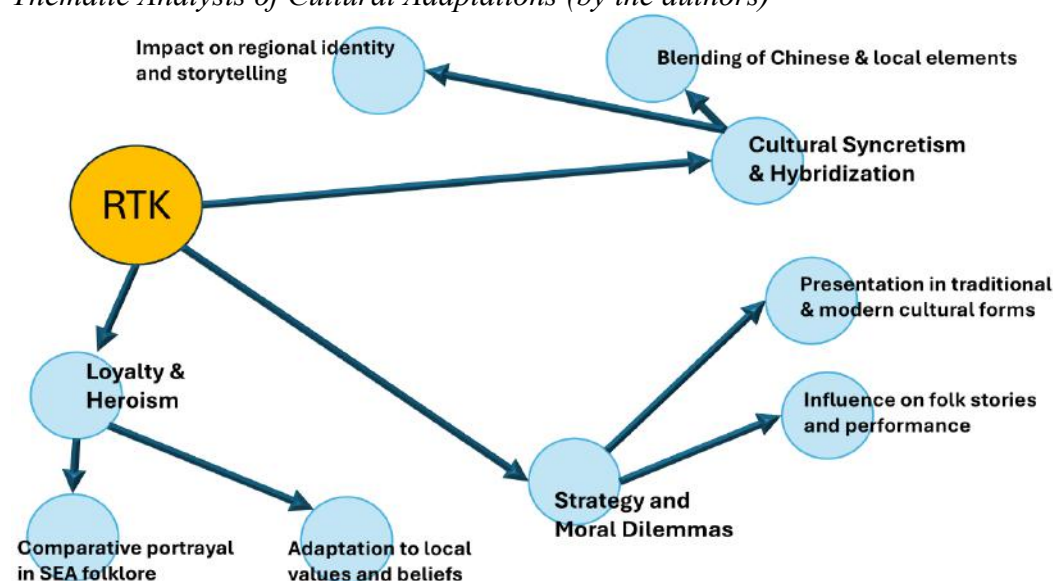
The novel has also inspired Indonesian authors and filmmakers to create modern adaptations that align with local cultural and historical narratives. For instance, the process of translation and adaptation of RTK into Indonesian contexts has led to unique interpretations that resonate with Indonesian audiences. These adaptations often incorporate elements of Indonesian history and folklore, making the stories more relatable and culturally significant (Budhwar, 2023). Additionally, the influence of Chinese culture in Indonesia is evident in various aspects of contemporary Indonesian society, including literature, cinema, and theater (Hoon & Yeremia, 2024). The integration of RTK into Indonesian culture highlights the rich tapestry of cultural exchange and mutual influence between China and Indonesia over the centuries.

Other Southeast Asian Countries

In other SEA countries such as the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, the influence of RTK appears more limited. What is known suggests that the novel's presence is primarily linked to the Chinese diaspora communities, where it serves as a cultural artifact connecting these populations to their ancestral heritage. Chinese schools, local associations, and media outlets sometimes feature references to the novel, reinforcing its value within these communities (Fang & Hou, 2021). However, there is a noticeable dearth of scholarly literature and research exploring the novel's impact in these countries. Unlike Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, or Singapore, where RTK has been actively adapted and studied, its reception in other SEA nations remains largely undocumented. This research gap highlights the need for comparative and localized studies to understand whether and how the novel influences cultural or social dynamics beyond the Chinese diaspora. Addressing these gaps would enrich the broader understanding of RTK as a transnational literary phenomenon.

Thematic Analysis of Cultural Adaptations

Figure 2 outlines the key themes derived from the cross-cultural interpretations of RTK in SEA. It centers on three main themes, each theme branches into specific aspects that highlight how the elements have been localized into SEA culture.

Figure 2*Thematic Analysis of Cultural Adaptations (by the authors)*

Loyalty and Heroism

A recurring theme in RTK, loyalty and heroism have been widely embraced in SEA cultural adaptations. Figures like Guan Yu symbolize unwavering loyalty, resonating deeply with historical struggles for independence in Vietnam (Hue Khai, 2013), or in Thailand through performances, which reinterpret the novel's heroic narratives to align with Buddhist principles of moral righteousness (Iamsa-ard et al., 2023). In Malaysia and Singapore, the emphasis on heroism often intertwines with the Chinese diaspora's cultural identity, highlighting moral and communal obligations in their storytelling traditions (Lei, 2014). These adaptations illustrate how loyalty and heroism from the novel are not merely replicated but reshaped to reflect local societal values. For example, while the original Chinese text often frames loyalty in a hierarchical Confucian context, SEA interpretations frequently democratize these values, emphasizing communal solidarity and individual moral choices.

Strategy and Moral Dilemmas

The novel's war strategy depth and portrayal of moral dilemmas have profoundly influenced SEA folk stories and performances. Zhuge Liang's tactical brilliance has inspired numerous tales and performances, often serving as allegories for political wisdom and ethical governance (Clark, 2012). Strategic narratives from the novel are incorporated into traditional drama, where characters face complex moral decisions that resonate with Buddhist teachings about karma and ethical conduct (Thak, 2018). Modern adaptations, such as television series and digital media, further explore these themes. Malaysian adaptations, for instance, juxtapose the novel's emphasis on strategy with contemporary issues like governance and leadership ethics (Shuo, 2024; Zhao & Xu, 2024). Across the region, these cultural forms demonstrate how strategy and moral dilemmas from the novel continue to engage audiences, offering lessons that transcend their historical origins.

Cultural Syncretism and Hybridization

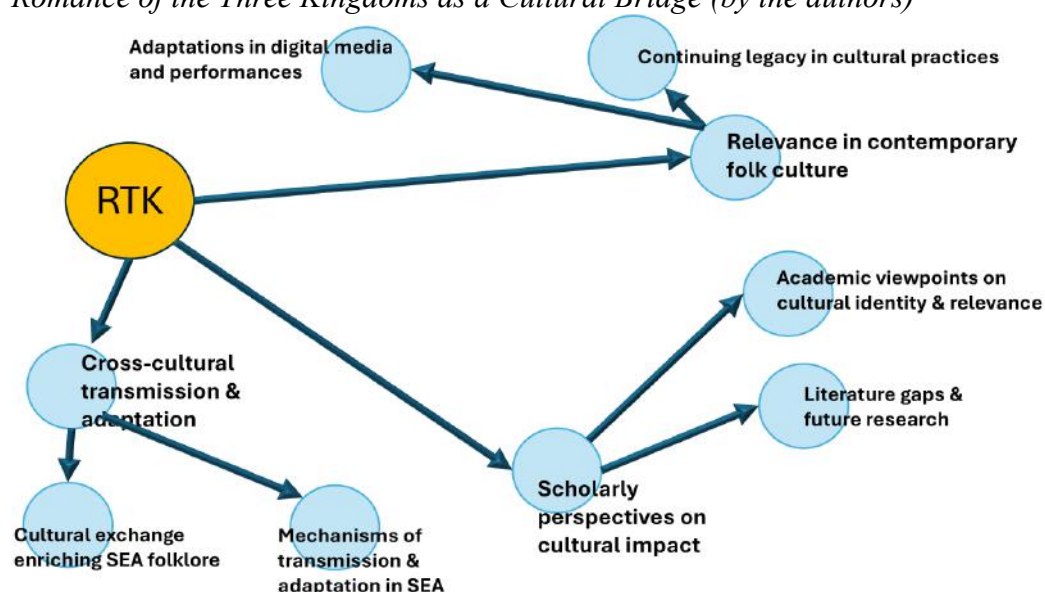
One of the most striking aspects of RTK in SEA is the blending of Chinese and local cultural elements, a process known as cultural syncretism. In Indonesia, the integration of the novel into Wayang theater showcases this hybridization, merging Chinese characters and plots with Javanese storytelling traditions (Budhwar, 2023; Chandra, 2019). Similarly, in Malaysia and Singapore, hybrid adaptations often reflect the multicultural fabric of these societies, incorporating elements from Malay, Indian, and Western cultures alongside the Chinese core (W. Liu & Zou, 2023; WACCCE, 2019). This cultural syncretism not only enriches traditional storytelling methods but also contributes to the evolving regional identity. By blending elements from different traditions, these adaptations ensure the preservation and continued relevance of both Chinese and local cultural heritage, creating a unique narrative space that celebrates diversity.

Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a Cultural Bridge

Figure 3 illustrates the discussion of RTK as a cultural bridge, emphasizing its thematic organization into three core components, each component is further divided into specific aspects.

Figure 3

Romance of the Three Kingdoms as a Cultural Bridge (by the authors)



Cross-Cultural Transmission and Adaptation

The transmission and adaptation of RTK across SEA occurred through historical migration, trade, and cultural exchange, particularly facilitated by Chinese diasporas (Besio & Tung, 2012; Budhwar, 2023; Bui et al., 2024; Thak, 2018). The novel was introduced through oral storytelling, printed translations, and later, modern media such as television and games. These mechanisms have allowed the novel to become integrated into local traditions while retaining its core themes of loyalty, strategy, and governance. Literature highlights how these cultural exchanges have enriched SEA folklore, infusing Chinese narratives into indigenous art forms such as wayang in Indonesia and likay in Thailand (Chandra, 2019; Fang & Hou, 2021; WACCCE, 2019).

Scholarly Perspectives on Cultural Impact

Scholars widely acknowledge the novel's influence in shaping cultural identities in SEA, particularly among Chinese diasporas. Academic studies point to the novel's role in reinforcing communal values and serving as a medium for moral instruction. However, significant gaps remain in understanding its broader societal impact beyond diaspora contexts. For instance, while its integration into educational and artistic practices has been documented in some countries (Kwon, 2023; Li & Qu, 2016; Tho, 2016), comparative studies exploring its reception across the region are scarce. Future research should address these gaps, focusing on underexplored areas such as the novel's influence on contemporary political discourse and its relevance in non-Chinese-majority communities (Eoyang et al., 2021).

Relevance in Contemporary Folk Culture

RTK continues to inspire cultural practices in SEA today, demonstrating its adaptability and enduring appeal. Modern adaptations, such as television dramas, digital games, and online content, have introduced the novel to younger audiences, ensuring its legacy in contemporary popular culture. For example, mobile gaming adaptations have become especially popular in Malaysia and Singapore, offering interactive ways to engage with the novel's themes (Wu & Chen, 2020). Additionally, live performances and cultural festivals frequently draw on the novel's narratives, blending traditional and modern elements to keep the storytelling vibrant. These modern interpretations underscore the novel's capacity to evolve with changing cultural landscapes while preserving its historical and literary significance.

Conclusion

This review highlights the widespread influence of RTK in SEA, where it continues to inspire cultural adaptations and academic inquiry. Its themes of loyalty, strategy, governance, and heroism remain relevant, bridging historical Sino-SEA interactions with contemporary cultural expressions. However, gaps remain in comparative studies that examine cross-national influences and shared cultural dimensions. Additionally, there is a lack of research on lesser-explored cultural elements, such as the novel's impact on culinary traditions or its representation in digital media. Future research should address the identified gaps, particularly in comparative analyses and underexplored cultural dimensions, to deepen our understanding of the novel's cross-cultural interpretations.

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The Analysis of Ideology, Representation of the Thai Education System, and Learning Environment as Portrayed in Thai Teen Series

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Abstract

Education is the heart of national development worldwide. Over the past several years, Thai teen series have portrayed education's connections to various social dimensions. The phenomenon that brought a huge change was the emergence of the *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015) series which presented the problems of high school teenagers at school and criticized the Thai education system. That year was also a time of calling for national reform in a number of different dimensions. The objective of this study was to analyze the Thai education system and learning environment as portrayed in eight Thai series, i.e., *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), *ThirTEENTerrors* (Kaewchart, 2014–2015), *The Gifted* (Panichraksapong, 2018), *Blacklist* (Danuwong, 2019), *The Underclass* (Patthanakumjon, 2020), *Bad Genius: The Series* (Maligool & Pongsittisak, 2020), *Girl From Nowhere* (Chitrakorn & Uekrongtham, 2018–2021), and *Home School* (Panichraksapong, 2023). The concepts of ideology and representation were used to analyze the educational ideology, education system, learning environment, and related problems. The major findings revealed that these series communicated the set of ideology and representation of education among the younger generations who crave freedom in learning versus the mindset and ideology of the traditional conservative education system. These series also served as a space to question the government and related agencies regarding the ways in which they should provide education management and how they should create learning environments in the future for younger generations in the current global situation with rapid change.

Keywords: Thai teen series, Thai education system, representation, ideology

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Introduction

The phenomenon of *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), a Thai teen series, brought several changes to Thai society and broke down the frame of liveliness and familiar visual identities of teenagers in Thai media. The series attractively unfolded the deep social problems of teenagers, i.e., their studies, families, and friends as well as the educational pressure that they must confront. This series was a turning point that was able to draw more attention toward educational management from people in society (Wikipedia contributors, 2024).

Educational problems, i.e., curriculums, lessons, teachers, teaching methods, educational disparity and opportunities for quality educational access still remain as major national-level problems. When education in the real world is questioned, it becomes connected to the constructed Thai education presented through media narratives.

Based on the presentation of education by the depiction of Thai students and their school life, Jarutsantijit et al. (2020) conducted a study on “The Analysis of Thai Teen Films as a Genre in Thai Films” and found that most teen stories were usually presented using schools as the main setting with the key roles to foster, shape, and control teenagers, whereas homes were symbolized as their emptiness, and the wider world outside was the space where the search for the meaning of life was conducted.

As for the roles of teachers, Jatuporn’s (2023) study “The Critical Analysis of the Construction of Teacher-ness Identities in Contemporary Thai Films” found that there were three ways of presenting teacher images, which can be described as 1) ideal teacher-ness, which was presented with the virtues and morality of teachers, the spirit of being a teacher, and the qualities accepted and respected by society, 2) negotiation with ideal teacher-ness, which was portrayed in the films that depict teachers’ encounters with various obstacles, and 3) non-ideal teacher-ness, in which teachers in this category demonstrated ideological concepts of teacher-ness that are different from social expectations, norms, and socio-cultural constructions, with new ways of teaching and giving freedom to students for thinking and taking action on their own. These teachers acted as mentors/observers rather than as controllers.

These images of teachers could also be viewed in films. According to the study of Kongsook (2022) on “Communication Meanings of the Stick Used for Discipline by Schoolteachers in Thai Films,” it was found that the initial power or authority of teachers was to discipline students using sticks as a form of corporal punishment. However, in later periods, such punishment has decreased, possibly due to the changing social conditions and culture that give more value to rights, freedom, and equality. Therefore, the role of teachers using sticks for punishment is now found less frequently.

When reviewing the world of Thai film about teenagers and education, the films presenting the problems of violence among teenagers include *Battle Royale Bangkok* (Thongsiew, 2005), *Dangerous Boys* (Arnon, 2014), and *4KINGS* (Nakthong, 2021). These films depict the violence used by teenagers and the use of force for problem solving, which reveals physical and mental violence. (Sanook.com, 2014; Sivapornpan, 2021). Therefore, going to school is no longer full of fascination but fears and the attempt to survive.

The films presenting teen life and school age with liveliness and stepping ahead to adulthood and perfect growth full of energy include *Seasons Change* (Tharathorn, 2006), *May Who?* (Boonprakob, 2015), *Suckseed* (Boonprakob, 2011) and *A Little Thing Called Love* (Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn & Wasin, 2010). The settings in all these films are at schools, with images of teenagers learning among their families, friends, and teenage love. (Kapook.com, 2023).

During this same period of time, the documentary film that mainly presented the images of study and admissions is *Final Score* (Nagasuwan, 2007), the story of Thai students preparing for university admissions, in which they have to confront the pressure, expectations, and required admissions system that may affect the selection of their future paths in life (The Standard Culture, 2019).

One of the most reputable and memorable Thai series about school age, broadcast for a very long time, is *Nong Mai Rai Borisut: the Series* (Phanuphan, 1996-2018) or *Innocent Rebels: The Series* (Phanuphan, 1996-2018). The story is about young male students at a high school, presenting their student life, how they are raised by their families, their relationships with friends, and love. It was one of the Thai series with a long and continuous reputation. The total broadcasting duration of this series was 22 years (Ordinary...superhuman, 2021; Phanuphan, 1996-2018).

The key turning point that made Thai series related to student life become more popular, with more production, may partly be because of the emergence of digital TVs in Thailand in 2014 (European Association for Business and Commerce, 2014) which offers various platforms and content creation (Wikipedia contributors, 2025d), particularly the *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013-2015). It attractively presents the lives of teenagers and their student life, implying questions about society and revealing the problems of teenagers and school age. Also, there was a critical situation in Thai politics during the time of this series. To clarify, there were protests against the performance of the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, with a call for national reform. (Olarn & Hancocks, 2013). Undoubtedly, this series resulted in the trend of more interest from teenagers and adults in the social problems of teenagers and education.

Kongkasuriyachai's (2015) study "A Social Construction of Young People in The TV Series: *Hormones*" found that the constructed representation of teenagers in this series reflects images that are close to reality, with realistic presentation. The teen characters are portrayed as confronting their problems, challenging social norms, and resisting society. However, they are still compromising and submit to some of the social rules. The impact of the *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013-2015) finally paved the way for the trend of a large number of other created Thai teen series related to schools and the lives of teenagers later on.

The analysis of the Thai series presenting the stories of student life in this study aimed to understand the constructed representation of the Thai education system and learning environments and how these two factors conveyed the meaning of the ideology or mindset of Thai education at that time, which was questioned regarding its quality. This is the significance of this study regarding this issue.

The following eight Thai series were selected for analysis. *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013-2015) presents the social problems of teenagers and the stories of high school teenagers. They have to confront problems in life, i.e., studying, sexual intercourse, fighting,

love, cheating on tests, family pressures, and teacher-student relationships (Wikipedia contributors, 2024).

ThirTEENTerrors (Kaewchart, 2014–2015) is about the mysteries and horrors at school and home. The story involves ghosts, spirits, and beliefs in the supernatural, which are all difficult to prove using logical reasoning (Wikipedia contributors, 2025b).

The Gifted (Panichraksapong, 2018) presents perspectives about gifted students as the top-notch group of the school. These students stand up against the system that gives too much precedence to smart students (Wikipedia contributors, 2025a).

Blacklist (Danuwong, 2019) is a series about the unsolved disappearance of a student, which leads to further investigation until problems within the school are discovered (Movement, 2021).

The Underclass (Patthanakumjon, 2020) is the story of a smart student in “Class A” with an unpleasant record and stress from cheating on tests until she is moved to the “Class F” of ordinary students. This class is an open door to the world of learning with no need to give importance to grades and rankings (Manager Online, 2020).

Bad Genius: The Series (Maligool & Pongsittisak, 2020) presents the story of an ingenious girl who helps her friends with cheating on tests. The series reveals educational corruption and disparity (Wikipedia contributors, 2025c).

Girl From Nowhere (Chitrakorn & Uekrongtham, 2018–2021) reveals the social problems at school, i.e., problems involving teachers, freshmen hazing, pregnancy during school age, and the dark side of the school society. The story in the series was inspired by a news article in Thai society (Wikipedia contributors, 2025e).

Home School (Panichraksapong, 2023) is about well-to-do and middle-class students who are spoiled and sent to stay at a boarding school surrounded by the forest under strict rules and pressure so that they will learn and understand the meaning of living their lives (Sanook.com, 2023).

This study applied the media representation theory of Stuart Hall and ideology of Louis Althusser to understand the constructed representation and ideology related to the Thai education system. Media representation theory describes the concept of representation as the characteristics of something communicated through language, words, voice, movements, and images. Constructed representation through media is presented in various ways, depending on the meanings to be communicated (Media Education Foundation, 2005). The purpose of representation may be for questioning, criticism, or change.

Ideology involves conveying the meanings or mindsets flowing in society, with the collision of different mindsets. The dominant ideology refers to the meanings or values that are naturally accepted in society. An alternative ideology refers to a negotiated mindset or one that is compromising with the dominant ideology. Oppositional counter ideology refers to the mindsets that are opposite to the ideas of the majority of people in society (Barker, 2008).

These findings, grounded in media representation theory and the concept of ideology, reflect the researcher's interpretation of how the Thai education system is portrayed and challenged through selected media discourses.

The Education System Is Focused on Competitive Examinations, With Rankings by Scoring Systems

Thai teen series at schools are constructed representations of the education system with strict academic aspects communicating an educational ideology that still values academic knowledge rather than experience-based learning. *Bad Genius: The Series* (Maligool & Pongsittisak, 2020) displays the images of classrooms, examinations under pressure, and the valuing of ingenious students through the story of “Lin,” a girl from a middle-class family. She is a top-notch student at school and cheats on examinations for classmates in exchange for money. This implies that the actual aim of study in the education system is not for learning but for survival.

The education system that focuses on competitions and measuring student values based on scores is also presented through *The Underclass* (Patthanakumjon, 2020). The series is about a girls' school, in which the system classifies smart students into Class A and ordinary ones into Class F. Their scores are ranked in each examination. Students in Class A enjoy more privileges than those in the other classes. Also, students designated Class A are more valued than others despite the different preferences, interests, and skills of each individual student.

Furthermore, *The Gifted* (Panichraksapong, 2018) questions and criticizes the educational system through its representation of gifted students, who have gained entrance into the Gifted Program. Each student in the series embraces gifted mental powers, e.g., computer control gifts, making things magically disappear, and mathematical gifts. This may lead to the perspective that educational issues can become gifts rather than practices and actions, including the use of mental power for their own benefit rather than thinking about public interests. Additionally, *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015) sparked significant public debate on educational reform and youth-related issues in Thailand. It also paved the way for the emergence of more realistic and socially critical Thai teen series.

It also paved the way for the emergence of more realistic and socially critical Thai teen series.

Examinations become the factor that determines student value. More specifically, it seems that studying is for examinations rather than learning to find out what they want to know. The series indirectly questions the Thai education system with traditional ideological education that puts emphasis on following rules, discipline, and obedience.

In contrast, the contrasting representation is to present progressive education, adaptation to situations, experienced-based learning, problem-solving practices, and logical thinking (Hope Horizon School for Giftedness, n.d.).

The prominent points in these series are the images of resistance against a conservative education system, valuing freedom in learning, and calling for the solving of educational problems, broader perspectives of various learning spaces, outdoor learning, and learning what they are interested in without considering grades or rankings. These points will promote equal learning.

Strict Rules and Control at Schools

Schools may be the first learning zone for humans with the exception of their families. They facilitate the practice of everyone following orders and having the same uniforms, hairstyles, curriculums, and textbooks. There is a question from the character “Win” in *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), a young boy with high self-confidence, freedom, and no concern about the rules. That question is “Why do all students have to wear the uniform?” He also challenges the rules of his school by not wearing the uniform. It is no wonder why he is usually warned by “Teacher Nipon,” an administrative teacher. In the series, Teacher Nipon (or Khru Nipon) regularly checks the students’ uniforms and hairstyles and warns female students about their makeup. It can be viewed that uniforms are a necessary symbol for student control; however, wearing uniforms indicates a burden on good students.

“Meen,” a girl in *The Underclass* (Patthanakumjon, 2020), does not agree with the students being forced to read the same textbooks. She thinks that all students have the right to read their own preferred books and to study what they really want to study and that giving privileges to high-achieving students and strictly enforcing the rules for ordinary ones are not just. For this reason, Meen set up the “Black Sheep” group in order to reform the school rules. She and her fellows make a move against the injustice of the rules under the motto “Difference, Justice, and Equality.” It communicates an ideology of educational management with acceptance of diversity, along with justice, an equal educational system, and the lowest possible educational disparity.

Nonetheless, control, pressure, and strict discipline for studying has already become a visual identity of Asian-style schools. *Home School* (Panichraksapong, 2023) is a series presenting the images of pressure, control, and violence at a boarding school. Even so, it conveys the meaning that such control is applied to create learning and to encourage students to live strongly in the world outside.

Therefore, representation between strict learning under pressure and freedom in learning is a controversial issue between the two sets of opposite ideologies. Which rules and learning methods suit younger generations who are growing into the future world is still under discussion and presented in the media.

Pressure and Expectations From Families and the Society Toward Education

Education is not an issue of individuals. Parents, families, and the people surrounding teenagers all have an influence on the education of children. In *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), “Mok” is an example of a boy with a passion and preference for photography. He is determined to further his studies at the School of Communication Arts. Unfortunately, his father expects him to select the School of Accounting because he envisions the bright future of his son with a secure job. No matter what, Mok insists on making his own decision.

Education of children becomes a serious tool for parents to control their children within the fixed frame. To illustrate, “If you don’t study, you are bad,” or “If you are not a smart student, your parents will not love you.” In *The Underclass* (Patthanakumjon, 2020), “Papang” is a diligent girl with her determination to stick to Class A. Every time examinations are held, she always faces stress and pressure due to the expectations of her family and social pressure. As a result, she eventually cheats on a test. Sadly, she is caught

and punished by being moved to Class F, where she meets a new friend “Meen” and the “Black Sheep” group. They enjoy learning what they prefer rather than paying attention to grades or scores. They create their own learning space called “Dreamland” for playing music, sports, singing, and performances. They learn what they want to, without family pressure.

The series criticizes and questions families with regard to setting directions or controlling decisions about the education of teenagers. Selecting study fields based on parental desires has become a problem that puts pressure on young generations, particularly Asian students. They must be engrossed in studying for many hours per day and need to take extra tutorial courses for entrance exams. Parents throw too much hope upon their children. Studying then becomes something to show social class and power. In other words, parents misuse the education of their children as a tool to show off their own capabilities and respectability in society.

In this world with rapid changes, teen series also express that teenagers need freedom of thought and decision making. They resist the ideology of conservative education, and attempt to unlock educational bondage for more freedom in learning what they are truly interested in.

Relationships, Power, and the Roles of Teachers and Students

In the schools presented through these series, the teacher-student relationships reflect the educational system management. There are teachers who control students and teachers who act as advisors, listen and understand. These series concentrate on presenting images of students and teachers with their challenges and desire to change the educational system.

Girl From Nowhere (Chitrakorn & Uekrongtham, 2018–2021) destroys the image of respectful teachers. It reveals the hidden images of teachers who abuse and rape students. “Nanno” is the main character who discloses the dark side of teachers and removes the visual identities of their power. This series implies that teachers are ordinary people with love, greed, anger, delusion, and mistakes. *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015) is similar. Both series present the stories of teachers who rape students.

Regarding the representation of uncompromising and conservative teachers who crave respect from students versus teachers with a modern way of thinking and perspectives that teachers and students are equal seen in *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), “Teacher Aor” is an English teacher with understanding toward students, reasonable explanations and no judgements. In contrast, “Teacher Nipon” is uncompromising. *The Underclass* (Patthanakumjon, 2020) includes “Teacher May,” a well-behaved, gentle, and nice teacher who always supports the students.

Therefore, the representation of teachers in these series includes both modern and open-minded teachers and conservative teachers who force students to stick to the rules and discipline. Teachers are a key part of learning management; not only do they take care of academic affairs but also the mental and emotional dimensions of the students. Simultaneously, they must listen to the problems of the students.

Representation in these exemplified series imply a changing ideology or mindset toward teachers. In the past, teachers were regarded as noble and very powerful. In these series, the meaning of teachers is communicated as common people. They place themselves as friends of students, advisors, and someone who can also make mistakes. Thus, the way of thinking

about teacher-student relationships has had a tendency to change and to be different from the past. In addition, young teachers do not ask for respect from the students as they are observers rather than controllers.

Thai Students: Rebels, Problem Challengers, Questioners, and Callers for Educational Reform

The characters in the series are male and female teenagers at junior and senior high schools, with sexual diversity (LGBTQ+). The representation includes obedient students and rebellious students who are always curious with critical thinking and calls for freedom. This study identified the following characteristics of students in these series.

Resistance to Rules/Regulations, and the Need Freedom and Independence

In *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), representation of a remarkable Thai student is “Win,” a male student at a senior high school. He is one of the characters with questions about wearing uniforms, i.e., “Why do students have to wear uniforms?” and “Does wearing or not wearing the uniform affect our education?” Due to persistently asking these questions, he is considered to be a weird student.

Conversely, “Kwan” is a smart female student who is the role model at school. However, she has to confront the love problems of her parents. Her father has a mistress, affecting her ability to concentrate on her studies. As a result, she cheats on tests in order to maintain her good record until she finally becomes greatly stressed. The characters in *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015) represent Thai teenagers or students differently from other series at that time. It displays the images of independent teenagers with the courage to express their needs and make their own decisions in life. They never surrender to control. The series conveys the meaning of freedom of thinking for oneself and the ability to challenge the system or more powerful authorities. According to Boonchom (2017), these characteristics are also reflected through the words and language used by teenagers. They can talk about sensitive issues, e.g., gender, questions about behaviors and society, and learning how to manage their emotions with support from the adults around them.

Questioning and Confronting Mysteries

ThirTEENTerrors (Kaewchart, 2014–2015) is a horror teen series. The students have to get involved with death, loss, murder, and being forced to follow adults’ requirements. Therefore, they struggle to survive on their own. “Manaswee,” one of the characters who likes challenges, mysteries, terrifying legends, searching for truths, and speculating about suspect incidents, acknowledges the murder of a student at school. She tries to solve the problem on her own, but she inevitably ends up with death.

Regarding the characteristics of the characters in the series, they struggle to survive as a result of indescribable mysteries. Their questioning, curiosity, abrupt decision making, and funny and enjoyable actions sometimes turn into sudden dangers for themselves. Nevertheless, the essence of the teen characteristics in this series is their courage in questioning and confronting mysteries despite sometimes ending up with tragedies. Their determination to solve problems on their own conveys the meaning of enthusiasm for learning and not believing in anything too easily.

Daring, No Fear of Dangers, and Leadership

Girl From Nowhere (Chitrakorn & Uekrongtham, 2018–2021) is a series about life at school through an uncommon character disguised as a student, “Nanno.” She may be Satan’s daughter blending herself in at the school and acts as an essential accelerator for quicker problem solving. Nanno is a girl with words that cut like a knife, high self-confidence, and ignorance of others’ perspectives toward herself. She is not afraid of dangers and dares to confront problems. This is a constructed representation of the challenges of teenagers against society and powerful adults.

Bad Genius: The Series (Maligool & Pongsittisak, 2020) is the story about an ingenious girl who misuses her genius. The series exposes the corruption of academic circles, e.g., cheating on tests and paying additional fees or extra charges to enter a top-ranked school. “Lin” is a smart, ingenious, and competent girl but cheats on tests in order to bring herself opportunities for a better life. “Bank” is a poor boy, whose mother runs a laundry shop to pay for his school fees. He misuses education as a tool for money because he does not come from a rich family. His mother lives from hand to mouth.

Therefore, he has to work and study harder than others. For the characteristics of the main characters, they are unafraid of dangers, daring, determined, decisive, and dedicated to their life of studying for the highest scores. Regrettably, they misuse their genius. But above all, they finally try to find a way to stop the cycle of corruption and cheating, without the repetition of such a thing. The story implies that the educational system must create people who are ready to change society in a positive way.

Resistance to the Education System That Focuses Too Much on Competition, and Reduction of Educational Disparity

The Gifted (Panichraksapong, 2018) is a series about a group of students with mental power over others. They have been selected for the Gifted Program. Being part of this program, they also get more privileges than others. An attractive character from this series is “Punn,” a multitalented boy. He is a perfectionist who is totally absorbed in trying to be smart in every subject and field. In academic excellence competitions, he has entered English, math, social dance, and music contests. The more he competes, the more stressful he becomes. All he desires is to win, and he never wants to be defeated. This ambition results in his pressure and misery. The images presented in the series emphasize the extreme educational system that drives students to be smart and multitalented in everything. It implies that the ideology influencing people in the society is education, which demands that children be smart and talented.

“Why can’t we simply learn as normal children with our love of learning, with no need to be smart or talented, and just have fun with learning?” This is the opposite to the perspective of “Pang,” a young boy from the Gifted Program. He does not agree with the selection system that cherishes gifted students with privileges granted by the school. What “Pang” calls for is no discrimination between the students.

Being gifted in a certain field or activity is admirable, but it can also turn into pressure that forces students to try to conquer all or to be number 1 all the time, without learning from their failures. The academic world and the real world of work life have a number of different

aspects. Having the skills to deal with failure and disappointment will help us live in society more happily.

The young girls “Meen” and “Papang” from *The Underclass* (Patthanakumjon, 2020) view student classification by score rankings from Class A to Class F as an injustice and a hinderance to learning. Therefore, they set up the “Black Sheep” group to resist this unjust system, to solve problems at school, and to bring about educational equality as they believe that all children should have opportunities to learn what they have a passion for. The series also presents the world outside in order to portray lifelong learning. The “Black Sheep” create “Dreamland,” a space for children to learn whatever they want based on their preferences and passions, i.e., performances, sports, or music. It is a teen space for physical, mental, and emotional development through noncompetitive learning, without expectations of winning or losing but to learn based on their preferences and passions.

School Society and Environments

After all, the dimension related to the Thai educational system is not only an academic one but includes the involved environments that also affect learning. Therefore, these Thai teen series present the images of social as well as environmental problems, i.e., violence, assault, problems with friends, love, sexual intercourse during school age, self-actualization and the failure to find their preferences and passions with no idea of what they are, or which preferences or passions will push their life ahead.

Violence and Assault

Home School (Panichraksapong, 2023), *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), and *Girl From Nowhere* (Chitrakorn & Uekrongtham, 2018–2021) display the images of problems at schools and representations of students who use violence for problem solving. Violence is still a key problem, including the representation of physical and mental assault by teachers. The communicated ideology indicates that education involves not just studying but also how to survive in society.

Love and Relationships at School Age

Love and relationships at school age are presented through the subject series, particularly *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015), representing love in teenagers, friendship, and the growth of their relationships. On the other hand, the dark side of their relationships is presented too, e.g., sexual intercourse at school age and teenage pregnancy.

The Underclass (Patthanakumjon, 2020), *ThirTEENTerrors* (Kaewchart, 2014–2015), and *Blacklist* (Danuwong, 2019) present the images of friendship problems. To elucidate, one’s teenage years is the time when there are major influences from friends. Friendship at this age inevitably affects students’ mental states during their studies. A large number of teenagers adapt or change themselves to blend in with friends, whereas some feel isolated and different, which eventually affects their academic performance.

Searching for Preferences and Life Paths

The Underclass (Patthanakumjon, 2020) presents the images of liveliness similar to Japanese-style cartoons. The series also questions the particular preferences and passions of

teenagers. According to the Thai educational culture inherited from generation to generation, parents believe that graduation with at least a bachelor's degree shall lead their children to a successful life and a secure career in the future.

In addition, we can see that *Hormones* (Pumseenil & Viravan, 2013–2015) and *The Gifted* (Panichraksapong, 2018) present images of students seriously spending their time on academic lessons, full-time study in class, and extra tutorial courses. The long study hours affect their mental and physical health, parallel to self-imposed pressure due to the education system that values smart students rather than those who are actually happy with studying. As a result, they express their mental stress, destroy things, scream, or even unawaresly hurt themselves to release their internal pain.

Studying what they indeed do not like or just to follow their parents' demands despite no desire for those things is what teenagers in the series try to resist and try to explain with reasons. In the end, the images of many of these teenage characters reveal their courage for self-actualization and for telling their parents straightforwardly about their own life paths, including the courage to step out of the frame of social expectations and to freely create their own preferable learning.

Conclusions

Thai teen series make attempts to question and criticize the Thai education system with regard to several issues, e.g., exam-oriented education, discrimination or classification between smart and ordinary students that finally causes disparity and inequality, and the power of teachers to control students when learning. At the same time, these series offer several new perspectives, such as children should search for their own preferences and passions rather than to follow their parents' wishes. Furthermore, the idea that academic rigidity should be lower, as children should be encouraged to enjoy learning with more freedom to learn on their own and at their own pace, is also presented.

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Mimicry in Actor and Actress Representation: The Adaptation of Korean Drama Standards by the Indonesian Drama Industry

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Abstract

The phenomenon of drakor (Korean drama) has become increasingly popular in Indonesia, influencing many aspects of the entertainment industry, including the representation of actors and actresses in Indonesian dramas. This article aims to examine the process of mimicry, a concept proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, by focusing on how Indonesian actors and actresses mimic visual elements, acting styles, and the star persona typical of drakor, while adjusting to local cultural norms. The research employs a qualitative approach with critical discourse analysis to examine actor representation in Indonesian dramas, compare elements influenced by drakor, and explore audience perceptions of these adaptations within the local cultural context. The findings indicate that although Indonesian actors and actresses mimic the style and appearance associated with drakor stars, they strive to sustain their local cultural identity through changes in acting techniques, visual expression, and character portrayal. This mimicry process creates cultural ambivalence, generating tension between the desire to align with global standards and the effort to uphold local values valued by audiences. The study also highlights that mimicry is not mere copying but a cultural negotiation involving actors and actresses as agents shaping hybrid media identities. This research offers insights into how globalization affects cultural representation in local media and how actors and actresses contribute to preserving Indonesian cultural identity. By balancing these dynamics, the Indonesian entertainment industry illustrates an active negotiation between global influence and local tradition, enriching the evolving forms of cultural representation in Indonesian television.

Keywords: mimicry, Korean drama, actor representation, cultural identity

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Introduction

In the last decade, Korean dramas (drakor) have become a dominant force in Asian popular culture, especially in Indonesia. Accessible via digital platforms such as Netflix, Viu, Disney+ Hotstar, and YouTube, drakor has transcended national borders and reshaped local media consumption (Korea Foundation, 2020). Beyond entertainment, drakor has influenced Indonesian lifestyle, fashion, beauty ideals, and youth communication styles (Heryanto, 2014; Seasia, 2023).

However, only a few researches have explored how drakor influences the representation of Indonesian actors. Increasingly, local productions adopt drakor-inspired aesthetics—from cinematography to acting style and star image. This trend is best understood through Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry, which frames cultural imitation as “almost the same, but not quite” (p. 86), highlighting a space of ambivalence and negotiation rather than exact replication.

Mimicry is not passive imitation, but a strategy of localization and resistance. It enables local cultures to absorb global elements while adapting them to fit local narratives and values (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008). In Indonesia, mimicry becomes clear in how actors embody Korean celebrity traits while grounding performances in national cultural contexts: The rise of OTT services and internet access has heightened audience expectations. Viewers compare Indonesian productions with global content, especially drakor, prompting local industries to improve quality while maintaining cultural authenticity (Jin, 2016; Kim, 2019).

This article argues that adapting drakor standards is a form of cultural negotiation that balances global aesthetics with local identity. Using the lens of mimicry, the study explores how Indonesian actors strategically navigate these expectations, offering insight into how globalization reshapes local entertainment representation. While past studies emphasize fandom or cultural consumption, few examine the role of actors as agents of mimicry and audience interpretation of these changes. This study addresses that gap, positioning mimicry as an active cultural strategy in Indonesian drama.

Methodologically, the study uses critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Van Dijk, 2015) to examine selected dramas, their production contexts, and related sociocultural discourses. The researcher's dual role—as both a drakor fan and media scholar—supports a reflective, nuanced interpretation of mimicry in performance. The analysis focuses on four Indonesian dramas:

- *Kau yang Berasal dari Bintang* (RCTI, 2014), an overt adaptation of *My Love from the Star* (SBS, 2013-2014);
- *Cinta 2 Pilihan* (RCTI, 2022), influenced by *Crash Landing on You* (tvN, 2019-2020) in tone and style;
- *Merindu Cahaya de Amstel* (MD Pictures, 2022), which blends drakor aesthetics with local religious and diaspora themes;
- *Bad Guys: Vengeance* (BASE Entertainment & CJ ENM, 2025), a formal co-production merging Korean technique with Indonesian content.

Primary data came from viewing episodes, reading scripts, and analyzing key scenes via Netflix, RCTI+, and Viu. Secondary sources included news articles, interviews, and social media responses (Basri & Afifulloh, 2025). Triangulation was done through video archiving, online discourse analysis, and academic literature review.

Data analysis followed three stages: identifying visual mimicry elements such as lighting, camera framing, and wardrobe; interpreting how these elements were localized within the cultural context of the production; and analyzing their impact on identity construction and audience perception. The study *Framing Perception* by Maradia et al. (2025) supports this approach, demonstrating that camera framing and lighting techniques in cinema significantly influence how viewers derive meaning, particularly in relation to objectification and visual mimicry. To enhance analytical precision, NVivo 14 was used to systematically organize thematic codes and strengthen the overall argumentative structure.

This study bridges theory and practice, contributing to mimicry literature in Southeast Asia while offering practical insight for the Indonesian drama industry to compete globally without losing cultural distinctiveness. The adaptation of drakor aesthetics by Indonesian dramas is a layered cultural process. Bhabha (1994) mimicry theory explains this as strategic appropriation: adopting global forms while adapting them locally. Thus, media globalization enables hybrid identities rather than creating one-way cultural domination. Most research on the Korean Wave in Indonesia has focused on fans or fashion, not on how drakor aesthetics reshape local performance norms. The shifts in actor portrayal, delivery, and identity negotiation remain underexplored.

This study highlights mimicry as a transformative cultural practice. Applying Bhabha's theory, it shows how actors adopt drakor conventions while maintaining local identity. It pursues three main goals:

1. Analyze visual and narrative elements adopted from drakor;
2. Explore how actors adapt these stylistic demands;
3. Assess audience perceptions of these mimicry practices.

Theoretically, the study expands Bhabha's mimicry concept to Southeast Asian popular media. Practically, it informs content creators and producers about balancing global influence with cultural authenticity. It also enhances media literacy, encouraging critical audience engagement. Mimicry should be seen not as loss of authenticity but as creative cultural negotiation. Indonesian actors are not passive imitators but active agents of hybrid identity. Ultimately, this study examines how drakor influences actor representation and identity in Indonesian drama. Imitation contains creativity and resistance—mimicry as a contextual strategy that helps Indonesian entertainment stay globally relevant while culturally rooted.

Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, has shaped global media consumption, including in Indonesia. Drakor, widely available via Netflix and YouTube, is now a cultural force creatively adapted by local producers (Jin, 2016; Lee, 2020). Indonesian content increasingly mirrors Korean visual styles and storytelling, appealing to audiences familiar with East Asian aesthetics (Iwabuchi, 2022). Bhabha (1994) concept of mimicry explains this trend as mentioned before, where global norms meet local resistance. Kraidy's (2022) idea of cultural hybridity complements this, framing mimicry as a creative negotiation between global and local values.

Kau yang Berasal dari Bintang mimics *My Love From the Star*, while *Cinta 2 Pilihan* mirrors the pastel tones and pacing of *Crash Landing on You* (Nugroho, 2023). *Bad Guys: Vengeance*, co-produced with CJ ENM, exemplifies institutional mimicry (Basri & Afifulloh, 2025). Indonesian actors adopt the “clean look” and subtle expressions of K-stars, raising concerns about cultural erasure. Drawing on Maradia et al. (2025), who show how visual framing shapes audience perception and objectification, this study argues that mimicry is not merely aesthetic but performative—negotiated through producers, actors, and audiences.

Audience behavior, such as emulating *drakor* styles, reflects mimicry's reach into everyday life. Actor representation thus embodies hybrid identities—visually Korean, yet locally grounded.

Results & Discussion

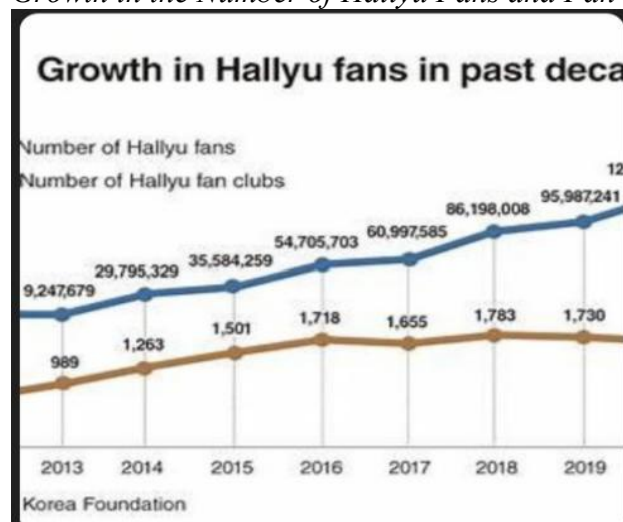
Hallyu Trends and the Growth of Drakor Popularity in Indonesia

Since the early 2010s, Korean dramas (*drakor*) have made a significant impact on Indonesia's entertainment landscape. According to data from the Korea Foundation, the global number of Hallyu fans—which includes *drakor* enthusiasts—increased sharply from 9.2 million in 2013 to more than 95 million by 2019 (Korea Foundation, 2020). This growth was accelerated by the rise of streaming services such as Netflix, Viu, and Disney+ Hotstar, which have made Korean content more accessible than ever to Indonesian audiences (Chung, 2024).

The mimicry phenomenon observed in Indonesia's local drama industry does not occur in isolation. Rather, it emerges as a response to the ever-intensifying flow of global cultural influence, particularly from East Asia. To explore how this mimicry manifests and adapts in the Indonesian context, four key visual references are presented below. These visual materials not only support the study's main argument but also serve as indicators of cultural transformation influenced by transnational media flows.

Figure 1

Growth in the Number of Hallyu Fans and Fan Clubs From 2012 to 2019



Source. Korea Foundation (2020)

The above figure illustrates the dramatic rise in the number of global Hallyu fans over the last decade. In 2012, the figure stood at approximately 9 million. By 2019, it had surged to nearly 96 million. This nearly tenfold increase confirms that the Korean Wave is far more than a fleeting pop culture trend—it represents a robust and sustained global community bound together by shared interests in Korean dramas, music, and fashion (Korea Foundation, 2020).

The graph that follows visualizes this exponential growth in popularity, reinforcing the argument that Hallyu has become a dominant cultural force with tangible effects on local media industries, including in Indonesia. This data serves as a foundational context for understanding the immense cultural power of Korean dramas in shaping new standards of

taste across the globe, including in Indonesia. As the global fan base expands, so does the expectation for domestic media industries to meet the aesthetic and narrative benchmarks popularized by *drakor*. In this environment, the mechanism of mimicry begins to take shape—local drama industries are pressured to adapt in order to remain culturally relevant to audiences who have grown familiar with the polished and emotionally resonant style of Korean entertainment.

Figure 2

Netflix Original Productions Shared by Country of Origin, 2017–2019



Source. Ampere Analysis (2020)

Adapted from the Ampere Analysis (2020) report via Statista, this figure illustrates the country-by-country distribution of Netflix Originals production between 2017 and 2019. South Korea emerges as a dominant force in the Asian content market, showing a consistent upward trend and gradually approaching the production levels of traditional Western content producers within Netflix’s portfolio. This growing share signals Korea’s rising status not only as a content creator, but also as a trendsetter in digital media aesthetics.

In this context, Netflix operates not merely as a content distributor, but as a powerful tastemaker. Through the global circulation of Korean dramas, the platform indirectly establishes the template for what a “quality” drama should look like. Indonesian drama producers, whether consciously or not, begin to emulate this template—adjusting episode durations, cinematography styles, narrative pacing, and character development to match the “Netflix-meets-East-Asia” flavor that has now become a dominant mode of storytelling.

The deepening cultural connection between Indonesian audiences and *drakor* is further underscored in Figure 3, which maps the 15 countries with the highest number of K-Drama viewers worldwide—excluding South Korea itself. According to data published by Seasia.co (2023), Indonesia ranks fourth, following only the Philippines, Egypt, and Malaysia. This ranking not only confirms the country’s centrality within the global Hallyu network but also reinforces the extent to which *drakor* consumption has become embedded in everyday media behavior in Indonesia.

Figure 3
15 Countries With the Highest K-Drama Viewers



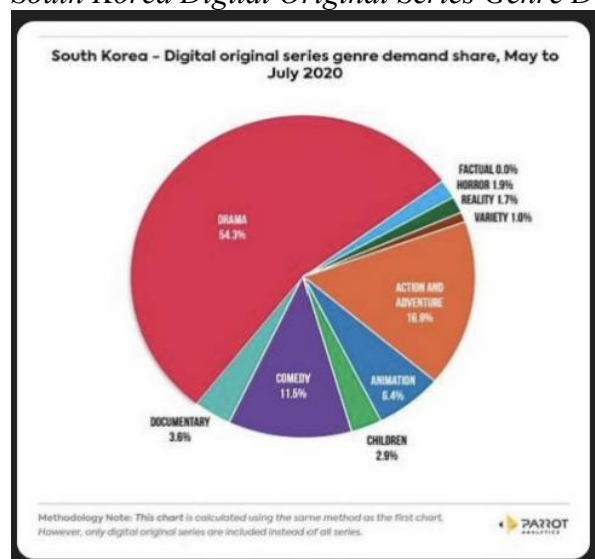
Source. Seasia (2023)

For Indonesia's local drama industry, the data presented above are far more than just entertainment statistics—they function as powerful market signals. As one of the most loyal and active K-drama consumer bases globally, Indonesian audiences have cultivated strong cross-platform fandoms and play an important role in shaping digital media trends. In this context, the effort to incorporate drakor-style aesthetics into local soap operas and films is not simply a matter of artistic preference, but a calculated business strategy. These adaptations help domestic productions remain competitive in a market increasingly saturated with high-quality imported content. In such cases, mimicry operates as a pragmatic bridge between audience expectations—heavily influenced by Korean media—and the production realities of a local industry often constrained by budgetary and infrastructural limitations.

This interplay becomes even clearer in Figure 4, which illustrates the genre demand distribution for digital original series in South Korea between May and July 2020. The data reveals that drama overwhelmingly dominates content preferences with a 54.3% share, followed by action, animation, comedy, and other genres in smaller proportions. These findings highlight that the drama genre is not only culturally significant within South Korea but also serves as a powerful export commodity shaping global content tastes.

Figure 4

South Korea Digital Original Series Genre Demand Share, May to July 2020



Source. Parrot Analytics (2020)

When this data is read in relation to Southeast Asia—particularly Indonesia—it reinforces the notion that this region is a key market for Korean drama consumption, consistently ranking among the top global audiences. This further validates the rationale behind the mimicry observed in local productions. If Korean dramas captivate audiences through emotionally charged narratives, subtle visual storytelling, and romantic plotlines framed in a “clean look” aesthetic, it is no surprise that Indonesian producers emulate not only the visual language but also the structural rhythms of storytelling found in *drakor*.

More than mere duplication, this genre adaptation reflects a deliberate creative strategy—one that seeks to package familiarity in a form that resonates locally. The four figures presented across this section, when interpreted alongside supporting narratives, form a cohesive visual argument: mimicry in the Indonesian drama industry is embedded in the broader logics of market demands, audience preferences, and digital media flows.

Through the lens of Bhabha (1994) theory, mimicry emerges as a dynamic space of negotiation. Imitation arises from the need for appropriation and cultural survival, yet in the very act of mimicking, producers, actors, and audiences co-create a space where “the Korean” is absorbed, recontextualized, and interwoven with what remains “Indonesian.” These visual data points are thus not ornamental—they are living proof of how popular culture operates as a fluid, bidirectional force. What is borrowed is reshaped; what is emulated is localized.

At this crossroads of global and local aesthetics, Indonesian drama finds its unique momentum. It is here that actors and actresses take on dual roles—as sophisticated imitators and as guardians of national cultural identity. They do not merely perform; they negotiate. And in that negotiation lies the creative heartbeat of contemporary Indonesian screen culture.

The practice of mimicry at the heart of this research is most clearly observed in the ways Indonesian dramas borrow, assemble, and reconfigure various elements from Korean drama productions—yet without completely erasing their distinct sense of “Indonesianness.” Close examination of four selected titles—*Kau yang Berasal dari Bintang*, *Cinta 2 Pilihan*, *Merindu Cahaya de Amstel*, and *Bad Guys: Vengeance*—reveals that adjustments in visual

aesthetics serve as the dominant gateway for aligning local dramas with audience expectations shaped by drakor standards.

For instance, *Kau yang Berasal dari Bintang* replicates the cinematic framing and soft, wash-out lighting of *My Love from the Star*, complete with slow-motion close-ups during emotionally heightened moments. This adaptation goes beyond camera techniques; it also shapes the narrative rhythm, prolonging emotional tension in a manner consistent with the storytelling formula of modern Korean dramas (Kim, 2019). Similarly, *Cinta 2 Pilihan* employs minimalist indoor sets and pastel-toned lighting to recreate the visual atmosphere of *Crash Landing on You*. Despite this visual mimicry, the director deliberately retains domestic elements—such as typical urban Indonesian homes and colloquial dialogue—as anchors of local authenticity (Lee, 2020).

In *Merindu Cahaya de Amstel*, the influence of the drakor aesthetic is expressed through a gentle musical score, contemplative close-ups, and minimalist piano instrumentals. However, these elements are interwoven with culturally specific visual markers such as Indonesian hijab fashion and the setting of Amsterdam’s canals—blending “global borrowing” with “local ornamentation” (Heryanto, 2014). Most notably, *Bad Guys: Vengeance*, a co-production with Korea’s CJ ENM, showcases a more advanced form of mimicry: its sharp cinematography, brisk editing style, and crime-thriller genre are directly influenced by Korean production standards. Yet, the characters speak in distinctly Indonesian tones and linguistic nuances, signaling a conscious localization within a transnational framework (Basri & Afifulloh, 2025).

To synthesize these observations, the following table presents a comparative summary of hybridized production elements found across the four analyzed dramas, illustrating how mimicry operates as a blend of imitation, adaptation, and cultural negotiation.

Table 1
Mimicry and Localization in Four Indonesian Dramas (Author’s Compilation)

Series	Adaptation Element	Local Aesthetics
<i>You Who Came from the Stars</i>	Cinematic framing, soft lighting, Korean-style wardrobe	Local humor in dialogue, working-class characters
<i>Love 2 Choices</i>	Pastel glow, slow transitions, minimalist set	Urban Indonesian home settings, casual language
<i>Missing the Light de Amstel</i>	Melodious scoring, expressive close-ups	Local fashion, Indonesian diaspora context
<i>Bad Guys: Vengeance</i>	Fast-paced editing, K-thriller musical scoring	Bahasa Indonesia, local actors

Emerging patterns of mimicry in Indonesian television drama are increasingly evident in the evolving performance styles of actors, which reflect the restrained aesthetic typical of Korean drama. Nugroho (2023) identifies a growing tendency among Indonesian actors to adopt subtle gestures, emotional minimalism, and deliberate pacing—marking a significant departure from the traditionally expressive modes associated with local soap operas. This stylistic shift suggests an internalized adaptation to audience preferences shaped by sustained exposure to K-drama conventions. As Maradia et al. (2025) demonstrate, visual techniques such as framing and performative restraint play a critical role in constructing viewer perception and signaling cultural sophistication. Within this framework, mimicry is not

merely cosmetic but functions as a performative negotiation—one that allows local productions to align with transnational aesthetic standards while simultaneously engaging with domestic cultural expectations. Rather than eroding authenticity, such practices reflect a dynamic process of hybridization that redefines local identity within a global media ecology.

From the audience's perspective, reception is complex and layered. A panel survey conducted by Jakpat (2025) revealed that 82% of viewers appreciated improvements in cinematography and narrative nuance. However, 40% expressed concerns that Indonesian dramas were becoming too similar to *drakor*, losing their distinctive cultural "voice." Furthermore, 15% of respondents believed such adaptations risk diluting traditional aesthetics altogether. These reactions mirror concerns raised in other Southeast Asian contexts, including Malaysia and the Philippines, where hybrid content is increasingly scrutinized for its cultural authenticity (Chua & Iwabuchi, 2008; Kim, 2019). Clearly, Indonesian audiences are not passive recipients—they act as cultural gatekeepers, selectively accepting or rejecting global elements based on relevance and resonance.

This selective reception aligns with Bhabha (1994) concept of mimicry as "almost the same, but not quite"—a form of imitation intentionally marked by difference to create room for negotiation. Indonesian dramas embody this tension: while adopting Korean-style framing, lighting, and soundtracks, they retain distinctive markers such as local dialects, familial themes rooted in village life, and recognizable domestic settings. What emerges is not blind replication, but a culturally negotiated strategy (Kraidy, 2022) that balances global appeal with local identity.

Notably, this negotiation occurs not only on screen but also behind the scenes. The production of *Bad Guys: Vengeance*, a collaboration with CJ ENM, reflects a shift from unlicensed imitation to officially sanctioned hybridization. In the broader landscape of global cultural economics, this signals a maturing industry where intellectual property rights and cross-border ethics are increasingly institutionalized—fostering synergy between Indonesian content creators and Korean media conglomerates (Iwabuchi, 2022).

From an academic standpoint, this research contributes to expanding Bhabha's theory of mimicry into the realm of Southeast Asian entertainment. Originally conceptualized to interpret colonial power dynamics, mimicry now serves to decode how global pop culture is reconfigured within the narrative factories of the digital age. This study's focus on actors as agents of hybridity enforcement and audiences as curators of cultural authenticity enriches the cultural studies discourse (Hall, 1997; Kraidy, 2022).

In practical terms, the findings serve as a cautionary guide for content producers. It is essential to avoid the extremes of either total replication or outright rejection of global aesthetics. The viable solution lies in technical refinement inspired by Korean standards, while preserving narrative frameworks rooted in Indonesian values. Integrating domestic symbols, local cultural references, and vernacular dialogue ensures that mimicry does not collapse into a crisis of identity (Heryanto, 2014).

For policymakers and regulators, this study underscores the need to establish ethical guidelines for cultural adaptation. Standardizing cross-border production partnerships, ensuring fair royalties, and supporting legally recognized hybrid projects can position Indonesia as a competitive content hub—global in flavor, yet local in soul.

In conclusion, Indonesian drama is at a critical juncture. On one side, there is the pressure to meet global standards shaped by the Hallyu wave; on the other, a responsibility to preserve and amplify the nation's cultural voice. Within Bhabha's theoretical framework, it is precisely this in-between space that transforms mimicry from mere replication into a rich site of identity articulation.

Conclusion

This study affirms that Indonesian dramas are currently situated at a cultural crossroads: striving to meet global aesthetic standards driven by the Hallyu wave, while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of local identity. Within this in-between space, the practice of mimicry emerges not as passive imitation, but as a dynamic cultural negotiation—a site where global and local impulses intersect, clash, and merge.

By applying Homi Bhabha (1994) theory of mimicry, this research demonstrates that the incorporation of drakor elements—such as soft lighting, pastel tones, and understated emotional performance—into Indonesian productions goes beyond replication. Instead, these aesthetic choices become tools of articulation, producing works that are simultaneously *foreign* in form yet *familiar* in spirit. The analysis of four dramas—*Kau yang Berasal dari Bintang*, *Cinta 2 Pilihan*, *Merindu Cahaya de Amstel*, and *Bad Guys: Vengeance*—supports this assertion by showing how these stylistic adaptations create hybrid texts marked by cultural duality.

On the level of performance, the shift toward subtlety and visual clarity reflects not only an aesthetic upgrade but also a transformation in how actors position themselves as mediators of global taste and national character. Meanwhile, audience responses captured from social media reflect ambivalence: appreciation for enhanced production values, yet concern for the erosion of cultural uniqueness. This tension is indicative of mimicry's core nature—it invites both admiration and critique, both acceptance and resistance.

Theoretically, this research extends the reach of Bhabha's mimicry beyond literature and colonial discourse, applying it to the field of Southeast Asian popular media. It also supports Kraidy (2022) assertion that cultural hybridity is the defining logic of the globalized entertainment industry. Practically, these findings offer valuable insights for Indonesian producers, writers, and policymakers, suggesting that global competitiveness does not require the abandonment of local roots—rather, success lies in striking a creative balance between adaptation and authenticity.

That said, the study has its limitations. Its focus on mainstream dramas excludes web-based series and independent productions, which may reveal different modes of mimicry or even more experimental forms of cultural negotiation. In addition, its reliance on textual and online observation would benefit from deeper interviews with actors, directors, and producers to validate interpretive claims.

Future research should explore mimicry practices in other formats—reality shows, musical dramas, or OTT-exclusive content. Digital ethnographic methods may also enrich our understanding of how local audiences interpret, challenge, or redefine hybrid content in their everyday cultural consumption.

Ultimately, this study encourages a reframing of mimicry not as a threat to originality, but as a strategy of survival and reinvention in an increasingly borderless media landscape. With critical awareness and thoughtful production ethics, the Indonesian drama industry can position itself not as a derivative of global trends, but as a distinctive voice in the global narrative—almost the same, but unmistakably ours.

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Representation as Solution: Symbolic Governance and the Visual Politics of Contemporary Indonesian Banknotes

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Abstract

This article critically examines the recent changes to Indonesian banknotes, particularly the inclusion of a national hero from West Papua for the first time in history. By employing Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) and conjunctural analysis from the cultural studies tradition, this study investigates how the representation of West Papua on banknotes functions within the visual politics of inclusion and exclusion. This symbolic practice takes place amid ongoing protests and unrest in Papua, representing a broader conjuncture in which the Indonesian state seeks to manage and contain dissent through visual and textual representation. The findings reveal that while the inclusion of a West Papuan figure in Indonesian banknotes is framed as an act of national recognition, it simultaneously operates as a discursive mechanism to reinforce state hegemony. The study also highlights how this symbolic inclusion aligns with other state-driven visual and textual strategies that prioritize national unity while marginalizing demands for material justice, especially during the Papuans protest against racism in 2019 with which the Papuans' symbol and culture were appropriated in the cultural events held by the Indonesian state. In other words, the practice of representation is seen as favouring symbolic solution over addressing material inequalities — an episteme that frames the West Papuan identity within the state's hegemonic discourse.

Keywords: banknotes, representation, visual politics, foucauldian discourse analysis

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Introduction

Banknotes serve as mundane yet powerful tools of statecraft, embedding political narratives into the everyday practices of economic exchange. Nevertheless its significance extends beyond its economic function, it also operates as cultural artefact that carry the weight of national identity, historical memory, and political ideology in a banal sense (Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995; Helleiner, 2003; Unwin & Hewitt, 2001). In Indonesia, a nation characterized by its vast diversity and historical complexities, banknotes emerge as a particularly potent medium for the articulation of state's political currency (Strassler, 2020).

The mundane nature of banknotes often belies their significance as instruments of power. As Foucault (1972) argued, objects and practices embedded in everyday life frequently serve as conduits for the dissemination and normalization of dominant power. Banknotes are no exception. Their design, circulation, and usage operate as mechanisms through which the state exercises soft power, subtly shaping perceptions of national identity and belonging. In this context, the visual and textual elements inscribed on banknotes are not arbitrary but deliberate choices that represent the state's priorities and ideological orientations.

This study examines the latest major changes in Indonesian banknotes that took place in 2016. Specifically, it analyses the inclusion of a West Papuan national hero in the national banknotes for the first time in history, framing this practice as part of a broader strategy of what we call as "symbolic governance." The strategic redesign of Indonesian banknotes, particularly the incorporation of Frans Kaisiepo—a national hero from West Papua—raises critical questions about the politics of representation and the state's engagement with its marginalized regions. This move occurs within the broader context of Indonesia's efforts to consolidate its national identity while navigating its contentious relationship with West Papua, a region marked by historical exploitation, militarization, and persistent demands for independence (Kadir, 2024; Karma, 2014).

To understand the relationship the banknotes with the state's politics of representation, we use Foucault (1972, 1981) to enable us to examine the its broader semiotic context and its discursive formation that share the similar strategy and episteme when dealing with socio-political issues in and about West Papua. We specifically ask, how does the representation of Frans Kaisiepo on Indonesian banknotes represent the state's approach to managing its relationship with West Papua? And how does this approach share similar episteme with other state discourse about West Papua?

Literature Review

Researching Banknotes

Scholars have extensively examined the multifaceted roles of banknotes, exploring their designs, symbolic functions, and socio-political implications. This body of research collectively underscores the complex ways in which currencies mediate identity, power, and resistance. The representation of gender in banknotes, for instance, highlights the interplay between cultural norms and monetary design. In a more recent study, Hadylaya (2023) noted the representation of women in Indonesian banknotes.

However, these advancements often remain superficial, reflecting persistent struggles for gender equality within broader societal structures. This theme of inclusion and exclusion in

banknote representation extends beyond gender to encompass other aspects of identity and power. The role of banknotes as mediums of political resistance provides a compelling counterpoint to their official narratives. Strassler (2020) explored how activists in Indonesia repurposed currency during the New Order regime to critique authoritarian governance. By altering the imagery and inscriptions on banknotes, they transformed these objects into tools of protest, crystallizing dissent into visible and tangible forms of public discourse. This remediation of money demonstrates its potential as a site of ideological contestation, challenging the state's monopoly over its symbolic meanings.

At the same time, the question of who controls the design of banknotes reveals the contested nature of monetary representation. Penrose (2011), in her study of Scotland's banknotes, challenged the assumption that national governments hold absolute authority over currency design. Instead, she highlighted the significant roles played by non-state actors, such as private institutions and artists, in shaping the iconography of banknotes. This decentralization complicates traditional notions of sovereignty, illustrating how monetary design emerges from collaborative and contested processes. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within these processes often reflect broader political and social tensions.

The aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of banknotes further deepen their significance as cultural artifacts. Elbardawil (2020) examined the visual lexicon and cultural aesthetics of banknote design, emphasizing their role in expressing national identity and collective memory. By incorporating stylistic elements that resonate with the public's cultural sensibilities, banknotes evoke pride and unity while reinforcing state narratives. Cabrera Arús (2020) extended this analysis by focusing on the politics of representation, arguing that the selection of specific symbols and figures on paper money serves to mediate state-society relations. Through these choices, governments construct narratives that legitimize their authority while often excluding marginalized communities and counter-narratives.

The geopolitical implications of banknote design are particularly evident in the work of First & Sheffi (2015), who studied Israeli banknotes. Their research revealed how the imagery of selected sites and landscapes on currency reinforced Jewish-Israeli sovereignty while marginalizing Palestinian narratives. This deliberate emphasis on Zionist symbols and the exclusion of contested geographies underscores the role of banknotes in asserting territorial claims and solidifying national identity. Similar to Strassler (2020) findings in Indonesia, this case demonstrates how monetary representation can entrench state ideologies while simultaneously becoming a focal point for resistance.

Collectively, these studies illuminate the intricate connections between banknotes, identity, and power. From gender representation (Hadylyaya, 2023) to political resistance (Strassler, 2020), the processes of monetary design and representation reflect broader societal dynamics. The involvement of non-state actors (Penrose, 2011) and the aesthetic strategies employed by governments (Cabrera Arús, 2020; Elbardawil, 2020) further complicate the narratives encoded in currency. Additionally, the geopolitical stakes of banknote design, as highlighted by First & Sheffi (2015), underscore the currency's role as both a tool of governance and a site of ideological contestation.

Representation as Symbolic Governance

Foucault (1972) concept of discourse offers a powerful framework for understanding how power operates through the micro-physicalities of everyday objects such as banknotes. For

Foucault, discourse does not simply mirror reality; rather, it is an assemblage of statements that actively produce and organize knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003). In this regard, discourse provides the strategies and systems through which knowledge about a particular topic is represented and understood at specific historical junctures (Foucault, 1981). This process involves more than just linguistic designations; discourse functions as a practice that systematically shapes and defines the objects it references:

Discourses [are no longer seen] as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents of representation) but as practices that systematically form the object of which they speak. Of course, discourses are composed of signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to language (langue) and to speech (parole). (Cousins & Hussain, 1984, p. 240)

By positioning discourse as both language and practice, Foucault distinguishes between what is said (language) and what is done (practice). This distinction highlights the regulatory frameworks that govern discourse, determining what can and cannot be articulated within specific contexts (Mills, 2003). The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion inherent in discourse play a central role in producing truths and delegitimizing competing narratives. This dynamic imbues certain discourses with authority, enabling them to define what is factual or valid while silencing alternative perspectives, as Foucault (1981) stated:

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of producers whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality. (p. 53)

For Foucault, power is not centralized in the state apparatus, as theorized by Marxist scholars like Althusser (1971). Instead, it is dispersed and circulates within societal relationships. Power functions through what Foucault describes as capillary mechanisms, operating at the extremities of social structures to create disciplinary and normalizing effects (Foucault, 1980). This decentralized conception of power shifts the focus to how governance is enacted through everyday practices, objects, and interactions. This approach resonates with Agamben (2009) conceptualization of the apparatus (*dispositif*), which he defines as a network of practices, institutions, and technologies that regulate human behavior and mediate relationships between individuals and power structures.

Agamben (2009) expands on Foucault's notion of the apparatus by emphasizing its role in capturing and managing life itself. For him, the apparatus encompasses a broad array of mechanisms—from legal systems to mundane objects like banknotes—that organize and govern human conduct. Banknotes, as an apparatus, not only facilitate economic transactions but also function as tools of governance that inscribe state authority, mediate identities, and regulate social relations. This dual role of banknotes aligns with Stuart Hall's theorization of representation as a site where meanings are produced, contested, and stabilized (Hall, 1997). Hall (1997) extends Foucault's insights by emphasizing that representation is not merely about reflecting reality but is actively involved in constructing meaning and identity. Representation, in this sense, operates as a form of governance by mediating power relations and shaping how individuals perceive and relate to the state (Hall, 1997).

The integration of Foucault's discourse, Agamben's apparatus, and Hall's representation provides a robust framework for theorizing representation as governance. Banknotes serve as

a concrete example of how these concepts converge, operating simultaneously as discursive artifacts, apparatuses of power, and mediums of representation. Through their design and circulation, banknotes produce knowledge, regulate behavior, and stabilize power relations. Hall's concept of conjunctural analysis further enriches this understanding by situating representation within specific historical and cultural contexts. Hall argues that discourses do not exist in isolation; they are shaped by material, economic, and structural conditions (Hall, 2018). In periods of crisis, the state employs representation to secure consent and stabilize its position. This aligns with Foucault (1972) observation that discourse is both a modality of power and a site of struggle, where dominant narratives are contested by subaltern voices. Agamben (2009) idea of the apparatus complements this by highlighting how these mechanisms operate not only at the ideological level but also through the material and institutional practices that govern everyday life.

By synthesizing these insights, representation can be theorized as a form of governance that operates through the interplay of language, practice, and material conditions. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how state narratives are constructed, maintained, and contested within specific socio-political contexts. As Hall (2018) noted, the effort to win consent is an incessant and persistent process, particularly in moments of crisis. Representation, as both discourse and governance, emerges as a critical strategy in this ongoing struggle for power and legitimacy, mediated through apparatuses that shape both perception and conduct.

The governance enacted through representation involves both symbolic and material dimensions. Symbolically, representation constructs inclusive national identities and affirms state legitimacy. Materially, it regulates behavior and reinforces power hierarchies through apparatuses like banknotes, which mediate interactions between the state and its citizens. The representation of Frans Kaisiepo functions symbolically to project an image of unity while materially reinforcing state narratives that marginalize Papuan resistance movements. This interplay of discourse, apparatus, and representation underscores the complex dynamics of governance in contemporary societies.

Results

Current Changes in Indonesian Banknotes

In September 2016, President Joko Widodo issued a decree mandating the redesign of Indonesian banknotes and coins, based on a law enacted in 2011 requiring the inclusion of national heroes on currency. This legislation grants the president the authority to select the individuals to be represented. Following this mandate, Joko Widodo submitted a list of 12 national heroes to the Central Bank of Indonesia for inclusion in the new currency series, produced by PERURI (Public Enterprise for Banknotes Printing and Minting of the Republic of Indonesia). Of the 12 figures chosen, 10 were new to the currency; seven appeared on banknotes and five on coins.

Figure 1

Current Series of Indonesian Banknotes (Katalog Uang Kertas Indonesia: 1782-2018, 2018)



A notable feature of this redesign was the deliberate effort to reflect Indonesia's geographic and ethnic diversity. For the first time, the national heroes represented regions spanning the entire archipelago. Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta—the founding fathers of Indonesia—continued to appear on the IDR 100,000 banknotes, symbolizing Central-East Java and West-South Sumatra, respectively. Sulawesi and Kalimantan were represented by local heroes on the IDR 20,000 and IDR 5,000 notes, while heroes from Aceh and Nusa Tenggara appeared on the IDR 1,000 and IDR 100 notes. This marked a departure from previous series, where the majority of heroes originated from Java and Sumatra.

Another unprecedented feature was the inclusion of Frans Kaisiepo, a West Papuan national hero, on the IDR 10,000 note. Historically, West Papua had limited representation in Indonesian currency. During Dutch colonization in 1951, the region's banknotes depicted Queen Juliana in the Dutch Nieuw Guinea series. Following Indonesia's annexation of West Papua in 1963, Soekarno's image replaced these colonial designs (Kusuma, 2021). Thus, the incorporation of Frans Kaisiepo in 2016 represented a significant symbolic gesture.

Figure 2

Frans Kaisiepo at the Front Page (Above) in Idr 10,000 of an Indonesia Banknotes



Frans Kaisiepo's political legacy is both celebrated and contested. A staunch advocate for the integration of West Papua into Indonesia, Kaisiepo founded the Irian Political Party in 1961 to campaign for this cause. He played a pivotal role in supporting TRIKORA, a military operation aimed at reclaiming West Papua from Dutch control, and later served as the region's governor. During his tenure, Kaisiepo actively lobbied local councils to vote for integration in the controversial Act of Free Choice in 1969, an election marred by allegations of coercion and military intimidation (Sitompul, 2024). Despite his contributions to Indonesian statehood, Kaisiepo's legacy remains divisive among Papuans, many of whom regard him as a figure of assimilation rather than independence.

The redesign also introduced the phrase "Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia" (The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) on the front of all banknotes, prominently positioned beside the images of the national heroes. This slogan, derived from the 2011 law, has been historically associated with the defense of Indonesia's territorial integrity. It gained prominence during the annexation of Timor Leste in the 1970s, often accompanied by the assertion that Indonesia's territorial boundaries were "undisputed." Following Timor Leste's independence in 1999, the Indonesian government replaced its banknotes with new designs, underscoring the symbolic power of currency in delineating national boundaries and asserting sovereignty.

The Conjecture of Indonesian Banknotes: Indonesia-West Papua Bitter Relationship

West Papua and Indonesia have long been embroiled in a complex and contentious relationship. From the perspective of Papuans, the Indonesian military occupation after Dutch colonization in 1963 is viewed as a continuation of colonialism under a different guise (Karma, 2014). Conversely, many Indonesians perceive this relationship as a legitimate effort to integrate West Papua into Indonesia. Nevertheless, there exist factions within both

populations: Indonesians who advocate for West Papuan independence and Papuans who support integration. Central to the conflict is the extensive exploitation of Papuan lands by national and multinational corporations, facilitated by the Indonesian state (Kadir, 2024). Consequently, Papuans formed the Free West Papua Movement, which the Indonesian government labels as separatist. President Joko Widodo has articulated a vision of transforming West Papua into a Silicon Valley in Eastern Indonesia. To further this ambition, he appointed a young Papuan entrepreneur as a specialized staff member, recognizing both his successful rise from poverty and his initiative in establishing entrepreneurial programs that simultaneously promote integrationist ideology among Papuan youth (Ihsanuddin & Meiliana, 2019). Through this appointment, the president anticipates innovative contributions toward regional development.

The Indonesian government imposes strict limitations on freedom of expression in West Papua. Military actions frequently disrupt mass gatherings, and journalists face significant restrictions when attempting to report from the region (Zakaria & Dwicahyo, 2022). Advocates for Papuan independence, whether native or Indonesian supporters, often face severe repercussions, including arrest, torture, imprisonment, and extrajudicial killings, accompanied by nationalist rhetoric emphasizing Indonesia's unquestioned territorial sovereignty. Notably, the redesign of Indonesian banknotes coincided with the mass incarceration of over 1700 Papuan activists who participated in demonstrations during May Day in 2016 (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Indonesia, 2016).

Notably, a significant incident occurred in 2019, where Papuans were subjected to racial abuse by Indonesian military personnel in Surabaya, East Java, being derogatively referred to as monkeys, pigs, and dogs (Lamb, 2019). This incident stemmed from suspicions that Papuan students had desecrated the Indonesian national flag in front of their dormitory. The event triggered immediate reactions from West Papuans, the Indonesian government, and Indonesian citizens. In West Papua, massive demonstrations erupted, with protestors explicitly demanding independence from Indonesia. Conversely, the Indonesian government responded by shutting down internet access and deploying additional military troops to the region. Moreover, the Regent of Blitar in East Java recommended that civil servants—teachers, local government staff—as well as students, wear symbols demonstrating their solidarity with Papuans (Pemerintah Kabupaten Blitar, 2020).

Figure 3

The Regent of Blitar, East Java, Wearing a Papua's Traditional Hat in an Event Called "Blitar Loves Papua"



Figure 4

An Event Called “Blitar Loves Papua,” Responding to the West Papuans Protest in 2020



In a similar fashion, during a car-free day event in the capital city, Jakarta, the Minister of Political, Legal, and Security Affairs performed a traditional West Papuan song. Significantly, this event also included traditional West Papuan dances, with participants wearing T-shirts bearing the slogan “Papua is Indonesia” (Minggu, 2019). Concurrently, the Police General of Indonesia engaged in a comparable symbolic gesture during an event celebrating the anniversary of Indonesian policewomen. From these events, it is evident that an unequal power dynamic exists between the Indonesian government, which seeks to defend its territorial integrity, and the Papuan population, which continues to advocate for independence.

Discussion

Representation as Solution, Indonesian Banknotes and Its Discursive Formation

A closer examination of Indonesian banknotes reveals how unequal power relations produce and reinforce knowledge about West Papua as perceived truths. The representation of heroes from various Indonesian islands on the banknotes constructs an image of “unity in diversity.” This representation generates two significant impressions: the government's advocacy of multiculturalism and the inseparable status of West Papua within Indonesian territory, irrespective of Papuan struggles for independence. The juxtaposition of the phrase “The Unitary State of Indonesia” with a West Papuan national hero significantly confines Papuans within an Indonesian ideological framework. If banknotes are conceptualized as “territorial currency,” marking the emergence and domestication of nation-states, the depiction of national heroes from diverse Indonesian islands can be interpreted as a strategic effort by the state and media to disseminate Indonesian geopolitical awareness, fostering a sense of belonging among ethnically and geographically diverse populations. Thus, the state functions not merely to ensure the legality of currency circulation but also to protect national unity and territorial integrity through symbolic representation.

This notion of belonging aligns with Rousseau (1991) concept of money as the “real bond of society,” invented as a standard measurement facilitating equal exchanges within society. Consequently, incorporating a West Papuan national hero into Indonesian banknotes serves

not only to reinforce West Papuan identity as inherently Indonesian but also to solidify social cohesion. Additionally, this can be related to Foucault (1980) concept of visibility. John Rajchman (1988), posited that visibility equates to discipline, whereby becoming a spectacle means becoming surveilled. Following this perspective, the circulation and distribution of currency are continuously monitored by the Indonesian Central Bank. Thus, when the Head of the Indonesian Central Bank for Papua/West Papua stated that the IDR 10,000 denomination was the most favoured banknote among Papuans, it suggested a measurement of psychological proximity between Papuans and Indonesia.

In order for the discourse of the unity of Indonesia to establish its truth, as Foucault argued, it is necessary to exclude other equally valid discourse. Conversely, in order for discourse to not to be excluded, it has to be subjected with another powerful discourse within the apparatus. Apparatus, once again, as Agamben (2009) argued before, always involves a process of subjectification, they have to produce their subject. This is the logic that precisely working in the case of Indonesian banknotes. Although Frans Kaisiepo was from West Papua, he supported West Papua to integrate with Indonesia rather than becoming independent. He was more of the hero for Indonesia rather than for West Papua. Thus, the incorporation of Frans Kaisiepo in Indonesian banknotes might be regarded as an appreciation for West Papuans who are pro-integration. Whereas, for West Papuans who want to be independent, this might be seen as a conditional cooptation. This is undoubtedly the same logic of the endorsement of the dominant culture that sustains social stability in which its significance is determined by whether it perpetuates dominant cultural values or not (McRobbie, 2005). We could also say, West Papuans is only of significance or appreciated as long as they are subjected within the discourse of NKRI or “The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.” Both Frans Kaisiepo and a young entrepreneur from West Papua I mentioned above, who are recruited by the President as one of his specialised staffs are exemplary of this appropriation.

The strategy of co-opting West Papuans into the realm of “The Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia” is multifaceted, evident in various discourses sharing common regularities with Kaisiepo's representation in banknotes. Besides co-opting West Papuan figures who align with NKRI discourse, other representational strategies involve appropriating West Papuan symbols to perpetuate this discourse. West Papuan language was appropriated to delegitimize the Free West Papua Movement, and traditional Papuan hats were appropriated) to symbolize Papuan inclusion within Indonesia. Similar appropriations occurred with traditional West Papuan songs performed by the Minister of Political, Legal, and Security Affairs and the Police General, as previously described.

This discursive formation must be contextualized within material, economic, and structural factors—elements Foucault (1993) overlooked in his theory of discourse and power/knowledge—to understand fully what enables this formation. As previously noted, the Indonesian state severely represses freedom of expression in West Papua, preventing mass gatherings and restricting journalists' access. Additionally, intensified punitive measures target both Papuan and Indonesian independence advocates. These policies align with efforts to transform West Papua into a Silicon Valley in Eastern Indonesia, removing potential obstacles to investment. Consequently, the unequal power dynamic between pro-integration Indonesians and independence-seeking Papuans not only suppresses alternative discourses but also fosters new behaviors reinforcing pro-integration narratives. Such behaviors are observable in Indonesians wearing shirts emblazoned with “Papua is Indonesia” and using social media to delegitimize the Free West Papua movement. This dynamic represents

individuals internalizing and reproducing dominant discourse, embedding themselves within structures of coercion and domination (Foucault, 1993).

Despite varied representational strategies regarding West Papua, they share a commonality: fetishizing West Papua as inherently Indonesian. Fetishism involves transforming a subject—be it a deity, community, or individual—into an object. Hall (1997) identifies this as a displacement process, where economic, political, and racial inequalities motivating Papuan independence aspirations are displaced and obscured by desirable representations such as banknotes or appropriated Papuan symbols. In other words, representation has become a preferred solution to addressing racial, political, and economic inequalities rather than resolving them.

Ultimately, this phenomenon exemplifies authoritarian populism. Hall (2018) argues authoritarian populism's distinct ability lies in generating active popular consent during crises. Within the Indonesian context, the state's increased law enforcement measures and restrictions on freedom of expression coexist with symbolic representations, such as incorporating a West Papuan hero in currency and appropriating Papuan cultural symbols, fostering public perception of inclusivity towards West Papua. Indonesian authoritarian populism distinctly operates through authoritarian measures materially while symbolically engaging in populist gestures, exemplifying the triumph of representation over material reality.

Conclusion

In an attempt to understand the role that the recent changes in Indonesian banknotes play in the present conjuncture, this study has applied Foucault's theory of representation via discourse to examine how unequal power relations enable and reinforce the discourse of pro-Indonesian integration as a dominant truth. Conversely, this discourse marginalizes and restricts the development of pro-West Papuan independence narratives. In this framework, banknotes function not merely as economic instruments but as disciplinary tools that construct and regulate West Papuan identity. West Papuans are rendered acceptable within Indonesian society only when they are subjected to and operate within the discourse of national integration. Furthermore, Foucault (1972) conception of power embedded within discourse elucidates how this constructed identity of West Papua generates new modes of behavior among Indonesians regarding how West Papuans are perceived, discussed, and represented.

Employing a Foucauldian analysis of discourse also allowed this study to situate the phenomenon of the redesigned banknotes within broader networks of representation. Through this lens, it becomes clear that the representation of West Papua has become fetishized—its complex political, economic, and racial struggles displaced by symbolic appropriation. However, as Hall (1997) critiques, this fetishism cannot be fully grasped without accounting for the underlying economic, material, political, and structural conditions that make it possible—factors that Foucault (1972, 1981) framework often overlooks. Thus, it is insufficient to treat discourse solely as an anticipation of the difference between language and practice. Instead, practices must be distinguished as either symbolic or material, a distinction critical for unpacking how power is enacted and legitimized.

To address this limitation, conjunctural analysis was employed to contextualize the representational strategy of banknotes alongside other parallel state discourse, including the

appropriation of Papuan cultural symbols and the political co-optation of pro-integration Papuan figures. This analysis reveals that representation itself has become a preferred solution to managing political, economic, and racial inequality in West Papua—displacing rather than resolving the real issues. This tendency reflects a core feature of authoritarian populism in Indonesia, where the state enforces repressive material controls while simultaneously deploying symbolic inclusivity to generate consent and stabilize dissent. In this context, representation triumphs over reality, making symbolic gestures a substitute for genuine structural change.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of viewing representation as a site of both ideological production and political struggle. Indonesian banknotes do more than commemorate national heroes; they participate in shaping geopolitical imaginaries, reinforcing state narratives, and disciplining subjectivities. Understanding this process requires a theoretical framework that accounts for both the symbolic force of discourse and the material structures that sustain it.

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Visual Culture and Brand Communication: How Chinese Beauty Brands Engage Japanese Consumers

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Abstract

With the acceleration of internationalization among Chinese beauty brands, the Japanese market, characterized by its mature consumer base and unique cultural context, has become a key strategic destination. This study analyzes short-video advertisements targeting the Japanese market on Instagram by three major Chinese beauty brands: Florasis, Flower Knows, and Perfect Diary. Based on visual social semiotics and employing multimodal discourse analysis, the current study examines their cross-cultural communication strategies across four dimensions: visual content, expression, context, and culture. Analyzing 46 advertising videos released in 2024 using quantitative and qualitative methods, this study reveals that the brands adopt differentiated visual positioning, leveraging Eastern aesthetic cultural symbols, scenario transplantation, and celebrity endorsements to enhance advertising effectiveness. Key findings indicate: Florasis's Eastern ritualistic expression, despite being highly distinctive, needs to balance "cultural export" and "local adaptation"; Flower Knows, albeit appealing to young Japanese consumers with dreamy elements, lacks cultural uniqueness; and Perfect Diary's celebrity strategy, although efficient, risks homogenization. Furthermore, given Instagram's algorithm favoring high-engagement content, optimizing multimodal elements (text, music, hashtags) is crucial for improving algorithmic visibility. This study finally recommends that Chinese beauty brands should deepen the visual translation of local cultural symbols, construct a dual "emotional-functional" narrative framework, and dynamically optimize multimodal expressions based on the data.

Keywords: Chinese beauty brands, visual culture, multimodal discourse analysis, cross-cultural communication, Japanese market, brand communication strategy

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Introduction

With the rapid internationalization of Chinese beauty brands, Japan has emerged as a vital target market, thanks to its highly developed beauty consumption landscape and unique cultural background. According to the data from China Association of Fragrance Flavor and Cosmetic Industries, the scale of the Chinese cosmetics market reached 1,044.525 billion RMB in 2023, making China the largest cosmetics consumer market in the world. In 2024, China's cosmetics export value was expected to reach 50.99 billion RMB, with Japan ranking among the top five export markets (Li, 2025). A survey conducted by Facebook Japan revealed that Japanese users were particularly enthusiastic about shopping on Instagram, with the proportion of users checking product details through posts with shopping tags being three times higher than in other countries (Sato et al., 2022). This creates expanded digital channels for cross-border communication for Chinese beauty brands. Current research indicates that social media has become an important platform for brands to engage in cross-cultural communication (Buzeta et al., 2023; Codignola, 2021; Thanasi-Boçe et al., 2023). Among these platforms, Instagram, with its visual orientation, particularly supports beauty brands in achieving market reach, shaping brand image, and driving sales growth (Lim & Lee, 2021; Wan et al., 2020). While short video advertisements are becoming increasingly significant in brand communication, their application in cross-cultural contexts still requires further exploration. Therefore, this study examines three representative brands—Flower Knows, Florasis, and Perfect Diary—focusing on the short video advertisements they released on Instagram for the Japanese market. The aim is to investigate the following key research questions:

1. How do Chinese beauty brands construct their brand image and attract Japanese consumers through the three layers of visual rhetoric (i. e. media texts, spatial texts, event texts)?
2. How can visual symbols such as “China chic” and “Kawaii aesthetics” be matched with the aesthetic preferences of Japanese consumers to strengthen emotional connections?
3. How can localized narratives and differentiated expressions be coordinated in short video advertisements to enhance market acceptance?

This study employs multimodal discourse analysis as the core method, systematically deconstructing the interplay of text, images, and sound. Meanwhile, it utilizes visual social semiotics to analyze the cultural coding and symbolic meanings of visual signs. By studying the patterns of cross-cultural visual strategies used by Chinese beauty brands, this study provides a theoretical framework and practical insights for optimizing international market communication strategies.

Methods

Theoretical Analysis Framework

Barthes (1977) posited that a “relay” relationship could form between text and images, mutually complementing each other's meanings. O'Toole (1997) analyzed visual art (images) using a systemic functional linguistics approach. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) proposed a framework for visual grammar analysis that encompassed representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning, providing a theoretical basis for image analysis. Chinese scholar Zhang (2009) introduced a comprehensive framework for multimodal discourse analysis, including four dimensions: culture, context, content, and

expression. This paper will draw on the visual grammar framework articulated by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) and Zhang's (2009) comprehensive framework for multimodal discourse analysis. By integrating these two frameworks, we, to some extent, will create a categorical construction divided into four levels: visual content, visual expression, visual context, and visual culture, as shown in Table 1. This study will focus on the analysis of visual modalities in short videos on social media (Instagram) and explore social visual signs.

Table 1

Category Construction and Analysis Framework of This Study

First-Level Coding	Second-Level Coding	Third-Level Coding	Initial concept
Visual content	Visual Theme	Theme style	The overall visual style characteristics presented by the advertisement
		Background Environment	Solid Color Background, Arranged Environment, daily environment.
		Character behavior	product description, usage process, image display, content script
		Character gender	Male, female
		Contact	provide, request.
		Shot size	close-up, medium close-up, medium shot, long shot, wide shot
		View Types	low angle, high angle, eye-level angle
	Narrative Structure	Structure	narrative representation, conceptual representation
			Condensation, Transplantation
			Opposition, Domestication
Visual Expression	Rhetorical Structure	Rhetorical devices	
		Metaphorical rhetoric	Object metaphor
Visual Context	Rhetorical context	Rhetorical context	Dynamic analysis of communication context
Visual Culture	Rhetorical culture	Critique of Ideas	Critique of Cultural Values

This framework is particularly suitable for analyzing the flow of visual information in short videos and helps to reveal how Chinese beauty brands establish cultural identity in the Japanese market through visual strategies.

Research Design

Sample Selection

The research objects are short video advertisements from three major Chinese cosmetic brands—Florasis, Flower Knows, and Perfect Diary—targeting the Japanese market on Instagram. The selection criteria are as follows:

- * Clearly targeting the Japanese market (including Japanese text and Japanese cultural elements).
- * Having clear brand communication objectives.
- * Published between January 2024 and December 2024 to ensure timeliness.
- * Possessing engagement data (over 10,000 views).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection Process:

- * Searching for target content through the brands' official Instagram accounts.
- * Filtering short video advertisements that meet the selection criteria.
- * Collecting basic video information (publication date, video length, engagement data).
- * Conducting preliminary classification of video content.

Data Analysis Methods

Following the multimodal discourse analysis framework in Table 1, we will systematically encode visual symbols and extract themes, focusing on:

- * The selection and combination methods of visual content elements.
- * The integration and expression of traditional Chinese aesthetic elements with local Japanese aesthetics.
- * How brand cultural values are effectively conveyed through visual symbols.

This study combines quantitative statistics and qualitative coding methods. Through multimodal interaction analysis, it reveals the visual communication strategy patterns and cultural adaptation mechanisms of Chinese cosmetic brands in the Japanese market.

Results and Discussion

This study conducts a systematic analysis of short video advertisements released by Chinese cosmetic brands (Florasis, Flower Knows, and Perfect Diary) targeting the Japanese market on the Instagram platform, based on the aforementioned multimodal visual analysis framework. In the process of this study, the character video content from the three brands in 2024 was used as the data foundation, and a total of 46 videos were screened; thus, there were 12 videos from Florasis, 9 from Flower Knows, and 3 from Perfect Diary. The results and discussion are explored from four dimensions: visual content, visual expression, visual context, and visual culture.

Analysis and Discussion of Visual Content

Presentation of Visual Themes and Symbols

The study finds that the three brands exhibit significant differentiation in visual themes based on their respective market positioning, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Comparison of Visual Theme Characteristics Across Different Brands*

Brand	Theme Style	Background Environmental Characteristics	Character Behavior	Character Gender
Florasis	Eastern Aesthetics and Cultural Heritage	Solid Color Background (75%), Everyday Environment (17%), Staged Environment (8%)	Content Script (25%), Image Display (67%), Usage Process (8%)	Female (100%)
Flower Knows	Combination of Girlhood Dreams and Japanese Aesthetics	Solid Color Background (22%), Everyday Environment (22%), Staged Environment (56%)	Content Script (22%), Image Display (67%), Usage Process (11%)	Female (100%)
Perfect Diary	Celebrity-Driven and Pragmatism	Staged Environment (100%)	Product Narrative (100%)	Male (100%)

The results of the visual theme analysis indicate significant differences in the visual theme strategies of the three brands.

Florasis employs solid color backgrounds (75%) to highlight elements of Eastern aesthetics, with character presentation (67%) reflecting cultural heritage. Flower Knows tends to create environments (56%) that cultivate a dreamlike atmosphere for young women, also placing emphasis on character presentation (67%) while increasing interactivity. Perfect Diary relies entirely on environmental arrangements (100%) and product narratives featuring Japanese male celebrities (100%), adopting a localization strategy with celebrity endorsements.

Figure 1*Screenshot of a Florasis Video Featuring a Modern Cheongsam Female Image*

Figure 2*Screenshot of a Flower Knows Video Featuring a Pink Dreamlike Scene***Figure 3***Screenshot of a Perfect Diary Video Featuring a Product Demonstration by a Japanese Male Celebrity*

The visual theme analysis reveals that Florasis emphasizes cultural uniqueness and artistry, Flower Knows pursues youthfulness and emotional resonance, while Perfect Diary focuses on the star effect and rapid market penetration. Each of these three different strategies has its strengths: Florasis's cultural heritage approach establishes a unique brand identity; Flower Knows's fusion strategy broadens acceptance among younger consumers; and Perfect Diary's celebrity strategy effectively reduces barriers to cross-cultural communication. Comparative analysis shows that background environment and character actions are key visual elements for brand differentiation. Florasis creates a sense of sophistication with solid color backgrounds (75%), Flower Knows generates a dreamlike atmosphere through environmental arrangements (56%), and Perfect Diary fully employs environmental setups (100%) to ensure professionalism and localization. This differentiated strategy enables each brand to carve out its position and audience within the highly competitive Japanese beauty market.

Interaction Rules and Cinematic Language

Table 3

Brand Interaction and Camera Language Analysis

Brand	Interaction Types	Shot Scale Distribution	Perspective Types	Interaction Effects
Florasis	Providing Type (75%), Requesting Type (25%)	Medium Shot (45%), Long Shot (35%), Close-up (20%)	Eye Level (60%), High Angle (25%), Low Angle (15%)	Emphasize the brand's aesthetic and elegant character through cultural ambiance and a sense of distance
Flower Knows	Providing Type (56%), Requesting Type (44%)	Close-up (53%), Medium Close-up (23%), Medium Shot (14%), Long Shot (7%), Wide Shot (2%)	Eye Level (92%), High Angle (5%), Low Angle (3%)	Focus on intimacy and immersive interaction, providing the audience with a relaxed and enjoyable experience
Perfect Diary	Providing Type (67.7%), Requesting Type (32.3%)	Close-up (64.4%), Medium Close-up (13.6%), Medium Shot (17.3%), Long Shot (2.6%), Wide Shot (1.1%)	Eye Level (81.5%), High Angle (13.8%), Low Angle (4.8%)	Focus on details and realism, enhancing persuasion through clear product presentation

The three domestic Chinese beauty brands exhibit distinct visual communication strategies. Florasis creates an aesthetic distance rich in cultural connotation through provided interaction and a combination of medium and long shots; Flower Knows employs a balanced interactive approach with numerous close-ups to foster an intimate yet non-intrusive relationship; and Perfect Diary focuses on solicited interaction and a combination of medium shots and close-ups to directly capture audience's attention and establish an immediate connection, forming a differentiated brand visual identity system.

Narrative Structure and Information Transmission

Table 4

Narrative Structure and Information Delivery Analysis

Brand	Narrative Type	Narrative Representation Ratio	Concept Representation Ratio	Narrative Example
Florasis	Cultural Depth Narrative	64%	36%	Visual Linear Presentation of Nomadic Aesthetics
Flower Knows	Contextualized Concept Narrative	35%	65%	Sweet Girly Party Scene with Context Switching
Perfect Diary	Celebrity Recommendation Narrative	21%	79%	Celebrity Directly Stating Product Features

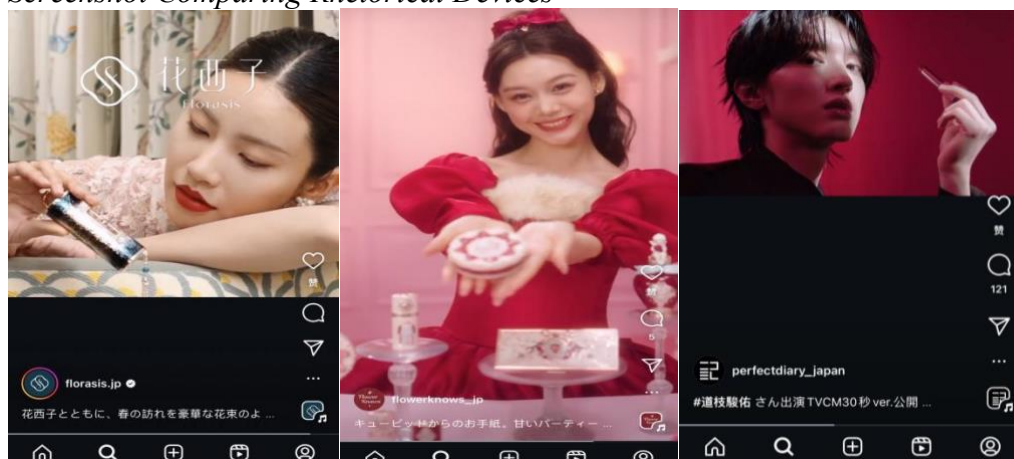
Narrative structure analysis reveals that Florasis primarily uses cultural depth narratives, conveying the brand story and reinforcing memory points through the linear presentation of cultural symbols such as cheongsams and nomadic aesthetics. Flower Knows employs contextualized conceptual narratives, integrating dreamy scenarios such as sweet Lolita parties into the storytelling, balancing product display with context building. Perfect Diary, moreover, mainly uses celebrity recommendation narratives, directly explaining product features to simplify the information delivery process and enhance consumers' rapid understanding of product functions.

Visual Expression Analysis

Comparison of Rhetorical Devices

Analysis of the Instagram short videos of the three makeup brands reveals distinct differences in their rhetorical strategies. Florasis is dominated by condensation rhetoric, merging multiple traditional Chinese elements and product features into a single frame or short period, establishing brand recognition through high-density information delivery. Flower Knows favors transplantation rhetoric, placing products in dreamy scenarios with a cute, girly style, creating an approachable brand image full of affinity and attracting emotional resonance from young female consumers by fusing a youthful atmosphere with product features. Perfect Diary, however, emphasizes a strategy combining domestication and transplantation rhetoric, transforming professional makeup concepts into easy-to-understand language through male celebrity advertising, while also integrating product features into consumers' daily scenarios through celebrity influence, achieving a balance between professionalism and approachability, and enhancing brand authority and accessibility. It is worth noting that the three brands have chosen differentiated rhetorical strategies based on their respective positioning, effectively differentiating themselves in the market and building a unique brand language system.

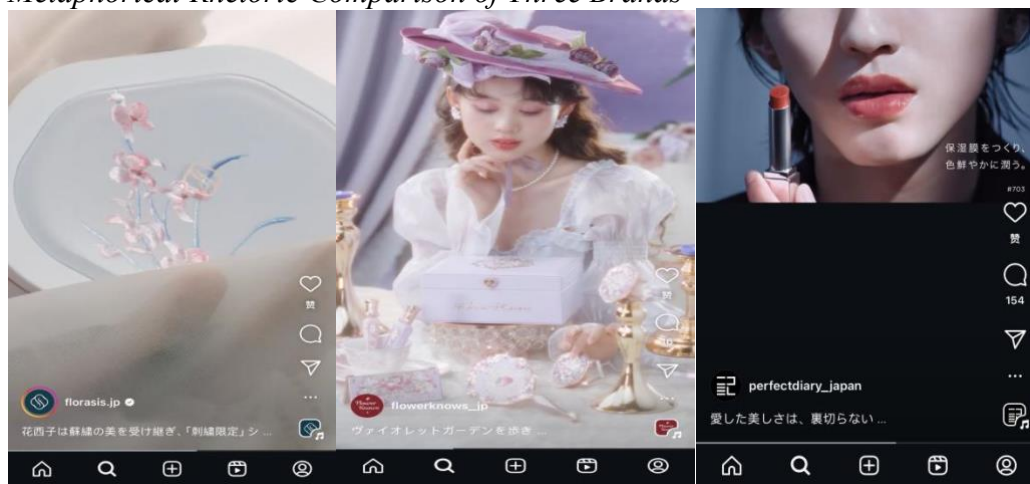
Figure 4
Screenshot Comparing Rhetorical Devices



Metaphorical Rhetoric Analysis

All three brands cleverly employ differentiated visual symbols to construct distinct metaphorical systems, effectively conveying their core values and emotional appeals. Florasis utilizes the metaphor of cultural heritage by selecting representative traditional cultural symbols such as the concentric lock and embroidery as visual elements, artfully blending them with modern makeup. This design strategy not only successfully conveys a profound Chinese traditional aesthetic but further communicates the brand values of “artisan craftsmanship” and “cultural confidence,” making Florasis products more than just makeup. They embody a cultural depth and historical heritage that transcends the surface, thereby evoking a sense of cultural identity in consumers. Knowing that Florasis focuses on the excavation and presentation of traditional culture, it is safe to say that Flower Knows concentrates on creating a visual world full of dreamlike colors. By using a large number of soft and romantic elements such as bows and flowers, Flower Knows successfully metaphorizes the emotions of youth and innocence, accurately grasping the psychological needs of young women. Its visual language is dedicated to evoking young women’s aspirations for a beautiful and ideal life, cleverly positioning makeup products as a medium for realizing girlish dreams, thus establishing a deep emotional resonance in the minds of consumers and stimulating their desire to purchase. Different from the previous two, Perfect Diary adopts a more direct and effective strategy. Through visual symbols such as male celebrity endorsements and facial close-ups, they construct a dual metaphor of professionalism and user experience. The image of celebrities not only directly implies the authority of the products, quickly establishing consumer trust, but the close-ups of lips also visually demonstrate the product’s usage effect, enhancing persuasiveness. This combination of strategies emphasizes the reliability of product effects while enhancing the brand’s recognition and influence among diverse audiences through celebrity endorsement. Through these three ingeniously designed, distinct metaphorical strategies, each of them demonstrates unique brand charm in the fierce market competition, successfully conveying their respective brand philosophies and emotional values, thereby winning the favor of consumers.

Figure 5
Metaphorical Rhetoric Comparison of Three Brands



Visual Context Analysis

This section mainly explores the communication context and rhetorical strategies of the three beauty brands in Instagram short video advertisements, covering the rhetorical situation, rhetorical context, and the dynamic process of the overall communication path.

Table 5
Comparison of Brand Visual Context Characteristics

Brand	Rhetorical Situation	Rhetorical Context	Communication Path
Florasis	Integration of Eastern Rituals and Daily Life	Eastern Aesthetic Colors + Everyday Life Representation + Emotional Resonance	Cultural Context → Emotional Resonance → Aesthetic Identification
Flower Knows	Sweet Rituals and Product Display	Sweet Style + Lifelike Characters + Emotional Resonance	Contextual Embedding → Emotional Resonance → Direct Conversion
Perfect Diary	Neutral Rituals and Authoritative Interpretation	Neutral Color Palette + Authoritative Presentation + Interpretive Interaction	Authoritative Endorsement → Rational Cognition → Functional Identification

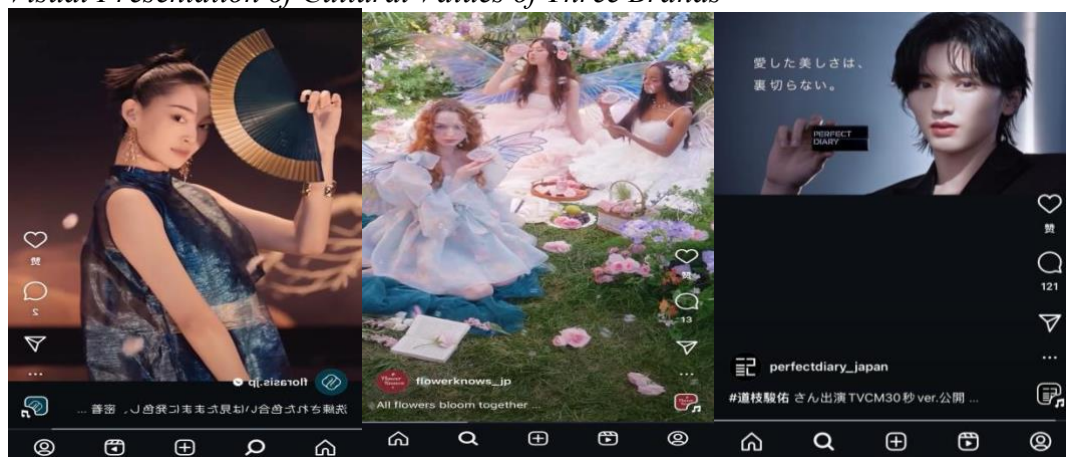
Florasis integrates Eastern rituals with everyday scenes, constructing a cultural atmosphere through aesthetic colors and lifelike representations. Flower Knows focuses on sweet rituals and product displays, skillfully using emotional resonance to achieve direct conversions. Perfect Diary employs neutral rituals and authoritative interpretations, emphasizing functional cognition and rational persuasion. In terms of interaction, Florasis emphasizes culture and emotion, Flower Knows relies on a sweet atmosphere, and Perfect Diary emphasizes functional orientation. Platform algorithm matching influences the breadth of dissemination, while cultural fit determines the strength of recognition. Each has its characteristics: Florasis is culturally unique but has a high barrier to entry, Flower Knows is emotionally strong but lacks differentiation, and Perfect Diary is efficient but has limited cultural depth.

Visual Culture Analysis

Critique of Cultural Values

In cross-cultural communication, brands convey unique cultural values by deeply exploring visual symbols and rhetorical methods. Florasis uses traditional cultural symbols such as the concentric lock, embroidery, and folding fan to reconstruct Eastern aesthetics in a globalized context, promoting cultural export and exchange from the perspective of cultural confidence. Flower Knows, in addition, integrates global aesthetic trends, combining pink, dreamy, and other Japanese “kawaii” styles with local creativity, showcasing an aesthetic view that combines local innovation with an international perspective. Perfect Diary, then, conveys inclusive and function-oriented values by balancing global makeup trends with local consumer demands (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Visual Presentation of Cultural Values of Three Brands



Consumer Culture and Resonance

In short videos, Florasis strengthens the symbolic output of Eastern aesthetic symbols, emphasizing the brand’s cultural recognition and differentiated perception in the international market, forming emotional resonance by highlighting “artisan craftsmanship” and “cultural depth.” Flower Knows breaks through cultural boundaries by expressing a relaxed and joyful aesthetic pursuit through universal aesthetic language and exaggerated dreamlike scenes, attracting young consumer groups. Perfect Diary, then, focuses on the expression of functional value, showcasing its inclusiveness and professionalism through celebrity endorsements and detailed close-ups, quickly reaching diverse audience needs. The three brands demonstrate different visual culture strategies. Florasis impresses with cultural heritage and sentiment; Flower Knows creates a dreamlike atmosphere with integrated innovation; but Perfect Diary satisfies diverse consumer demands with a function-oriented approach, presenting differentiated competitiveness and market positioning.

Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the visual communication strategies employed by three major Chinese beauty brands on the Japanese Instagram platform, examining them through four dimensions: visual content, visual expression, visual context, and visual culture, with the aim of revealing the effectiveness of their cross-cultural communication. The

findings indicate that each brand exhibits significant differences in visual themes, expressions, contexts, and cultural strategies, resulting in varying trade-offs between “cultural depth” and “market efficiency.” Specifically, Florasis opts for a minimalist style to highlight Eastern cultural aesthetics, conveying traditional aesthetics through rhetorical techniques such as condensation and transplantation, constructing a unique cultural atmosphere, and reinforcing Eastern aesthetic symbols. Flower Knows, then, builds dreamlike scenes to evoke emotional resonance, integrates Chinese and Japanese elements using domestication and transplantation strategies, focuses on emotional resonance, and merges global aesthetics with Japanese “kawaii” style. Meanwhile, Perfect Diary relies on celebrity endorsements to emphasize product functionality and localized identity, constructs brand authority through celebrity influence, focuses on functional cognition and rational persuasion, and balances global makeup trends with local consumer demands. Through differentiated visual positioning, these brands conduct advertising and marketing in the Japanese market; they, to some extent, enhance the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. However, we also observe that while Florasis’s ritualized Eastern expression is highly recognizable, it needs to balance “cultural output” with “local adaptation.” Flower Knows’s integration of dreamlike elements, while appealing to young Japanese consumers, may lack cultural uniqueness. Perfect Diary’s celebrity strategy, although efficient, is also prone to falling into homogenized competition. From an algorithmic perspective, Instagram’s recommendation mechanism favors high-interaction content, suggesting that brands need to optimize multimodal elements to enhance algorithmic visibility. For example, Flower Knows’s immersive close-up videos, due to their high interaction, achieved 1.5 times compared with the average viewership. Therefore, this study offers strategic recommendations for the international communication of Chinese beauty brands: deepen the visual translation of local cultural symbols, construct a dual-narrative framework of “emotion-function,” and dynamically optimize multimodal expressions based on the data. Unfortunately, this study is primarily based on visual content analysis and does not fully encompass consumer behavior insights or interaction metrics outside of the Instagram platform. Future research could more comprehensively explore consumer attitudes and preferences in different cultural contexts to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of cross-cultural communication.

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Humanistic Knowledge in Vietnamese Proverbs: A Cultural Heritage and Lessons in Conduct for the Modern Era

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Abstract

Vietnamese proverbs, encompassing over 16,000 sentences, form a rich repository of folk knowledge that preserves humanistic values and behavioral lessons passed down through generations. This study examines the cultural and linguistic significance of proverbs, highlighting their role in reflecting humanistic philosophies within relationships among humans, nature, family, and society. Using the AntConc corpus analysis tool, the study analyzes selected proverbs in three key dimensions: (1) proverbs as ethical handbooks for harmonious living; (2) their relevance to modern challenges such as technology overuse and environmental degradation; and (3) the role of digitalization in preserving and revitalizing this cultural heritage. Proverbs are contextualized not only as reflections of Vietnamese agricultural civilization but also as part of a global humanistic discourse that resonates across cultures. By modeling linguistic structures and values embedded in proverbs, the paper proposes educational and technological strategies to sustain this oral tradition in the digital age.

Keywords: Vietnamese proverbs, humanistic values, cultural heritage, digitalization, AntConc

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Introduction

Vietnamese proverbs are a valuable repository of folk knowledge, crystallized through the lived experiences, labor, and social interactions of generations past. With over 16,000 entries, the proverb system profoundly captures Vietnamese thought, identity, and philosophy of life. Proverbs serve not only as a means of conveying life experiences but also as a “social mirror” imbued with ethical values, practical knowledge, and a rich humanistic spirit.

In the modern era, particularly during the digital transformation period, proverbs face the threat of gradual disappearance due to the impact of globalization, urbanization, and generational forgetfulness. Nevertheless, technology simultaneously provides new pathways to digitize, study, and effectively disseminate this heritage. The application of corpus analysis tools such as AntConc enables a scientific and modern approach to proverbs, serving both scholarly research and digital engagement.

This article examines the humanistic values embedded in Vietnamese proverbs, illustrating their moral teachings, traditional ethics, and educational roles in contemporary society. Furthermore, it presents an integrated research methodology that combines corpus linguistics with cultural comparison, contributing to the proposal of strategies for the digital preservation and revitalization of proverbs in the digital age.

The Epistemic and Philosophical Values in Proverbs

Proverbs represent a succinct linguistic form—rhythmic, memorable, and readily transmitted orally—laden with profound informational and philosophical content. Compared to folk verses (*ca dao*), which tend to express emotion, proverbs lean toward rationality, conveying perceptions, life experiences, practical knowledge, and social norms. According to Nguyễn Xuân Kính - Vietnam Proverb (n.d.), proverbs reflect a synthesis of generational life experience, embodying both practical utility and elements of folk philosophy.

At the international level, proverbs are also recognized as a form of “polysemic” language, characterized by high flexibility and adaptability across various contexts. This very nature enables proverbs to be regarded as “the shortest saying containing the deepest lesson” (Urbano, n.d.).

Vietnamese proverbs constitute a repository of traditional value systems, reflecting not only productive knowledge and lived experience but also philosophical thinking, a worldview, and a conception of human life rooted in Vietnamese cultural identity. According to Ngo Thi Thanh Quy, proverbs are considered cultural–linguistic artifacts that serve the dual function of reflecting social life and preserving and disseminating traditional cultural values. They act as a “grand textbook” for every generation, playing a pivotal role in shaping Vietnam’s characteristic wet-rice agricultural civilization.

Harmony With Nature and Agricultural Labor

One of the most distinctive features of Vietnamese culture is the philosophy of *thiên nhân hợp nhất*—the belief in living harmoniously with nature, respecting and adapting to the laws of the cosmos. Vietnamese proverbs reflect this worldview deeply, primarily through expressions related to weather forecasting, seasonal patterns, and agricultural experience, such as: “When dragonflies fly low, it means rain; when they fly high, it means sunshine;

flying in between indicates overcast,” or “In the seventh month with the northeast monsoon, if dragonflies fly, a storm is approaching,” and “Deep plowing yields good rice.” These forms of knowledge not only assist in agricultural production but also reveal a behavioral attitude grounded in careful observation, experiential synthesis, and a strong emphasis on stability and adaptation to environmental fluctuations.

In addition, practical advice in proverbs—on crop selection, seedling transplantation, rice cultivation, and weather forecasting based on flora and fauna—is another form of collective agricultural intelligence. Examples include “When winged ants leave their nest, storms are near” and “When dragonflies fly low, it means rain.” These examples affirm that proverbs not only encapsulate the achievements of material culture but also stand as evidence of the intellectual depth, keen observational abilities, and practical, synthetic thinking of the Vietnamese people.

This harmonious relationship with nature also permeates all aspects of material life—from cultivation and food to housing, mobility, and daily routines. The agricultural foundation of Vietnamese society has shaped key positive personality traits, including diligence, patience, a preference for peace and stability, strong family bonds, and a heightened sense of community. However, this nature-based way of life also entails certain limitations: a tendency toward caution, resistance to change, complacency with the status quo, and reliance on luck or fate.

To sustain a harmonious existence with nature, Vietnamese people have developed a synthetic mode of thinking—accumulating experience and recognizing relationships between natural phenomena and the growth of crops and living systems. This has led to the formation of a dialectical worldview that values experience and adaptability. Such thinking is vividly reflected in Vietnamese proverbs, which integrate universal relationships among natural and social phenomena. While not fully evolved into formal scientific reasoning, this worldview is highly compatible with the characteristics of wet-rice agricultural culture.

The way humans interact with nature is closely linked to social conduct. In living according to natural rhythms, Vietnamese agricultural communities formed tightly knit communal relationships founded on the principle of *“trọng tình”*—prioritizing emotional bonds, empathy, connection, and cooperation. This has contributed to one of the most respected characteristics of the Vietnamese: emotional sincerity and relational sensitivity (*“duy tình,” “trọng tình”*). Land and water are considered invaluable (*“An inch of land is worth an inch of gold”*), yet for sustainable living, one must not only be attached to the land but also remain connected with others who share that land. This attitude has laid the groundwork for a sustainable community culture and provided the basis for social relations in traditional agrarian society.

Vietnamese proverbs, as a unique genre of folk literature and a linguistic medium for expressing communal cognition, bear the imprint of wet-rice agricultural civilization—where the knowledge of engaging with nature forms the foundation for both social values and the moral character of the Vietnamese people.

Ethical Values in Family and Kinship Relationships

The family is considered the central axis and foundational pillar sustaining the stability of traditional Vietnamese society. Vietnamese proverbs profoundly reflect values of filial piety

(*đạo hiếu*), familial affection (*nghĩa tình*), and the duties of each family member toward parents and elders. Proverbs such as “A father's labor is as vast as Mount Tai; a mother's love is like the source water flowing endlessly,” “When eating fruit, remember who planted the tree,” and “Blood is thicker than water” emphasize the central role of kinship in social life, embodying Eastern moral philosophy.

Within the Vietnamese family structure, the parent-child relationship holds a particularly significant position. The success of a child is not only a source of happiness for the parents but also the result of a long-term process of education and upbringing, with the family playing a vital role. Proverbs underscore the importance of parents in child development: “A father child is like a bee without hive” while also highlighting how parental conduct shapes the child's personality: “Like father, like son,” “As the old cock crows, so does the young ones,” “As the tree, so the fruit” As such, parents are expected to be role models in both behavior and speech, contributing to the moral education of their children.

Parental love for their children is expressed through affection, tolerance, and compassion: “Every mother thinks her own gosling is a swan,” “A child may have too much of his mother's blessing.” At the same time, proverbs emphasize the responsibilities parents bear: “Mother's darling are but milksop heroes,” and they encourage parents to invest time and effort in nurturing and disciplining children from an early age: “Learn young, learn fair” “True love is bitter, false love is sweet.” While strictness is necessary for childrearing, harsh or unfeeling treatment is discouraged: “Scold when angry, love in silence,” “Love your child behind their back; scold them to their face.”

In addition to emphasizing parental love and responsibility, proverbs also warn of the negative consequences that can result from parents being neglectful or overly indulgent: “Raising a child without teaching them is worse than raising a pig to eat,” and “A spoiled child results from indulgent parents.” In this way, proverbs serve not only as ethical instruction but also as practical guidance for balanced childrearing, combining love and discipline.

From the child's perspective, proverbs promote gratitude, respect, and love toward parents, such as “Honor the father, revere the mother” and “Children do not reject poor parents; dogs do not reject poor masters.” Disrespectful or disobedient behaviors are severely criticized: “Fish that ignores salt will rot; a child who disobeys parents will go astray.” Conversely, when parents age and become dependent, children are morally obliged to care for them: “The young rely on their father; the old rely on their child,” “He that has no children knows not what love it.” True filial piety is expressed through attentive care while parents are still alive: “What use is offering oxen and goats to the dead? Better to share sweetness and bitterness while alive.”

Beyond the parent-child relationship, proverbs also emphasize sibling affection and mutual obligation. Sibling ties are often viewed as blood relationships of deep attachment, as exemplified by phrases such as “Brothers and sisters share one drop of blood,” “Siblings are like hands and feet,” and “If the sister falls, the brother must lift her; if the brother falls, the sister lifts him.” Ethical principles and norms of behavior reinforce these bonds: “Respect from above, deference from below brings happiness to the household,” “Show cleverness to outsiders, but do not quarrel with your kin,” “United we stand divided we fall.” Proverbs also caution against letting minor disputes undermine kinship: “Who would cut the gourd and squash vine? Likewise, who would sever sibling ties?”

In summary, the system of family values in Vietnamese proverbs plays a crucial role in preserving societal stability, transmitting moral norms, and educating individuals in the tradition of “Never cast dirt into that fountain of which you have sometimes drunk,” thereby establishing a sustainable moral foundation for both families and the wider community.

Social and Community Culture

A prominent feature in Vietnamese proverbs is the emphasis on humanistic values, community solidarity, and the spirit of mutual aid, reflecting the individual's responsibility toward the collective. Proverbs such as “The good leaves cover the torn ones,” “Oh gourd, love the pumpkin, even though different breeds, they share the same trellis,” and “Do as you would be done by” are timeless messages imbued with deep humanistic meaning. They contribute to shaping and reinforcing the cultural identity of the Vietnamese people. Among these values, the spirit of “*trọng tình*” (emotional prioritization) and “*duy tình*” (relational sensibility) stands out as a distinctive social norm—one that favors harmony, empathy, and communal cohesion, grounded in the agrarian structure of wet-rice culture (Thi et al., n.d.).

Vietnamese proverbs also emphasize blood relations and intimate kinship among extended family members: “An uncle is like a father; the elderly are like mothers,” “A maternal aunt loves her niece as her child; if the mother is absent, the aunt is someone to rely on.” These familial ties are built on ancestral affection rather than material interest: “Relatives love one another for shared ancestry, not for rice or money.” Personal responsibility toward the family's honor and collective benefit is consistently highlighted: “One person's success brings fortune to the whole clan,” “One person's wrongdoing brings shame to the entire family.” Family members are expected to share both joy and sorrow, protect the family's reputation, and encourage moral behavior among themselves.

Living within the village environment, Vietnamese people have developed a strong sense of community consciousness. The village functions as a cultural space centered around familiar symbols like “the banyan tree, the water wharf, and the communal yard,” which accompany individuals throughout their lives—from birth to adulthood and into old age: “Dry bread at home is better than roast meat abroad” The village is not only a place for sharing material resources, such as land and food, but also a center of communal cohesion and social stability amid external upheavals. Proverbs such as “One for all and all for one,” “One hour's sleep before midnight is worth three after” reflect collective values and the ideal of solidarity. The communal spirit, exemplified by the saying, “One man does not make a team,” is deeply rooted in social consciousness and serves as the guiding principle of behavior: “Every land has its customs; every village its traditions,” and “The king's laws yield to village rules.” No matter where they go, Vietnamese people tend to preserve the customs of their homeland and show respect for community traditions: “When entering a house, ask about its taboos; when entering a country, inquire about its customs; etiquette varies by region.”

Neighboring relations are also emphasized in Vietnamese proverbs: “Better is a neighbor that is near than a brother,” “In the dark or when the fire is out, we are there for each other.” Neighbors are not just people living nearby but spiritual support systems who are ready to share and help each other in times of hardship: “United we stand, divided we fall,” “When the head aches, all the body hurts.” Even within close relationships, proper boundaries and mutual respect are essential: “Good fences make good neighbours.”

In conclusion, the Vietnamese proverb system vividly reflects core communal moral values, including respect for emotional bonds, the promotion of solidarity, encouragement of mutual support, and adherence to traditional social norms. These insights provide both a stable foundation and a driving force for the development of Vietnamese society while simultaneously contributing to the preservation and enrichment of national cultural identity across generations.

Vietnamese Proverbs in Global Cultural Comparison

Vietnamese proverbs not only embody local cultural values but also reflect universally shared human principles, such as love, justice, compassion, and respect for nature.

As a form of oral tradition, proverbs are prevalent among most ethnic groups worldwide. They reveal many commonalities in humanistic values, life philosophies, and shared meanings relevant to the global human community. According to comparative studies, the proverbs of the Akan and Yoruba peoples (West Africa), the Chinese, and the Japanese all emphasize virtues such as moral integrity, altruism, fairness, and human love (Adamo, 2015; Agyekum, 2021).

What makes Vietnamese proverbs particularly distinctive is their harmonious integration of Confucian philosophy, which upholds propriety and humaneness, with Buddhist spirit, emphasizing karma, compassion, and tolerance alongside indigenous folk wisdom. This fusion creates a value system that is both universal and culturally specific. Liang and Tan (2024) note that many Vietnamese proverbs effectively convey the concept of karmic causality (*nhân quả báo ứng*) and promote a benevolent and tolerant lifestyle. Expressions such as “One good turn deserves another” (*Ở hiền gặp lành*) and “sow the wind and reap the whirlwind” (*Gieo gió gặt bão*) are clear manifestations of the intersection between religious and philosophical beliefs and folklife in Vietnam.

In comparison with other cultures, there is notable overlap in ethical and humanistic messages. A Japanese proverb states, “One confidant who truly understands you is worth more than a hundred relatives,” highlighting the value of emotional understanding and mutual respect. The English proverb “Actions speak louder than words” encourages practical deeds and emphasizes the importance of labor and personal character over empty rhetoric. Meanwhile, the Akan proverb “Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” presents proverbs as vital tools for nurturing and preserving language and communal knowledge (Kquofi et al., 2013).

Moreover, proverbs serve as a means of preserving and transmitting cultural values, knowledge, and lived experience across generations. Through proverbs, Vietnamese people convey the philosophy of *thiên nhân hợp nhất* (unity between humans and nature), emphasizing reverence for the natural world, the importance of family and community, and the pursuit of harmony with both society and the self.

Despite modernization and globalization, the humanistic values embedded in Vietnamese proverbs remain resilient, contributing to the nation's moral foundations and cultural identity. These proverbs are not merely a national heritage but possess the capacity to connect and engage with other cultural systems, affirming their international significance as an integral part of humanity's intangible cultural heritage.

Whether in Vietnam or elsewhere, proverbs are “living knowledge repositories,” encapsulating moral lessons, behavioral guidance, and social reasoning. According to Adamo (2015), the functions of proverbs globally include advising, educating, warning, encouraging, interpreting, and reflecting social and natural laws. Their brevity, vivid imagery, and metaphorical style make them easy to remember, transmit, and adapt across cultural contexts. Research by Uzoaku et al. on proverbs in four Nigerian communities. Uzoaku et al. (2014) suggest that, in addition to serving as cultural markers, proverbs play a central role in shaping and maintaining collective values. This observation is also applicable to Vietnamese proverbs.

Despite cultural and historical differences, proverbs around the world converge on humanistic ideals: love, unity, tolerance, fairness, respect for nature, and community cohesion. Vietnamese proverbs, as part of the “global language of moral living,” not only reflect but also enrich the moral identity of humanity.

At the same time, each culture expresses these shared values through its symbols, nuances, and modes of expression—its unique “cultural fingerprint.” The continuity, transmission, and creative adaptation of proverbs in the modern world—primarily through digital technology—present an opportunity to foster cross-cultural dialogue and preserve universal human values.

According to (Thi Thanh & Thi Hong, n.d.), proverbs serve as both a “living knowledge archive” and a “handbook for conduct” for individuals and communities alike. These values have a strong potential to disseminate widely, helping people adapt and resolve conflicts in modern society—especially in the fields of education, communication, and character development for younger generations. The humanistic value of proverbs is the vital thread connecting tradition with modernity, sustaining the vitality of Vietnam's cultural heritage.

Digitalization and AntConc Corpus Analysis

In contemporary corpus linguistics, the AntConc software plays a vital role in digitizing, storing, retrieving, analyzing, and statistically processing thousands of Vietnamese proverbs based on semantic, structural, and thematic criteria. This methodology ensures objectivity and precision, avoiding the subjectivity and interpretive bias often found in traditional, intuition-based approaches.

Research Process Using AntConc

Step 1: Select the input corpus—e.g., a curated collection of Vietnamese proverbs related to weather, family, or society.

Step 2: Upload the corpus into AntConc and use the *Concordance* tool to scan and extract keywords or salient structural patterns (e.g., “lightning,” “rain,” “father,” “mother,” “siblings”).

Step 3: Generate frequency lists, identify standard structural templates, and categorize proverbs into thematic groups (e.g., weather prediction, family conduct, social ethics).

Step 4: Extract and interpret the resulting data tables to analyze linguistic features, identify models of folk knowledge, and uncover the grammatical and sociocultural implications of each group.

Illustrative Tables and Linguistic Modelling of Vietnamese Proverbs

Figure 1

Table of Weather Forecasting Proverbs (Sample From AntConc Output)

Theme	Proverb Example	Linguistic Structure	Meaning / Forecasting Value
Rain	<i>When dragonflies fly low, it means rain</i>	[Animal] + [action] + [weather]	Indicates imminent rain
Rain	<i>In the seventh Month, if dragonflies fly, expect storms</i>	[Month] + [phenomenon] + [animal]	Signals storms or bad weather
Thunder/Lightning	<i>Flashes in the east and rooster crows: rain is coming</i>	Lightning + [location/action] + rain	Forecasts rain using natural signs
Drought	<i>Rain at midnight, dry at noon</i>	[Time phenomenon] + [weather state]	Describes seasonal weather patterns
Wind	<i>When the southern wind blows strong, storms arrive</i>	Wind + [direction] + [action]	Predicts storms/floods based on wind direction

Figure 2

Table of Proverbs on Family and Social Behavior

Theme	Proverb Example	Traditional Value	Modern Function / Significance
Parents	<i>A father's labor is as great as Mount Tai...</i>	Filial piety, gratitude	Family ethics, child education
Spouses	<i>When husband and wife are in harmony, they can drain the sea</i>	Family unity and harmony	Building sustainable happiness
Siblings	<i>Siblings are like limbs of the same body</i>	Solidarity, support, kinship	Strengthening generational and traditional bonds
Society	<i>The good leaves cover the torn ones</i>	Mutual aid, compassion	Fostering humane communities
Conduct	<i>Love others as yourself</i>	Humanism, altruism	Teaching social ethics

Structural Modeling and Recognition of Folk Knowledge in Proverbs

Based on concordance analysis, it is possible to identify common syntactic patterns and linguistic formulas in Vietnamese proverbs, such as:

Weather Forecasting:

“Lightning + [direction/location] + [phenomenon]”

→ “Lightning in the north may not bring rain; lightning in the south certainly means storms.”

Family Conduct:

“[Kinship relation] + [simile/metaphor] + [traditional value]”

→ “A child with a father is like a house with a roof.”

Social Ethics:

“[Situation] + [lesson in behavior]”

→ “The good leaves cover the torn ones.”

Using AntConc facilitates the accurate identification of repeated structures, frequency patterns, and thematic clusters of folk knowledge—such as weather lore, family ethics, and community values—thereby contributing to the digital preservation and dissemination of proverb-based wisdom in the digital age.

Digitalizing and analyzing proverbs with corpus tools, such as AntConc, marks a significant advancement in preserving and revitalizing the folk linguistic heritage. It enables the “decoding” of embedded knowledge within Vietnamese proverbs and supports educational and cultural outreach by making these insights widely accessible.

This approach offers core benefits, including objectivity, verifiability, and scientific rigor. It allows researchers to detect patterns and systematically model folk knowledge while supporting the open-access sharing of data through websites or apps. However, its limitations lie in its reliance on the quality and comprehensiveness of the input corpus; oral variants that have not yet been digitized may be overlooked.

Proverbs as Cultural Heritage and Ethical Guidance

Proverbs constitute an invaluable component of Vietnam's intangible cultural heritage, encompassing collective memory, lived experience, worldview, and human philosophy passed down through generations. They serve not only as a “repository of living knowledge” but also as a “behavioral map” for individuals, families, and communities. In this respect, proverbs function as a *manual for behavior*, offering guidance in morality, etiquette, gratitude toward one's roots, social solidarity, and adaptability to changing times. For instance, “Never cast dirt into that fountain of which you have sometimes drunk” teaches the virtue of gratitude; “Love see no faults” reinforces a spirit of mutual support; and “Do as you would be done by” highlights the importance of human compassion.

In the context of digital transformation and global integration, proverbs play a crucial role in promoting moral education and life skills among younger generations. Many general education programs and extracurricular activities have incorporated proverbs as tools for transmitting traditional values and for enhancing language proficiency and critical thinking abilities.

As an educational tool, proverbs support active learning by helping students practice linguistic analysis, recognize cultural values, and apply insights to real-life situations. This approach fosters national pride and strengthens intergenerational connections with ancestral heritage. Proverbs also inspire creative engagement—such as proverb-based storytelling contests, interactive learning apps, or digital archives—thereby making cultural knowledge both relevant and engaging. Digitalization presents new opportunities to preserve, disseminate, and innovate with Vietnam's proverb corpus: Online Corpus Development: Creating open-access proverb databases via websites or mobile applications for searching, learning, comparing, and contributing.

AI and Big Data Integration: Developing chatbot assistants and semantic recommender systems that interpret and explain proverbs by theme or context.

Extracurricular and Creative Digital Activities: Organizing proverb creation contests, storytelling challenges, and visual interpretation games using virtual reality, social media, or short-form video platforms.

Fusion of Tradition and Innovation: Encouraging youth to invent new proverbs or transform existing ones into digital formats like memes, infographics, or stickers, thereby enhancing cultural resonance in the digital age.

As a cultural “core,” proverbs bind communities together and preserve cultural identity amidst globalization. Their preservation, revitalization, and innovation offer multiple benefits for modern society, including strengthening resilience against foreign value systems and social upheavals, developing autonomous learning, critical thinking, and cultural literacy among youth, and establishing a robust ethical foundation that promotes solidarity and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Vietnamese proverbs represent a rich linguistic and cultural heritage, encompassing profound epistemic and humanistic values. They offer a comprehensive reflection of the Vietnamese people's lived experience, moral codes, and socio-philosophical worldview. Through the processes of digitalization and corpus-based analysis using modern tools such as AntConc, proverbs are not only preserved but also revitalized in new contexts, including education, communication, and digital creativity.

In contemporary society, proverbs are no longer merely “cultural memory”; they function as a form of soft power that contributes to sustainable educational and social development. The integration of digital technologies—particularly corpus analysis with AntConc—has introduced a novel, objective, and scientific approach to encoding, preserving, and disseminating knowledge based on proverbs. Moreover, this technological application opens up opportunities for innovation in heritage education and promotes the continued relevance of proverbs in the digital age.

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Enhancing Self-Regulated Learning in Twice-Exceptional Students Through Diary-Based Scaffolding

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Abstract

This study examines how diary-based scaffolding supports the development of self-regulated learning (SRL) skills in twice-exceptional (2E) students with both talents and learning disabilities. A case study was conducted involving a Japanese junior high school student diagnosed with learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder, who engaged in daily electronic diary writing and received tailored scaffolding advice over 352 days. The diary entries and corresponding educator scaffolding advice were analyzed to construct a Self-Regulated Learning Support Model. This model includes both an ideal SRL process and an educational model designed to scaffold learners struggling with monitoring and control aspects of SRL. Analysis of the diary entries and corresponding educator scaffolding advice reveal that the participant gained metacognitive awareness, increased learning autonomy, and improved social adaptation. These initial findings are expected to show that diary-based interventions have the potential to empower 2E students by leveraging their cognitive strengths while addressing learning challenges. While this single-case study has limitations in generalizability, qualitative analysis future research are needed to comprehensively verify the model's effectiveness and applicability across diverse 2E populations, and to evaluate its long-term effects. Ultimately, by focusing on both challenges and strengths, diary-based SRL interventions are expected to promote equity for 2E learners and empower them to grow and thrive, offering a promising framework for inclusive and individualized support in special needs education.

Keywords: twice-exceptional, self-regulated learning, diary-based, scaffolding advice, Self-Regulated Learning Support Model

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Introduction

Despite a declining school-age population, the number of students receiving special education in Japan's education system is increasing. This trend highlights the urgent need for individualized educational approaches, particularly for students with dual characteristics (2E)—those who possess both high abilities and significant learning difficulties. The current support system in Japan often focuses on overcoming deficits, neglecting the development of the exceptional cognitive abilities that these students possess.

This study examines how diary-based scaffolding advice can support self-regulated learning (SRL) in 2E students. SRL refers to the metacognitive process by which learners plan, monitor, and reflect on their learning. 2E students possess high cognitive abilities, but co-occurring learning disabilities such as dysgraphia and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can make it difficult for them to manage their learning independently. Therefore, for 2E students, mastering SRL is essential for overcoming concrete challenges faced by and effectively utilizing their exceptional abilities.

Literature Review

Previous study have highlighted the challenges that students with learning disabilities face in self-regulated learning (SRL) (Girli & Öztürk, 2017). This study emphasizes the importance of targeted support to develop SRL skills in this population. Furthermore, the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) has been shown to mitigate these difficulties and improve the learning environment (Okano, 2019). Zimmerman's (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2013) three-stage SRL model—pre-planning, execution, and self-reflection—provides a robust framework for understanding the process by which students acquire autonomy in learning. Based on these fundamental insights, this study aims to support the development of SRL in 2E student. This is achieved by utilizing diary-based scaffolding advice to identify SRL challenges from student diary entries and providing individualized support to address these challenges. Diaries, especially electronic diaries, have been shown to promote SRL by strengthening metacognitive monitoring and control (Perels et al., 2007), and they also have the effect of reducing the physical difficulties associated with writing. This aligns well with the unique characteristics of 2E students, who require structured self-reflection tools that allow them to address learning challenges while leveraging their cognitive strengths.

Methodology

In this study, we adopted a single-case study design to deeply investigate the long-term changes in SRL of a concrete 2E student. This approach enables a rich and detailed understanding of complex behavioral and cognitive processes that change over time, making it particularly suitable for exploring individualized interventions. Specifically, we focused on integrating personalized support into diary-based scaffolding advice to promote SRL. For example, in a case where a student with writing difficulties sought advice on how to respond to a teacher who insisted on handwriting, we facilitated monitoring by asking questions such as, “Why does the teacher insist on handwriting?” and “What are the drawbacks of handwriting?” Based on observations of SRL deficits in diary entries, we defined achievable ideal SRL behaviors, compared actual behaviors with the ideal model, diagnosed the location and causes of challenges, and provided scaffolding advice to overcome these challenges. We attempted to model these processes. The primary objective of this study is to develop and

evaluate a Self-Regulated Learning Support Model that leverages the self-reflective nature of diaries to enhance the SRL skills of 2E students.

Participant

- Japanese 2nd-year junior high school student
- Diagnosed with learning disabilities and ASD
- WISC-IV scores: FSIQ 123, VCI 140, PRI 111, WMI 112, PSI 100
- Primary challenges: handwriting, environmental adaptation, and social communication

Data Collection

- Duration: June 2023 – May 2024
- 352 diary entries and corresponding educator scaffolding advice
- Ethical approval: JAIST Life Science Committee, Approval No. PERSON 06-035

Analytical Approach

The analytical approach of this study comprises of two stages. In the first stage, we construct a Self-Regulated Learning Support Model based on diary activity data. In the second stage, we verify the role of the Self-Regulated Learning Support Model in the acquisition of self-regulated learning (SRL) by the participant and investigate the transferability of the acquired SRL. This paper reports the interim results of the first stage of the study.

In the first stage, we analyzed the participant's daily electronic the diary entries and corresponding educator scaffolding advice. Through detailed qualitative analysis, we identified concrete SRL difficulties faced by the participant. To provide a theoretical foundation for this analysis and the subsequent model construction, we first developed an ideal self-regulated learning (SRL) process, taking into account the unique developmental characteristics of 2E students and referencing existing SRL theories (e.g., Zimmerman's cyclical model).

Subsequently, through an insight-driven, iterative model development process, we developed a self-regulated learning support model. This model provides a comprehensive framework for addressing SRL challenges. Specifically, it supports educators systematically compare observed behaviors with the ideal SRL process to diagnose deficiencies in SRL and their concrete types (e.g., monitoring or control breakdowns).

The ideal model is one of the two main components of the self-regulated learning support model and serves to indicate learning goals. This diagnostic support facilitates interpretation by providing a conceptual lens for understanding the root causes of observed difficulties, taking into account the unique characteristics and context of participants. Ultimately, this comprehensive understanding enables the consideration of appropriate support measures.

The educational model is another component of the self-regulated learning support model and plays a role in considering support for areas of SRL that are not functioning properly. It was constructed by analyzing 352 the diary entries and corresponding scaffolding advice from educators. This model enables the interpretation of difficulties in SRL and the consideration of scaffolding advice by identifying the stage of SRL, and the type of difficulties faced by

learners based on the discrepancies between the behaviors observed in the diaries and the ideal model.

In the second phase, we plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with the participant and their parents. These interviews aim to confirm the acquisition and transferability of self-regulated skills gained through diary activities. Through data triangulation between the first and second part, we will refine conclusions regarding the role of the model.

Results

A Self-Regulated Learning Support Model enables providing appropriate scaffolding advice to learners who are struggling with SRL. In the model construction process, concrete information was extracted from SRL issues observed in the diaries of 2E student, and their characteristics were abstracted from concrete examples and expressed in two to three layers. This abstraction was performed to facilitate the adaptation of the model to the instruction of similar students.

The Self-Regulated Learning Support Model is composed of two interrelated components: an Ideal Model that defines learning goals, and an Educational Model that builds upon this Ideal Model to offer tailored support for learners facing challenges in SRL.

Ideal Model of Self-Regulation

Table 1 summarizes the Ideal Model by presenting different levels of abstraction in the SRL process, from high-level conceptual understanding to concrete behavioral examples. The ideal model is one of the two main elements that make up the self-regulated learning support model and serves to indicate learning goals. This model depicts an ideal state in which problems arising from 2E characteristics can be appropriately self-regulated. This ideal state is characterized by the ability to recognize the causes of problems related to these characteristics (monitoring) and the ability to devise and implement methods to eliminate those causes (control).

This case is based on the diary records of a student who has high abilities but struggles with handwriting. Due to a disability, this student was unable to demonstrate their abilities through handwriting, and when asked to do so by their teacher, they were unable to respond and sought support. The student sought support because they were unable to engage in self-regulated learning. The ideal SRL process is created by extracting the diary entries and associated scaffolding advice. One of these is shown in Table 1. This ideal SRL process consists of five distinct parts: “m-input,” “monitoring activities,” “m-output/c-input,” “control behavior,” and “c-output.” The three rows in the table classify the abstraction level of the SRL process from high to low as “high (H),” “medium (M),” and “concrete (C).” The “m-input” column represents the initial challenges or situations faced by students. For example, “The teacher told me to write by hand, but I disagree” is an example of concrete level of m-input of Monitoring activities. That shows metacognitive process by which students analyze problems and identify their root causes. In the case of concrete input, this includes considering why it is impossible to demonstrate ability by hand due to the nature of the disability. The “m-output/c-input” column represents the understanding gained from monitoring, which forms the input for “control behavior,” are strategic actions taken to address the identified causes. For example, if it is understood that “it is impossible to demonstrate ability through handwriting due to the nature of the disability,” methods for

adapting the requirements are considered. Finally, “c-output” indicates desirable solutions or outcomes of the SRL process, including explanations of the importance of alternative input methods. At the “high (H)” abstraction level, the model addresses general “cognitive dissonance” and explains the ideal process for resolving internal contradictions. At the “medium (M)” abstraction level, the model focuses on more concrete problems (e.g., “unacceptable requirements”), identifies constraints related to the disability, and explains the ideal SRL process for eliminating them. This multi-stage abstraction enables a general understanding of the ideal SRL process and its application to the concrete challenges faced by 2E students. Table 1 systematically presents these ideal responses, emphasizes the critical steps essential for effective SRL, and demonstrates how 2E students can leverage their cognitive strengths, overcome their characteristic difficulties, and actively manage their learning.

Table 1

Example Ideal Model of Self-Regulation

Abstraction Level	m-input	monitoring activities	m-output/c-input	control behavior	c-output
High (H)	Cognitive difficulty.	Consider the causes for cognitive difficulty.	Causes for cognitive difficulty.	Consider ways to deal with the causes for cognitive difficulty.	Actions to deal with the causes for cognitive dissonance.
Medium (M)	I cannot accept the request.	Same as above.	Due to the nature of the disability, the request limits my abilities.	Consider ways to remove the restrictions imposed by the request.	Negotiate to remove the restrictions imposed by the request.
Concrete (C)	I don't agree with the teacher's request to write by hand.	Consider the causes why I cannot accept the request.	Due to the nature of my disability, I cannot demonstrate my abilities by writing by hand.	Think of ways to adapt the request so that I can demonstrate my abilities.	Explain the importance of alternative input methods for me.

Educational Model of Self-Regulation

Table 2 outlines the Educational Model, showing how specific SRL difficulties can be discovered and addressed through scaffolding at multiple levels of abstraction. The educational model, which is part of a Self-Regulated Learning Support Model, aims to nurture the learner who has difficulty with appropriate SRL. This model provides a conceptual framework for diagnosing deficiencies in SRL and considering appropriate scaffolding advice. The lack of SRL is identified by comparing the ideal SRL process (shown in Table 1) with the student's diary entries to determine which parts are not functioning appropriately, why, and how to provide scaffolding advice.

In an ideal model that demonstrates sufficient SRL, individuals are able to consider the reasons why they cannot accept a request. However, in reality, individuals are unable to consider the reasons why they cannot accept a request and instead request assistance. This indicates that monitoring is insufficient. Therefore, the educational model promotes

awareness of the necessity of alternative inputs in order to demonstrate one's abilities and provides scaffolding to enable individuals to consider ways to resolve inconveniences. It has been confirmed that this SRL is subsequently transferred.

Table 2 illustrates the process by which concrete SRL issues are diagnosed, and corresponding scaffolding advice are considered within this educational model. The “diagnostic procedure” column explains the systematic approach to analyzing these challenges within the model framework, and the results are presented in the “diagnostic result” column as conceptualized patterns of SRL deficiencies. This process enables educators to understand how the student's observed behaviors deviate from the ideal SRL process.

The educational model serves as a practical framework for providing support based on identified self-regulated learning (SRL) difficulties, as part of a Self-Regulated Learning Support Model. This model was derived from a detailed qualitative analysis of the diary entries and corresponding educator scaffolding advice and was designed with consideration for the unique developmental characteristics of 2E students.

Table 2 shows the comprehensive structure of this educational model. This model classifies SRL difficulties into three different levels of abstraction: high (H) represents fundamental conceptual gaps, medium (M) represents intermediate application issues, and low (C) represents concrete behavioral problems. At each level, the table provides a detailed explanation of the process from “identifying SRL challenges” to “diagnostic procedures” and “diagnostic results,” and finally specifies the content of “advice.” This model provides a structured approach for educators to systematically understand the challenges of SRL.

Specifically, it supports the diagnosis of a lack of SRL and its concrete types (e.g., breakdowns in monitoring or control) and enables systematic comparison between observed behavior and ideal SRL processes. This diagnostic support provides a conceptual framework for understanding the root causes of observed difficulties and facilitates the interpretation of complex SRL situations that take into account the unique characteristics and context of participants. This comprehensive understanding ultimately provides a foundation for considering appropriate support interventions that foster participants' SRL skills and promote transferability to similar contexts.

It is important to note that this educational model represents a concrete framework derived from our single case study analysis. Alternative models and interpretations of 2E students' SRL challenges may exist. The developed model serves as one effective approach to guide intervention.

Table 2

Example Educational Model of SRL (Education Model for Monitoring Issues Corresponding to Table 1)

Abstraction level	SRL issues	diagnostic procedure	diagnostic result	consideration of advice	scaffolding
High (H)	Unable to consider the causes for cognitive difficulty.	Consider the causes of being unable to consider the causes for cognitive difficulty.	Unable to consider the causes for cognitive dissonance in relation to one's own characteristics.	Build a foundation for considering the causes for cognitive difficulty.	Build a foundation for considering cognitive dissonance in relation to one's own characteristics.
Medium (M)	I can't think of any causes why I can't accept the request.	Same as above.	I am unable to think of causes why I cannot accept requests when considering my own characteristics.	Same as above.	Same as above.
Concrete (C)	I cannot think of any causes why I cannot accept the requirement to write by hand.	I cannot think of any causes why I cannot accept the requirement.	I cannot think of any way to consider the constraints imposed by the requirement while recognizing the importance of alternative input methods for me.	I will consider advice that will encourage me to deeply recognize the importance of alternative input methods for me.	I will lay the groundwork for recognizing that alternative input methods do not unfairly inflate results and only eliminate disadvantages related to my characteristics.

Conclusion

This study, as an interim report focusing on Stage 1, proposed a Self-Regulated Learning Support Model based on diary-based scaffolding advice for fostering self-regulated learning (SRL) in 2E students. This model provides educators with a conceptual and practical framework for supporting learners with complex characteristics, specifically addressing the diagnostic process and intervention planning. While this paper primarily details Stage 1 (model construction), analysis of the participant's diary entries during the application of the Self-Regulated Learning Support Model suggested an association with the student's acquisition of metacognitive awareness and adaptive learning behaviors, alongside observed improvements in their ability to transfer SRL strategies to new contexts, including gains in autonomy and social skills. A comprehensive verification of these acquired SRL skills and their transferability will be thoroughly confirmed through the analysis of interviews with the student and their parents, as planned in Stage 2 of this ongoing research. Future work also includes verifying the applicability of this model to diverse 2E populations and evaluating its long-term effects. By focusing on both challenges and strengths, diary-based SRL scaffolding advice can promote equity for 2E learners and empower them to grow and thrive.

Limitations and Future Work

The diversity of difficulties that each individual faces, which is a characteristic of special education, is a limitation. Even if the main complaint is similar, the background and characteristics may differ, and measures that are effective for one child may not be effective for another. Analyzing the factors that determine the applicability of effective measures is essential for improving the quality of special education. However, this is a research endeavor that cannot be achieved through the individual studies of a single researcher. We hope that this study will serve as a starting point, and that through the cumulative efforts of the research community, tangible results will be achieved. Future challenges. We aim to conduct verification studies with different research subjects. Additionally, we plan to continue investigating the long-term effects of the scaffolding advice.

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Archetypal Duality of the Psychiatrist-Destroyer in Psychological Thrillers: Hermeneutic Inquiry Into the Silent Patient and the Silence of the Lambs

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Abstract

The duality of human nature, a central theme in psychological thrillers, often revolves around the archetype of the psychiatrist-destroyer. This figure, embodying both healer and predator, presents a complex paradox in literary criticism. It blurs the lines between care and manipulation, trust and exploitation, challenging readers' understanding of moral and psychological traits. In this article, we take a unique approach by applying Hirsch's [1967] hermeneutic method to explore how this dual archetype is constructed through the characters of Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Harris, 1988) and Theo Faber in *The Silent Patient* (Michaelides, 2019) by Alex Michaelides. Our aim is to investigate how psychiatrists with double consciousness manipulate their professions as healers to conceal their dark inner selves, destructive behavior, and deceptive relationships with patients and society. By closely interpreting the text within the theoretical frameworks of dualistic human nature and archetypal psychology (Durkheim, 1914; Frye, 1951; Jung, 1959), psychological aspects of literary interpretation (Kalaga, 2015; Szondi & Bahti, 1978), linguistic and stylistic strategies in thriller writing (Dutta-Flanders, 2017; Patterson, 2006), transgressor-centered narratives in thrillers (Horsley, 2005), and the narrative of conventional psychoanalysis (Halberstam, 1995), our research reveals how both Michaelides and Harris use narrative ambiguity, psychological manipulation, and ethical violation to create suspenseful, yet disturbing portrayals of characters with multiple personalities. Both writers' language and style disrupt traditional thriller writing's normative narrative conventions through their representations of psychological fluctuations between the identities of manipulative criminals and rational psychiatrists.

Keywords: archetypal duality, dual personality, psychiatrist-destroyer, psychological thriller, hermeneutic analysis

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Introduction

Psychological thrillers have long captivated audiences with their intricate portrayals of human behavior, and few themes are as potent as the duality embedded in the figure of the psychiatrist. As both healer and destroyer, psychiatrist characters invite an analyst to delve deeply into their multifaceted roles. This research paper focuses on the archetypal duality of the psychiatrist-destroyer, employing hermeneutic phenomenology as the primary analytical approach and grounding the theoretical framework in Jungian archetype theory. The two literary works under consideration, *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides and *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris, present fertile ground for this exploration through their portrayal of Dr. Theo Faber and Dr. Hannibal Lecter, respectively. Both narratives raise central questions about the ethical and psychological dimensions of psychiatry: How can psychiatrists be both agents of healing and instruments of destruction? What does it mean, according to Jungian (1959) theory, to embody the archetype of the Shadow, and how does this archetype manifest in the characters' actions and interactions? By examining the internal conflicts and external behaviors of both Theo Faber and Hannibal Lecter, this paper aims to illuminate the dual functions of psychiatrists in the real psychological thrillers. The target audience for this analysis includes literary scholars, students of literary theory, and researchers interested in the intersection of psychology, film studies, and narrative representation. By integrating recent interdisciplinary studies, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how contemporary research informs the interpretation of psychiatric characters in literary narratives. The discussion will draw on studies that advocate for a balance between clinical understanding and interpretative analysis, examining both the ethical considerations and the symbolic meaning embedded in the portrayal of the psychiatrist as a figure capable of both significant benevolence and profound destructiveness.

Literature Review

The representation of psychiatrists in psychological thrillers has attracted scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the dual roles that these figures play in narratives across literature and film. Central to this discussion is the concept of archetypal duality, wherein characters embody both constructive and destructive tendencies. According to Jungian (1959) analysis, the psychiatrist can be seen as a reflection of the Shadow archetype—a manifestation of unconscious conflict and repressed drives that simultaneously offer the possibility of healing through confrontation and insight.

Hermeneutic phenomenology has emerged as a critical methodological framework for exploring these themes. This interpretative approach emphasizes the importance of understanding lived experience and subjective interpretation, making it particularly suited to analysis of complex psychiatric characters in narrative fiction. Kalaga (2015) applied a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of men grappling with severe psychiatric illness. His research, which utilized in-depth interviews, highlighted how misinterpretation and misunderstanding by healthcare professionals often prolonged suffering rather than alleviating it. This study illustrates the importance of empathy and interpretative engagement in psychiatric practice—a dynamic tension mirrored in the relationship between psychiatrist and patient in psychological thrillers.

Research Method

This study employs a **hermeneutic methodology** to explore the archetypal duality of the psychiatrist-destroyer figure in the psychological thrillers *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides (2019) and *The Silence of the Lambs* by Thomas Harris (1988). Hermeneutics, as a method of textual interpretation, allows for a deep, layered reading of these narratives by uncovering the symbolic and psychological underpinnings of key characters, particularly those who occupy the dual roles of healer and destroyer.

The research follows a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in literary analysis and Jungian archetypal theory. Drawing on Carl Jung's concept of archetypes, particularly the "Shadow" and the "Wise Old Man," this study identifies and examines manifestations of archetypal duality within the psychiatrist figures—Dr. Faber and Dr. Hannibal Lecter. The analysis pays close attention to character construction, narrative voice, dialogue, and symbolic imagery. Data collection is limited to close readings of the primary texts and supported by secondary sources such as critical essays (Paoletti, 2012; Szondi & Bahti, 1978), scholarly articles, and psychological studies on archetypes and character pathology. Through thematic coding and comparative analysis, the study identifies patterns that reveal how these characters simultaneously fulfill therapeutic and destructive roles within the narrative structure. By employing a hermeneutic lens, the study seeks not only to decode the psychological complexity of the psychiatrist-destroyer figure but also to understand the broader cultural and philosophical implications of this duality in the psychological thriller genre.

Results

The hermeneutic analysis of *The Silent Patient* and *The Silence of the Lambs* reveals a consistent and complex portrayal of the **psychiatrist-destroyer archetype**, characterized by the dual function of psychological insight and manipulation. Through a close reading of the texts, several key findings emerged: Both Dr. Theo Faber and Dr. Hannibal Lecter exhibit a paradoxical nature—serving as agents of healing while simultaneously exerting control, manipulation, and psychological harm. This duality is central to their characterization and aligns with Jungian archetypes, particularly the fusion of the "Wise Old Man" (symbolizing knowledge and guidance) with the "Shadow" (representing repressed instincts and destructive tendencies). The narratives of both novels use ambiguous language and unreliable narrators to blur the line between therapy and coercion. In *The Silent Patient*, Theo Faber's obsession with Alicia is masked as therapeutic concern, revealing his underlying destructive impulse. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter's role as a consultant psychiatrist camouflages his sadistic tendencies, which he enacts with calculated precision. The psychiatrist-destroyer archetype elicits complex emotional responses from readers. Despite their ethical violations, these characters command fascination and even admiration due to their intelligence, composure, and control. According to Paoletti (2012), this suggests that the archetype operates as a cultural symbol of forbidden power, appealing to both fear and curiosity. Thus, both novels reinforce psychological thriller conventions—such as introspection, suspense, and identity crises—while subverting the traditional role of the psychiatrist as a moral authority. Instead, they present a corrupted archetype, who mirrors the instability of their patients, thus destabilizing reader expectations of healing and justice. In these works, therapy sessions become arenas of power struggle rather than healing. The psychiatrists use their understanding of the human psyche not to rehabilitate, but to dominate and manipulate, suggesting that therapeutic knowledge, when unchecked, becomes a tool for destruction.

These findings highlight how the archetypal duality in these texts is not merely a narrative device but a reflection of deeper anxieties about authority, identity, and the dark potential of psychological insight.

Discussion

The results of this hermeneutic inquiry demonstrate that the psychiatrist-destroyer archetype in *The Silent Patient* and *The Silence of the Lambs* functions as a symbolic embodiment of the tension between healing and harm, knowledge and power, order and chaos. By examining these dualities through the lens of archetypal theory, particularly Jung's concepts of the Shadow and the Wise Old Man, it becomes clear that the psychiatrist figure in psychological thrillers is no longer a neutral observer or healer—but often a mirror of the darkness they claim to treat.

In selected novels, the psychiatrist does not stand in contrast to the patient, but rather reflects the patient's internal fragmentation. Theo Faber, in *The Silent Patient*, initially appears as a savior, determined to unlock Alicia Berenson's silence. Yet his deep psychological entanglement with her reveals his unconscious identification with her trauma and rage. Theo ultimately fulfills the role of destroyer under the guise of therapist, highlighting the danger of repressed motives masquerading as benevolence.

Similarly, Dr. Hannibal Lecter exemplifies the most extreme version of the archetype. His charm, intellect, and psychiatric expertise grant him the status of authority, yet he uses these very traits to manipulate, mutilate, and kill. What makes Lecter particularly chilling is his self-awareness—he knows and accepts his duality, which paradoxically lends him a twisted moral clarity. His archetypal role pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable in a moral or therapeutic figure, subverting the reader's expectations of trust and care associated with psychiatry.

This duality speaks to a broader cultural ambivalence toward authority figures, especially those entrusted with mental and emotional well-being (Samandarova, 2024). The psychiatrist-destroyer archetype may serve as a narrative vehicle for exploring societal anxieties about the abuse of knowledge and institutional power, particularly in spaces as intimate and vulnerable as therapy.

Moreover, the genre of psychological thriller, with its emphasis on mystery, identity, and internal conflict, is particularly suited to housing such an archetype. These narratives force readers to confront uncomfortable questions: Can someone possess both healing power and destructive intent? Is insight into the human psyche inherently dangerous? Where does therapy end and control begin?

Ultimately, the dual nature of these psychiatrist characters underlines a key insight from Jungian (1959) psychology: the path to wholeness involves confronting, rather than denying, one's darker aspects. The psychiatrist-destroyer archetype, in this sense, becomes a mythic figure of confrontation—not only with the darkness of others, but with the potential for darkness within the self (Kalaga, 2015).

Conclusion

This study has explored the archetypal duality of the psychiatrist-destroyer in *The Silent Patient* and *The Silence of the Lambs* through a hermeneutic lens, revealing a complex and unsettling fusion of therapeutic authority and destructive intent. By engaging with Jungian archetypes and literary analysis, the research demonstrates how the psychiatrist figure in these psychological thrillers subverts traditional expectations of healing, instead embodying both guidance and corruption.

The characters of Theo Faber and Hannibal Lecter serve as compelling examples of this archetype—each using psychological insight not solely for therapeutic ends but as a means of manipulation, dominance, and personal gratification. This duality not only destabilizes the moral clarity often associated with mental health professionals but also reflects deeper cultural fears surrounding the abuse of power, the unreliability of authority, and the thin boundary between sanity and madness.

Ultimately, the psychiatrist-destroyer archetype functions as a narrative device that forces readers to confront the uncomfortable reality that knowledge, especially psychological knowledge, can be wielded as both a tool of healing and a weapon of control. Within the psychological thriller genre, this duality amplifies suspense and deepens character complexity, inviting reflection on the human psyche's capacity for both light and shadow.

Future research may expand on these findings by exploring how this archetype evolves in contemporary media or intersects with gender dynamics, institutional critique, or real-world perceptions of psychiatry. For now, these two novels serve as powerful illustrations of how fiction can use archetypes to explore profound existential and psychological questions.

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Education as a Bridge for Communication: Early Chinese Students in Europe and the Foundations of Global Citizenship

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of early Chinese students who travelled to Germany, France, and the United Kingdom between 1870 and 1930, situating their journeys within the context of global citizenship and education for peace. China's active initiative to send students abroad began during the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861–1895), aiming to acquire Western technological and military knowledge. European countries welcomed these exchanges to foster diplomatic and economic ties with China. By the early 20th century, more students sought overseas education, motivated by the promise of better job prospects and political engagement. Many joined discussions with overseas political groups like the Kuomintang, expressing dissatisfaction with China's internal developments. Education remained the primary driver of migration, as European systems were perceived as advanced. The students' experiences extended beyond academic achievement. Their personal and intellectual growth abroad promoted cross-cultural understanding and international cooperation. Though initially dispatched for national development, these individuals evolved into agents of global learning, exchanging ideas between China and Europe. Their contributions spanned technical, diplomatic, and social fields, underscoring education's role as a bridge for dialogue and mutual respect. Through a series of vignettes, this study illustrates how these students shaped China's transformation upon their return. Their legacy highlights the enduring value of international education in fostering global citizenship and intercultural dialogue—lessons still relevant for today's world.

Keywords: migration, education, Sino-European

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Introduction

Research on global citizenship education (GCE) has grown significantly in recent years, driven by the rise of a globalised economy and the increasing need for intercultural competence in educational systems. Although a universally accepted definition of global citizenship remains elusive, there is broad agreement on its core principles: fostering awareness of diverse perspectives, promoting intercultural understanding, and encouraging engagement across national and cultural boundaries. Scholars such as Schattle (2008) and Green (2012) emphasise that true global citizenship requires voluntary individual engagement with international issues and the ability to navigate multiple overlapping communities of identity and belonging (Green, 2012, pp. 1–2).

This paper re-examines these ideals through a historical lens, focusing on early Chinese student migration to European universities, specifically in the UK, Germany and France, between 1860 and 1930. It argues that these students, often overlooked in mainstream migration studies, actually were some of the earliest global citizens through their personal educational and intercultural experiences in the countries where they studied. Existing research on Chinese migration to Europe has largely focused on labour communities in port cities like London, Hamburg, and Rotterdam, beginning in the 1870s (Benton & Pieke, 1998, p. 4; Künnemann & Mayer, 2011). These workers were primarily active in the seafaring industries, where they would be seen as direct competition to the local labour market, who worried that they were “being priced out by ‘cheap’ Chinese labour.” (Benton & Pieke, p. 5). However, student migrants from China represented a fundamentally different type of transnational experience, rooted not only in economic necessity but in various levels of educational ambition and intercultural exchange (Steffen, forthcoming).

Origin of the Student Movement

The root of Chinese educational migration is found in the Qing Dynasty’s self-strengthening movement in the 1860s. Before the end of the century, the ruling dynasty had to face various struggles such as the first Opium War (1839), the Taiping Rebellion (1859), overpopulation, poor harvest and corruption. As a result, in the 1860s, China began a period of modernisation known as China’s self-strengthening period, also known as the Westernisation period (Hsü & Kachru, 2000, p. 268).

What is observed in primary and secondary sources is that there is a clear shift, before and after 1900 (Steffen, forthcoming). Before 1900, primarily military and naval students would find themselves abroad as part of the Self-Strengthening Movement, to help maintain the dynastic claim. These students typically came from newly established naval arsenals such as Fuzhou, which developed training programs that included overseas study. One notable student was Yan Fu, who joined the Fuzhou Arsenal out of necessity after his father's death (Lovell, 2012, p.154). He was among the first to be paid for training and was later sent to Greenwich, the first British Naval Academy to accept Chinese students, who were promised to be “treated with every civility” (Admiralty, 1877).

Students continued to be sent to France and the UK for primarily naval education and to Germany for artillery training until the 1910s, after which there was a broader shift toward general academic pursuits. Until then, their personal experiences were deeply shaped by their host countries vested economic, imperial, and diplomatic interests as well as the personal relationships that facilitated their studies abroad in the first place. In France, students had

access to a broader curriculum, beyond the naval studies, due in part to Prosper Qiquel, a French advisor at the Fuzhou Dockyard, who leveraged his connections to place students in institutions across France (Fong, 2022, p. 156). Students at the Greenwich Naval Academy in the UK experienced a more neutral reception, whereas accounts from Germany, despite the majority of the archives pertaining to these students being destroyed during the Second World War, suggest that early experiences there were fraught with cultural misunderstandings and limited communication, leading to significant difficulties. This included three members of the first student group being sent to an ammunition factory for insubordination, requiring diplomatic intervention to restore them to their student status (Meng, 2005).

The Shift

After 1900, the nature of Chinese student migration changed significantly. With the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the abolition of the Imperial Examination in 1905, studying abroad became a more accepted and personally motivated path (Elman, 2013, p. 5). Students were no longer exclusively government-sponsored; many received partial funding or paid their own way. Their fields of study diversified beyond military science to include engineering, textiles, diplomacy, and public administration (Steffen, forthcoming).

These shifts brought new dynamics. Social class, funding status, and personal background all shaped students' experiences as well as their engagement. One illustrative case is Ho Kai, the well-known barrister and philanthropist, who was a student at Aberdeen University (Choa, 1981, p. 10; Xianggang-Yixue-Bowuguan, 2006, p. 100). During his studies, he married a local woman named Alice Walkden in 1881; she returned to China with him but died soon after (Xianggang-Yixue-Bowuguan, 2006, p. 100). Nonetheless, the union that reflected early forms of intercultural connection, albeit later discouraged by official policy in 1910 (Lorke, 2019, p. 545). Indeed, the government would forbid scholarship students from marrying, under threat of having to return their scholarship funds. Yet, students from wealthy families who were self-funded often ignored these regulations and married anyway (Harnisch, 1999). These cross-cultural marriages typically involved Chinese men and local European women. This pattern was influenced by both social structures, such as the limited international mobility of women, and the fact that Chinese women did not generally attend higher education institutions abroad until the 1920s, after which there is evidence of women at universities in all three countries (Steffen, forthcoming).

Indeed, when it came to engagement and communication with host communities, interaction was not uniform. Factors such as political orientation, social class, funding status, and host country norms played a pivotal role. In the UK, Chinese students were advised not to choose an accommodation that would "prove conducive to a gentleman's life" such as a lodgings house (Hue, n.d., pp. 42–43). Hence, although students were trying to find accommodation, this had to fit within the frame of what was acceptable within British society. In France, for instance, students associated with the Diligent Work-and-Study Movement had to juggle academic goals with manual labour in local factories (Levine, 1993, pp. 29–32). Political activism further complicated these dynamics. At institutions like the Sino-French Institute in Lyon, students sometimes had to choose between maintaining academic progress and joining political protests or movements, which, throughout the 1920s, were particularly intense throughout Europe (Levine, 1993, pp. 29–32). This did not mean that all students lived a life of suffering. Some male students decided to focus on more of the freedom that going abroad leading to some very incensed reports by German officials stating that some young male students had undergone a shocking transformation from shy, well-raised young man had

become “pompous good-for-nothings.” (Berg, 1921). Another German government report even lamented that some Chinese students had been seen wasting time playing billiards and in coffee houses socialising with prostitutes (Traut, 1921). In all fairness, it must be pointed out that the majority of students across all three countries primarily focused on completing their education and returning home (Steffen, forthcoming).

Conclusion

The early Chinese students who studied in the UK, France, and Germany between 1860 and 1930 embodied a complex, multidimensional form of transnational engagement. Their journeys were shaped by historical, political, and primarily personal factors that illustrate how education served as a bridge for intercultural engagement and global citizenship, as observed in communication and intercultural understanding. Their experiences were often shaped by loneliness, financial strain, and cultural misunderstanding. And yet, through these struggles, they participated, sometimes consciously, sometimes incidentally, in shaping early forms of global civic engagement. Their daily negotiations across language barriers, social expectations, and political ideologies reflected not just adaptation, but also subtle forms of redefinition and contribution, as they would often be the first in-person interaction with Chinese people that other students and academics would have had.

Most of the students who went abroad were just trying to survive unfamiliar systems, improve their lives, or respond to the pressures placed on them by their families, by their government, or by circumstance. Some adapted well. Others struggled, made mistakes, or faded into obscurity. A few became influential figures, but most did not. Nonetheless, despite this outcome, the importance of these students is that they helped lay the groundwork for intellectual exchange and early forms of global citizenship, broadening the scope of how we understand migration, diplomacy, and identity formation in the modern world. Their experiences were often shaped by loneliness, financial strain, and cultural misunderstanding, themes that are very prevalent in international student migration in the present day. And yet, through these struggles, they participated, sometimes consciously, sometimes incidentally, in shaping early forms of global civic engagement. Their daily negotiations across language barriers, social expectations, and political ideologies reflected not just adaptation, but also subtle forms of resistance, redefinition, and contribution.

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Visualizing East Asian Cultural Diplomacy at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how China, Japan, and Korea practice cultural diplomacy through their respective national galleries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It engages museum theory and soft power discourse to evaluate how each nation projects its historical narrative, aesthetic priorities, and strategic interests through curated space. With the Met serving as a universal museum and a global cultural stage, these galleries represent not just artistic heritage but also tools of international identity formation and influence. Drawing from contemporary policy studies, comparative frameworks, and case-specific analysis, this study explores national motivations and tensions within museum diplomacy. It concludes by arguing for more integrated approaches that balance traditional heritage with modern cultural dynamics, particularly for nations such as Korea, which possess powerful contemporary cultural assets.

Keywords: East Asian culture, cultural diplomacy, Metropolitan Museum of Art, soft power

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Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is increasingly recognized as a strategic tool for nations to assert their identity, values, and influence on the international stage. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is rooted in political or military power, cultural diplomacy operates through the exchange and promotion of culture, the arts, language, and traditions to foster mutual understanding and extend a country's soft power (Nye, 1990). Museums have emerged as central platforms for such diplomacy, serving as curated arenas where national identity is exhibited and interpreted. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), one of the world's foremost universal museums, presents a compelling case study for examining how East Asian countries, China, Japan, and Korea, utilise museum galleries to represent and assert their cultural identities.

Cultural Diplomacy and Museums: Theoretical Framework

Although there is no set or commonly agreed upon definition of cultural diplomacy, it could be "best described as the means through which countries promote their cultural and political values to the rest of the world" to "foster mutual understanding and dialogue" through culture (Chakraborty, 2013, p. 30; Gienow-Hecht & Donfried, 2010, p. 6). Bennett (2013) conceptualizes the museum as a "governmental assemblage," where displays serve ideological functions in shaping public understanding which have been deployed with a particular political intention in each historical moment and context (Ang et al., 2018). Therefore, museums, especially public or national ones, are not neutral spaces; political forces and institutional agendas structure them.

In so-called "universal museums" such as The Met, which aim to showcase artistic achievements from all civilizations and cultures around the world across all eras from ancient to contemporary, targeting global citizens (ICOM, 2002), national galleries become an effective medium for cultural diplomacy. In this regard, the state-led agencies and programs may emphasize image-building and soft power, while relational models stress co-creation and exchange. This mode is visible in East Asian cultural diplomacy today.

This study employs the Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met) as a primary case study to examine East Asian cultural galleries, specifically those of China, Japan, and Korea, and their relationship to cultural diplomacy strategies. Situated in the heart of New York City, the world's most prominent multicultural metropolis, the Met serves as both a representative "universal" museum and a symbolic site for the display of East Asian cultures. Methodologically, two approaches were adopted: first, an analysis of the cultural diplomacy strategies of the three nations (Table 1); and second, a field observation of the respective galleries to explore how East Asian cultures are represented. This dual approach aims to reveal the relationship between national cultural diplomacy and the actual visualization of culture in a global museum setting.

Table 1*Comparison of Cultural Diplomacy Strategies in East Asia*

Country	Operator Type	Key Institutions	Key Content	Target Audience	Strategic Focus
China	Government-led	Ministry of Education (Confucius Institutes) (2004, 500+)	Traditional culture and history	Political partners, developing countries	Alignment with national strategies and political messages
Japan	Government-led, Public institutions	Japan Foundation (1972/2003), Agency for Cultural Affairs (Japan Cultural Center)	Animation, traditional arts, cuisine	Global cultural enthusiasts	Balance between tradition and modernity, “Cool Japan”
South Korea	Government-led institutions + private sector collaboration	Korea Foundation (1991), KOCIS (Korean Cultural Center)	K-culture (Hallyu, music, drama, food)	Global youth and general public	Promotion of K-content, participatory digital outreach

East Asian Galleries at the Met**China: Civilizational Soft Power Through Cultural Heritage**

China’s cultural diplomacy is primarily government-led and tightly integrated with national political agendas. The Ministry of Education oversees the Confucius Institutes, which have expanded globally since 2004 to over 500 branches. These institutions focus on promoting traditional Chinese culture and history, particularly in developing countries and political partner states. China’s approach is characterized by the alignment of cultural initiatives with foreign policy objectives, emphasizing state messaging, ideological coherence, and centralized control over content and delivery (Jiang, 2021).

Recent studies on China’s cultural diplomacy have emphasized the state’s active role in shaping global narratives through institutionalized platforms and translation strategies. Jiang (2021) positions translation not merely as a linguistic tool, but as a core mechanism of cultural diplomacy that negotiates political meaning and legitimacy in the international arena. Wang (2024) further deepens this analysis by examining the structural role of China Cultural Centers abroad, framing them as nodes of platformized diplomacy. His analysis reveals how these centers serve not only as spaces for showcasing Chinese culture, but also as strategic interfaces for soft power projection through state-driven digital and physical infrastructures.

The Chinese gallery, opened in 1981, was the first permanent cultural space representing China in a major American institution following the normalization of U.S.-China diplomatic ties. The centerpiece is the Astor Court, a full-scale reconstruction of a Ming Dynasty scholar’s garden built with materials and expertise imported from Suzhou. This representational space serves both aesthetic and diplomatic functions. It emphasizes continuity, refinement, and China’s ancient civilizational heritage. The gallery aligns with China’s broader strategy to brand its culture as a shared heritage of humanity, thereby

expanding its soft power under a universalist discourse. According to Wang (2024), Chinese cultural centers including Confucius Institutes operate similarly, asserting China's global cultural relevance while maintaining centralized control. The Met gallery embodies this ethos through its emphasis on grandeur, longevity, and harmony, intended to appeal to both Western admiration for classical art and the political narrative of a peaceful rise.

Japan: Aesthetic Diplomacy and Cultural Refinement

Japan's cultural diplomacy operates through a hybrid model, combining government leadership with the work of public institutions such as the Japan Foundation (established in 1972, independent since 2003) and the Agency for Cultural Affairs. These entities promote content ranging from traditional arts and cuisine to globally popular animation. Japan targets global cultural enthusiasts through its Cool Japan strategy, which aims to strike a balance between heritage and modern artistic forms. The emphasis on maintaining cultural authenticity while embracing creative industries exemplifies Japan's nuanced positioning in global soft power diplomacy.

Japan's approach to cultural diplomacy has been critically examined through the lens of heritage conservation and geopolitical narratives. Akagawa (2014) examines how national identity is embedded in heritage diplomacy, illustrating that conservation policies often serve as tools for nation-building. Bukh (2014) critiques the agent-level interpretation of Japan's soft power, arguing that it inadequately accounts for the structural and institutional dimensions of cultural diplomacy. Complementing this, Otmazgin (2012) highlights the geopolitical role of Japan's cultural initiatives in Asia, underscoring the complex interplay between culture, regional politics, and media representation. Together, these studies highlight the tensions between universal values and national interests in Japan's diplomacy.

Japan's gallery at The Met, titled Arts of Japan, is less overtly nationalistic and more attuned to conveying an aesthetic experience. Built up from the early 20th century, with significant expansions in the 1970s and 1980s during the so-called "Japan aesthetic boom" in the U.S., the gallery focuses on themes such as Zen Buddhism, the tea ceremony, and samurai culture. According to Iwabuchi (2015), postwar Japanese diplomacy involved "softening" Japan's international image, which had been tarnished by wartime aggression. Cultural artifacts, rather than political discourse, became tools to communicate refinement, peace, and spiritual depth. Japan's strategy is unique in that it relies heavily on diaspora collectors and private patrons, such as the Avery and Brankenridge families, rather than government agencies. This decentralized mode allows for aesthetic autonomy, while still supporting the national brand. Japan's gallery at The Met exemplifies "quiet cultural diplomacy", a model that blends individual agency with state ambition.

Korea: Traditional Heritage and Contemporary Dissonance

South Korea presents a hybrid public-private model of cultural diplomacy, led by government institutions such as the Korea Foundation (established in 1991) and the Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS), under the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. With a strategic focus on K-culture, South Korea leverages the global popularity of Hallyu (Korean Wave) to engage youth and the general public worldwide. The country's approach is notable for its quickness, media-driven outreach, and emphasis on co-producing cultural narratives that appeal to global audiences, particularly through K-pop, drama, food, and digital platforms.

South Korea's cultural diplomacy has increasingly focused on institutional innovation and global cultural representation. Istad (2016) proposes a strategic framework for public diplomacy that integrates cultural, political, and communicative dimensions under a coherent policy structure. Kim (2024) provides a case study of the British Museum's Korean gallery, analyzing it as a transnational site of soft power embodiment in the 1990s. This reflects Korea's efforts to institutionalize its cultural image abroad. While earlier approaches focused on government-led narratives, recent discussions emphasize the hybridity and co-production of Korean culture within global cultural institutions, marking a shift toward participatory and co-creative models of diplomacy.

The Korean gallery, Arts of Korea, was inaugurated in 1998 through collaboration between The Met, the Korea Foundation, and other institutions such as the Samsung Culture Foundation. It represents artifacts from the Three Kingdoms through the Joseon Dynasty, highlighting celadon ceramics, Buddhist sculpture, and folk crafts. The gallery's curatorial narrative emphasizes Korea's craftsmanship, historical continuity, and indigenous spirituality. However, as noted by Kim (2024), this portrayal is often disconnected from Korea's contemporary global cultural identity, which is shaped more by K-pop, film, and digital content—a phenomenon known as Hallyu. Unlike China's immersive space or Japan's aesthetic cohesion, Korea's gallery adopts a chronological structure and relies. The gap between Korea's traditional narrative in The Met and its contemporaneous soft power initiatives signals a need for more integrative curatorial strategies.

The following Table 2 summarizes the cultural diplomacy strategies employed by China, Japan, and Korea at The Met:

Table 2

Visualization of Cultural Diplomacy Strategies in East Asian Galleries in "The Met"

Country	Opened	Strategy	Cultural Focus	Government Role	Diplomatic Message
China	1981	Civilizational Soft Power	Astor Court, Ming Tradition	High (State-led)	China as ancient, harmonious civilization
Japan	1970s–80s	Aesthetic Diplomacy	Zen, Samurai, Tea	Low (Collector-driven)	Japan as refined and peaceful
Korea	1998	Heritage and Institutional	Chronological artifacts	Moderate (Foundation-based)	Korea as historically rich, craft-oriented

Conclusion

The Met's East Asian galleries function as visual embodiments of cultural diplomacy strategies (Kim, 2024) and a symbolic space for understanding how they represent and utilize soft power using their cultural heritages. China asserts its place as a timeless civilization through promoting its gigantic cultural heritage and narrative cohesion. Japan promotes refined aesthetics through decentralization by providing an impressive artistic experience with a sophisticated atmosphere, and collector-led diplomacy relatively. Korea emphasizes national heritage but must further integrate its contemporary cultural dynamism despite its

cultural-historical authenticity. The East Asian nations similarly or contextually reflect their cultural diplomatic aims and relations with the countries they represent. As global audiences shift and cultural competition intensifies, nations must reconcile their traditional legacies with their current global identities. The museum, once a static repository, can be seen as a cultural diplomatic stage. The effectiveness of that performance depends on a country's ability to balance authenticity, narrative, and innovation in its cultural self-representation.

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Chinese Boys' Love (Danmei) as Cultural Resistance: Examining Queer Failure in Danmei Novel *Heaven Official's Blessing*

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Abstract

This research paper employs textual analysis to investigate queer failure in a popular Chinese Boys' Love (danmei) text: *Heaven Official's Blessing* (*tian guan ci fu*) by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. This paper adopts a post-structuralist lens and is informed by queer theory, particularly the concept of queer failure as detailed by Halberstam (2011) in *The Queer Art of Failure*. Through a character-focused analytical approach, I illuminate experiences of queer failure, queer affection, violence, religious blasphemy, and a rejection of success and closure as a challenge to heteronormative, capitalist success within a fictional context. This study frames danmei as a form of cultural resistance, provides a queer reimagining of alternative ways of existence, and contributes to broader academic discourse surrounding danmei, Boys' Love media, and LGBTQ+ studies.

Keywords: danmei, boys' love, *Heaven Official's Blessing*, queer theory, queer failure

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Introduction

Background Information and Current Academic Discourse

Danmei refers to a popular Chinese Boys' Love genre that depicts male-male relationships characterised by a focus on romance and homoeroticism (Feng, 2009; Ni, 2023; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Existing danmei scholarship can be largely organised into the following categories: Aggressive censorship in Mainland China, the role of Mainland Chinese women as cultural producers and consumers, and narrative conventions in danmei. Firstly, danmei is under belligerent censorship in Mainland China due to its associations with pornographic and homosexual content (Yang & Xu, 2016b). In addition, scholars frequently explore the intrinsic motivations behind Mainland Chinese women's production and consumption of danmei, looking particularly at how their gender and sexuality might intersect with their motivations. Furthermore, danmei has been closely examined for its narrative conventions, and how these conventions reflect ideas surrounding gender and sexuality. Danmei narratives that explore controversial and taboo-filled subgenres receive academic attention (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Xu & Yang, 2013), yet danmei is still looked down upon as a form of "low" web literature and for its association with homoerotic pornography (Yang & Xu, 2016b).

Rationale and Significance of This Study

Considering current academic discourse surrounding danmei, majority of danmei scholarship examines aggressive state censorship, women's fandom, homoeroticism and romance. However, I point out that these studies, regardless of their focus, are trapped in normative binaries surrounding gender, sex and sexuality. Queerness and the subversive potential of being queer are severely underexplored in danmei studies, due to the inherent limitations imposed by the normative binaries that frame majority of danmei studies, such as morally permissible/morally impermissible, top/bottom, gay/straight, and so on. Adopting a post-structuralist lens and using queer theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to fill this literature gap by positioning danmei characters as queer subjects, and investigating the value of queer, non-normative narratives. Through textual analysis informed by the concept of queer failure (Halberstam, 2011), this paper will examine *Heaven Official's Blessing*, a popular danmei novel, to examine how and why queer subjects fail, and how these queer acts of failure challenge or subvert traditional notions of heteronormative, capitalist success.

Literature Review

Definition, Origins and History of Danmei

Danmei refers to a popular Chinese Boys' Love genre that depicts male-male relationships characterised by a focus on romance and homoeroticism (Feng, 2009; Ni, 2023; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Danmei production and consumption are dominated by women and sexual minorities through digital technologies (Feng, 2009; Ni, 2023; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Following the popularity of Japanese Boys' Love, danmei constitutes a cultural import introduced to China in the 1990s, and has since blossomed into a popular, fan-centric subculture (Feng, 2009; Yang & Xu, 2016a). "Danmei" is a translingual term from the Japanese kanji "tanbi", which directly translates to "indulgence in beauty" (Feng, 2009; Wong, 2020). Hence, danmei narratives focus on beautiful and romanticised aesthetics of queer romance between good-looking male characters (Feng, 2009; Wong, 2020). While danmei is traditionally understood to be a form of original web literature, contemporary danmei encompasses a variety of media

forms such as manhua (comics) and dangai (TV dramas adapted from danmei) that are accessible across the Internet (Ge, 2020; Wong, 2020; Yang & Xu, 2016a).

Censorship of Danmei in China

Danmei is under constant, aggressive censorship in Mainland China due to its close association with pornographic and homosexual content (Yang & Xu, 2016b). Perceived to be transgressive, Chinese censorship laws have resulted in the mass erasure of danmei works on popular websites like Jinjiang Literature City, through editors' deleting the works or self-censorship by danmei writers afraid of negative repercussions (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Yang & Xu, 2016b). Belligerent Chinese state censorship of danmei has also resulted in the alleged arrest of danmei writers (Ni, 2023). The Chinese government's aggressive stance regarding censorship of homosexuality peaked in the banning of Archive of Our Own (AO3), a public archive for original and fan-written texts (Yu, 2021). This ban occurred in 2020, when the emergence of a homoerotic fan-made text of two male celebrities who co-starred in a dangai drama gained negative attention (Yu, 2021). The Chinese government subsequently banned the entire AO3 website, signalling an unrelenting stance against danmei and homosexual content in China (Yu, 2021).

Danmei Fandom: Chinese Women as Cultural Producers and Consumers

Existing danmei scholarship also delves into the intrinsic motivations behind Mainland Chinese women's production and consumption of danmei. Many scholars argue that danmei is an unconventional avenue for Chinese women to explore deviant dreams surrounding gender, sex and sexuality (Feng, 2009; Yang & Xu, 2016a). Xi (2024) posits that danmei narratives featuring men being intimate and vulnerable with each other, constitutes Chinese women's resistance against mainstream media portrayal of traditional, inflexible gender binaries. However, the motivations behind Chinese women's exploration remain multifaceted and highly contentious. From one perspective, these Chinese women are perceived to be largely heterosexual (Feng, 2009), and that they exercise a voyeuristic female gaze to look upon gorgeous men, thus fulfilling their longing for an ideal heterosexual relationship (Ye, 2022; Zhang, 2016). However, other scholars argue that danmei, specifically danmei production, serves as an imaginary, experimental playground for Chinese women to play with different masculinities (Ni, 2023) and to look upon male-male homoerotic romance with an inherently queer gaze (Chao, 2016).

Narrative Conventions in Danmei

Furthermore, danmei has been closely scrutinised for its narrative conventions, and how these conventions reflect ideas of gender and sexuality. The most common narrative convention discussed among scholars is the gong/shou emotional-sexual dichotomy in danmei, where gong (lit. "attack") refers to the strong, dominant, "top" penetrator, and shou (lit. "receive") refers to the weak, subservient and "bottom" penetrated partner (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Wang, 2021b; Ye, 2022). While this rigid dichotomy appears to echo heteropatriarchal ideals, many scholars point out the emergence of new narrative conventions that challenge this conventional gong-shou dyad and explore new possibilities (Wang, 2021b; Xu & Yang, 2013). In terms of narrative arcs, Xi (2024) argues that happy danmei narratives (tian wen) are more popular than tragic ones (nue wen), suggesting that majority of danmei fans prefer successful, happy stories of romance over heart wrenching, tragic ones. However, the popular archetype of the "beautiful, strong, pitiable" (mei qiang can) man (Wang, 2021a; Ye, 2022)

suggests that some degree of suffering, rejection and failure is needed in danmei narratives to appeal to readers. In addition, some danmei narratives also explore controversial, taboo-filled subgenres and topics involving male pregnancy, incest, sexual violence and Omegaverse (A/B/O) settings (Chao, 2016; Ge, 2020; Xu & Yang, 2013). Therefore, other than being looked down upon as a form of “low” web literature and for its inherent association with homoerotic pornography (Yang & Xu, 2016b), women who consume danmei are often criticised to be depraved, debauched and lascivious (Feng, 2009).

Queer Subjects in Danmei: The Subversive Nature of Queer Failure

The majority of danmei scholarship focuses on romance, homoeroticism, fandom and belligerent state censorship. However, these studies are fundamentally ensnared in normative binaries surrounding gender, sex and sexuality, and they overlook the subversive potential of queerness in danmei, and the critique these non-normative narratives present. Adopting a post-structuralist lens, I turn to David Halperin’s (1995) definition of “queer”: “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62). Building upon Butler (2006)’s theory of performative gender, I position danmei subjects as queer for their homoerotic acts of *doing*, and by extension, *being*, that challenge rigid frameworks of heteronormativity and patriarchal values. I then extend my study of danmei narratives to Halberstam’s (2011) concept of queer failure. Halberstam (2011) uses the term “queer” to resist conventional narratives of success associated with conforming and thriving in a heteronormative, capitalist world. He argues that “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3), illuminating how queer failure is inherently disruptive in a world that prizes heteronormative, capitalist success. Proposing a queer reimagining of and resistance to conventional interpretations of success, Halberstam (2011) advocates for queer failure to function as a rejection of normative values and an oppositional narrative that reframes the concept of defeat. In his examination of queer failure, Halberstam analyses a plethora of Western media such as children’s animated movies. Expanding on Halberstam (2011)’s concept of queer failure and method, I turn to danmei narratives filled with queer subjects’ failures to offer a different cultural interpretation of queer failure. Moving beyond danmei scholarship underscored by normative binaries and mimicries of heteropatriarchal success, I interrogate how and why queer failure in danmei perpetuates Halberstam’s concept of queer failure as resistance and examine how danmei resists mainstream ideas of heteronormative, capitalist victories.

Research Questions

In this paper, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1. How and why do queer subjects fail in *Heaven Official’s Blessing*?

This research question interrogates the ways in which narrative arcs in *Heaven Official’s Blessing* present us with queer failure. In examining the relationship between these fictional narrative arcs and queer failure, I seek to illuminate how and why these acts of queer failure present us with non-normative narratives of success.

2. How do these queer acts of failure challenge or subvert traditional notions of heteronormative, capitalist success?

This research question seeks to understand how the narrative arcs depicting queer failure can challenge or subvert ideas of heteronormative, capitalist success. Therefore, I seek to illuminate a queer reimagining of alternative ways of being.

Methods

Qualitative Research Method: Textual Analysis

This paper utilises the qualitative research method of textual analysis to investigate queer failure in a popular danmei text: *Heaven Official's Blessing (tian guan ci fu)* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. Textual analysis has been chosen to actively describe, interpret and illuminate the content and themes within a chosen text (Tracy, 2020).

Data Sources

This paper focuses on a textual analysis of the danmei novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, and this novel is chosen for its popularity and literary excellence. Originally published in 2017 by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu on web literature website Jinjiang Literature City, *Heaven Official's Blessing* is a popular web novel that boasts a 9.8/10 rating on the website, in addition to having won two awards: the 2017 Annual Outstanding Work award and the VIP Strong Recommendation Medal on Jinjiang Literature City (Jinjiang Literature City, 2024). In addition, the *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel has been chosen for its immense novel length, literary depth, and exploration of queer subjects' failure. In her examination of a lack of clichéd plotlines in *Heaven Official's Blessing*, Wang (2022) emphasises that *Heaven Official's Blessing* is outstanding in its “encyclopedic portrayal of the trials and tribulations of various characters” (Wang, 2022, p. 291), a stark deviation from the “feel-good” type of writing that tends to plague popular danmei literature. Thus, the *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel is an excellent source material to analyse queer failure within the context of danmei.

In my textual analysis of queer failure in the *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel, I have chosen eight data sources:

- *Heaven Official's Blessing: Tian Guan Ci Fu (Novel) Vol. 1 to Vol. 8* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, published by Seven Seas Entertainment

I chose the published, official English translation of *Heaven Official's Blessing* over the original Chinese web novel for two primary reasons. Firstly, the published English translated novel of *Heaven Official's Blessing* facilitates clarity in my analysis and writing for this Anglophone study. Secondly, the published translation will ensure that all Chinese idioms, linguistic nuances, and language specific to Chinese culture have been translated and interpreted in a consistent manner by a professional translator.

Data Collection

In terms of data collection, this paper employs a character-focused analytical approach to examine queer failure by the two main characters in *Heaven Official's Blessing*: Xie Lian and Hua Cheng. Acknowledging that the novel has a large cast of characters and multiple intersecting plot lines, this paper will only focus on Xie Lian and Hua Cheng for two reasons. Firstly, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng are the two main queer subjects who embody failure in the

text. Secondly, their narrative arcs intersect throughout the entire novel to form a larger romantic narrative arc that is underscored by queer failure and resistance.

Data Analysis

I performed a close reading of the entire *Heaven Official's Blessing* novel to analyse the two main characters' character arcs and their larger relationship arc. I paid close attention to how these characters experience or embody queer failure in relation to queer theory and Halberstam (2011)'s concept of queer failure. I then interrogated how these queer acts of failure challenge or subvert mainstream notions of heteronormative, capitalist success within a fictional context.

Results

Protagonist Xie Lian's Character Arc

The story of *Heaven Official's Blessing* takes place in an immortality cultivation setting, where three realms exist: the Mortal Realm, the Heavenly Realm, and the Ghost Realm. The protagonist of *Heaven Official's Blessing* is Xie Lian, a heavenly official who is the former crown prince of the fallen kingdom of Xianle. Having been banished to the mortal realm twice, he collects scraps for a living and is known as the Scrap Immortal, to the ridicule of other heavenly officials. 800 years ago, Xie Lian was the renowned crown prince of a prosperous kingdom named Xianle. While performing during a ceremonial procession, Xie Lian saves a child from falling to his death. Shortly after, Xie Lian achieves spiritual ascension and becomes a heavenly official, worshipped by his entire kingdom. Three years later, Xie Lian defies heavenly orders and descends to the mortal realm to save his people from droughts, civil wars and a plague. Xie Lian exhibits indecisiveness and foolish ideals, and he struggles fruitlessly, revealing his inherent fallibility despite his godly status. Here, his repeated failures despite his godhood effectively disrupt the myth of exceptionalism and the capitalist mappings between hard work, talent, and success. As his kingdom accelerates towards ruin and Xie Lian fails to save his people repeatedly, the common people become disillusioned and enraged. After a conversation with his state preceptor, Xie Lian reflects upon his failures as a god:

That's strange. I saved people and protected people because they were innocent and didn't deserve death. Everything I've done was only done after serious consideration, and every choice was made after much struggle. Yet why does it all sound so laughable coming from another's mouth? Why does it sound like I've achieved nothing, that everything I've done is such a... failure? (Moxiangtongxiu, 2022, p. 183)

As Xie Lian loses his kingdom to the rebels, he is banished from the heavens and becomes the subject of ridicule and violent hatred. Xie Lian is subsequently brutally stabbed and mutilated by the common people, but he is unable to die due to being an immortal. As a queer subject that defies societal expectations, Xie Lian endures extreme violence as a natural consequence of being a deviant failure. Disillusioned, Xie Lian plots revenge on the common people he once loved, and teams up with a ghost named Wuming. However, Xie Lian eventually snaps back to his senses and attempts to save the common people again. Wuming sacrifices himself to save the common people, and Xie Lian ascends to the Heavenly Realm again. Ridden with guilt, Xie Lian asks to be banished for the second time, and gives up all

his spiritual powers and luck. Xie Lian wanders the mortal realm for 800 years, until he ascends again as the Scrap Immortal. In his attempts to cope with his deep trauma, Xie Lian advocates the art of forgetting rather than remembering:

Besides, some things are best forgotten. Rather than remembering how I was butchered and trampled hundreds of years ago, I'd prefer to remember that I ate a delicious meat bun yesterday, no? (Moxiangtongxiu, 2021, p. 323)

Deuteragonist Hua Cheng's Character Arc

Hua Cheng is the deuteragonist in *Heaven Official's Blessing*, and he is Xie Lian's love interest. Hua Cheng is a Supreme ranked ghost, and he is notorious for being a powerful menace across all three realms. During his mortal life, Hua Cheng was known as Hong'er. Born with one red pupil, Hong'er was the subject of violent abuse by everyone around him. Sick and tired of suffering, Hong'er contemplates suicide during a ceremonial procession, and almost falls to his death. He is caught by Xie Lian and becomes instantly enamoured, and Xie Lian shows up time and again to save his life. Hong'er falls in love with Xie Lian, forming a queer romantic-religious obsession that coalesces homosexual affection and religious worship. Following Xie Lian's ascension to godhood and the outbreak of chaos in Xianle, Hong'er becomes a soldier in the Xianle army and dies in battle for Xie Lian. Hong'er becomes a ghost fire, refusing to rest in peace due to his wish to protect Xie Lian. "If you force your soul to remain, you won't be able to rest in peace," Xie Lian said. The nameless ghost didn't seem to care. "I'm willing to never rest in peace" (Moxiangtongxiu, 2023, p. 134). Subsequently, Hong'er becomes a wrath ghost when he witnesses Xie Lian get mutilated by a hundred swords in his former temple. 800 years later, Hua Cheng alludes to the pain he felt when he failed to protect Xie Lian: "Watching your beloved be trampled and ridiculed with your own eyes and being unable to do a thing about it. You understand that you are nothing, that you can do nothing. That's the worst suffering in the world" (Moxiangtongxiu, 2022, p. 39). As Xie Lian plots revenge, he teams up with a nameless wrath ghost named Wuming. The dead Hong'er is in fact now the wrath ghost Wuming, and Wuming sacrifices himself to save Xie Lian after the latter regains his senses. Wuming eventually goes to Mount Tonglu to partake in a violent battle royale. He emerges as a Supreme ghost king and calls himself Hua Cheng. Having become unparalleled in strength across all three realms, Hua Cheng fervently searches for Xie Lian for 800 years.

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian (Hualian)'s Combined Narrative Arc

800 years later, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng reunite in the mortal realm. Through a series of escapades, the two fall in love with each other and form a homoerotic and romantic relationship. Regardless of their gender and belonging to different realms, the two love each other unapologetically and unconditionally against heteronormative expectations. The two, despite their happy ending, do not have any children and instead live together as immortals forever. Their inter-realm homosexual relationship is also perceived to be a taboo, and the two frequently engage in blasphemous acts. This ties in with Hua Cheng's extremely obsessive love for Xie Lian, both as his romantic interest and as his most devoted believer for centuries. The blurring of the lines between fervent religious worship and romantic affection peaks in a scene where the god and ghost embrace each other on top of an altar:

This altar was originally a place to worship the divine, but presented there this evening instead was a ghost and a god entangled in a fervent, inseparable embrace,

their tongues entwined. It was absurd and strange, and yet a sight of breathtaking loveliness. (Moxiangtongxiu, 2022, p. 278)

Furthermore, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng's romantic relationship is also characterised by unconditional love in the face of failure. When Hua Cheng expresses his failures in the past, Xie Lian reassures him that he is never measured by his external achievements, but he deserves to be loved for who he is. When Xie Lian expresses his own failures, Hua Cheng repeats the same saying back to him:

'To me, the one basking in infinite glory is you; the one fallen from grace is also you. What matters is you, not the state of you' Hua Cheng recited languidly as he gazed at Xie Lian. He blinked meaningfully, cocking an eyebrow. 'I feel the same way.' (Moxiangtongxiu, 2023, p. 92)

Discussion

Queer Subjects' Failure and Natural Endurance of Violence

Xie Lian's repeated instances of failure followed by an endurance of violent humiliation reflects the violence that queer subjects endure when they "fail" by normative standards set by society. When Xie Lian is disgraced and banished, the common people violently mutilate his body with a hundred swords. Due to his immortal status, Xie Lian is unable to die and instead turns into an unrecognisable mush of human flesh and blood writhing in endless, extreme and unbearable pain. As a queer subject who has taken a non-normative path and failed terribly, Xie Lian's extreme pain and humiliation are not depicted as a punishment, but as a perverse, natural consequence of his failure. His inability to die is deeply symbolic of the unending nature of abuse queer subjects endure in the face of their public failure. Xie Lian's endurance of violence as someone who failed his kingdom criticises and highlights the hypocrisy of a normative society that celebrates the winners and throws the losers under a bus.

Rejection of Heteronormative, Capitalist "Success"

However, one might ask, where does failure and public humiliation lead to? The correct answer is nowhere in particular. The obsession with achieving success measured by capitalist yardsticks is humorously criticised by Halberstam (2011) throughout *The Queer Art of Failure*. Rejecting a linear path to capitalist success and an obsession with productivity and positivity, Halberstam advocates for a queer, oppositional narrative that reframes the concept of defeat. In a discussion on American exceptionalism, Ehrenreich (2009) highlights that the heralded path to capitalist success is one that places immense emphasis on "positive thinking" and having the right attitude. Xie Lian's exceptionalism in all areas coupled with his epic failures to save his beloved kingdom presents a precise queering of this success narrative. It shatters the myth of exceptionalism and exposes society's hypocrisy in how it jeers at those who do not conform. Furthermore, as a non-conforming queer subject, Xie Lian's character arc presents us with a queer alternative to exist between "success" and "failure". His endurance of failure and public humiliation, interestingly, does not make him a better or worse person at the end of it all. This disrupts the didactic narrative shamelessly promoted in a capitalist society, where static, normative binaries of success/failure, good/bad, lesson learnt/lesson missed are weaponised to impose moral instruction and capitalist ideals on queer subjects who do not conform. After enduring immense pain and violence, Xie

Lian's fundamental character and outlook on life remain unchanged, to the disbelief of others. His past narrative arc, concluded in a grey area between "success" and "failure", constitutes a rejection of normative success in a capitalist world obsessed with making subjects conform to upward trajectories of victory.

Queer Subjects and the Art of Forgetting

Furthermore, Xie Lian's act of deliberately forgetting parts of his past is a form of queer power in his attempt to actively erase memories of pain and trauma. To quote Halberstam (2011): Forgetting can be a "cocooning of the self in order to allow the self to grow separate from the knowledge that might destroy it" (p. 92). Deliberate forgetfulness, as practised by Xie Lian in his desperate attempts to forget the violence he endured, provides an alternative way for queer subjects to reclaim their power in a world that seeks to permanently imprint labels and traumatic experiences on queer subjects. In a society that insists on remembering the winners who conform and succeed by narrow standards, Xie Lian reminds us that queer subjects can feel empowered in a safe space created by deliberate forgetfulness.

Queer and Ambiguous Romantic-Religious Affection

Hua Cheng's queer affection for Xie Lian is one that is ambiguous, selfless, and immensely painful. In the face of Xie Lian's unconditional kindness, Hong'er/Hua Cheng forms a queer affection for Xie Lian that is riddled with contradictions as it blurs the boundary between romantic affection and religious worship. Hua Cheng calls Xie Lian his "beloved", highlighting his romantic and homoerotic intentions, yet he religiously worships Xie Lian as his most devoted believer for more than 800 years. The queerness of Hong'er/Hua Cheng's devotion lies not only in its refusal to be neatly categorised into a heteronormative matrix, but also in its blatant subversion of religious figures as unreachable, holy beings. Hua Cheng's pursuit of his queer affection for Xie Lian is also riddled with failure and suffering as he witnesses Xie Lian being humiliated, betrayed and trampled by the common people whom he loved. Indeed, Hua Cheng's queer affection in his relentless pursuit of Xie Lian is an explicit rejection of upward trajectories of victory and self-benefit. Despite experiencing failure repeatedly, Hua Cheng's queer affection for Xie Lian pushes him to worship a disgraced and fallen god, and to suffer endlessly in his pursuit to protect him. Hua Cheng's queer devotion reminds us that "failing" by societal standards can be liberating and fulfilling for the queer subject himself, despite its accompanying host of negative affective states. Hua Cheng's queer affection moves beyond its romantic-religious ambiguity and fluidity to trouble dominant narratives that promote a monolithic definition of love and hard work for self-benefit.

Rejection of Closure and Resolution

If Xie Lian's journey is a rejection of "success", Hua Cheng's journey is one that is undoubtedly the rejection of closure. Closure can be thought of as a form of resolution, whether it be "successful" or not. When Hua Cheng dies again and again, he refuses to rest in peace. Here, the immortal cultivation setting provides a fantastical space where Hong'er/Wuming/Hua Cheng undergoes death repeatedly for Xie Lian, and his refusal to a physical and emotional closure stems from the fact that he longs to protect Xie Lian, a direct consequence of his queer affection and desires. Hua Cheng's repeated deaths are queer in and of itself, because it does not seek any resolutions or conclusions in a world that celebrates not just an ending, but a successful and happy ending. Furthermore, Hua Cheng is willing to die

for Xie Lian repeatedly, and his failure to live leads to a sense of fulfilment in terms of his queer affections and desires to protect Xie Lian. Therefore, his deaths symbolise his failure to protect his beloved, and yet it is the very act of repeatedly dying without resting in peace that underscores Hua Cheng's resistance against mainstream narratives of happy resolutions and fulfilment from obtaining closure.

Non-reproductive, Undying Queer Romance as a Challenge to Productive Heteronormativity

Hualian's romance is one that is undoubtedly queer: Xie Lian and Hua Cheng are both men in love with each other, they belong to different realms, and their relationship is underscored by mutual obsession and Hua Cheng's religious reverence and devotion to Xie Lian. Hualian's undying queer romance that persists for all eternity presents the reader with an unorthodox alternative to a heteronormative matrix that equates heteronormativity with social success and capitalist wealth. In reality, Hualian's childless queer romance would be frowned upon for being a deviant and non-reproductive lifestyle. However, *Heaven Official's Blessing* leverages upon a fantasy immortal cultivation setting to provide a queer reimagining of what it means to live happily ever after. Hualian's happy ending hence provides an oppositional narrative that reframes queer failure as non-normative success. Throughout the novel, Hualian fail time and again to conform to normative binaries and heteropatriarchal success, choosing to walk their own paths of failure to find each other. Through their failure to conform as queer subjects in a normative world, they are rewarded with unconditional love unbounded by their identities, and that which cannot be measured by conventional interpretations of success.

Queer Religious Blasphemy and Subversion of Socio-Religious Expectations

In addition, Hualian's queer failure is evident in their acts of religious blasphemy. Returning to my previous point on Hua Cheng's romantic-religious affection for Xie Lian as a form of queer affection, Hualian frequently engage in acts of religious blasphemy as a form of romance. For instance, Hua Cheng kisses Xie Lian fervently and passionately embraces him on top of his own altar in his own temple, religiously desecrating his god and romantically worshipping him at the same time. The idea of religious desecration is further compounded by the fact that Hua Cheng, a Supreme ghost embracing Xie Lian, is basically the embodiment of the devil himself. The electrifying co-existence of religious blasphemy with romantic desire constitutes queer failure for it directly challenges the idea of a distant devotee-god religious relationship and heteronormative romance, and it subverts the idea of religious figures as asexual and aromantic beings. The queer failure evident in the coalescence of religious blasphemy with romantic desires in Hualian's relationship illuminates the beauty of alternative expressions of love and desire, that are otherwise deemed as socially deviant and degenerate in a heteronormative society.

Conclusion

This study acknowledges the limitation of examining only the main characters and plot lines in *Heaven Official's Blessing*. For future research, I would like to conduct textual analysis on a danmei novel with a thematic analysis approach to examine the entire storyline. Furthermore, I am keen to conduct in-depth interviews with queer danmei readers to examine how queer failure in danmei might resonate with their social realities.

In conclusion, this paper investigates queer failure in danmei novel *Heaven Official's Blessing* from a post-structuralist perspective and examines how these queer acts of failure challenge traditional notions of heteronormative, capitalist success. Through a character-focused analytical approach, I articulate the protagonist Xie Lian's experiences of queer failure, his natural endurance of violence, his rejection of heteronormative, capitalist "success", and the art of forgetting. In examining the deuteragonist Hua Cheng's journey, I illuminate a queer and ambiguous romantic-religious affection, and a rejection of closure. Finally, I examine the larger, combined romantic arc to illustrate how non-reproductive, undying queer romance challenges productive heteronormativity, and how queer religious blasphemy can subvert socio-religious expectations. In conclusion, I position my study as a form of cultural resistance and queer reimagining of alternative paths to success within broader academic discourse surrounding danmei, Boys' Love and LGBTQ+ studies.

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The Impact of Queer Representation in Animation: Children's Perceptions of Gender and Understanding of Diversity

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Abstract

From colorful childhood cartoons to intricately animated films, animation plays a crucial role in shaping children's minds and worldviews. Recent increases in LGBTQ+ representation in children's animated movies and media have promoted inclusivity, yet they have sparked debate about the age appropriateness of such portrayals. While existing research has addressed the media's impact on children's views of gender roles and stereotypes, studies specifically examining queer representation in animation remain limited. This gap in the research highlights the need for further exploration of queer representation in animation and its influence on children's perceptions of diversity. The present study addresses this gap by analyzing children's views on gender and diversity regarding queer representations in American and Japanese animation created between 2014 and 2024, a period that highlights the rise of LGBTQ+ representation in children's media. The study employed a qualitative approach involving 15 students from Hong Kong to explore their perspectives on the topic. It featured visual stimuli of LGBTQ+ followed by semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis was conducted, utilizing transcriptions and coding to identify key themes, along with supporting quotes, within the context of the existing literature. The findings contribute to the development of animation that fosters positive audience attitudes toward gender diversity and promotes a more inclusive society by examining how viewers perceive and understand these representations.

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Introduction

Animation plays a significant role in children's lives, offering valuable lessons and cultural messages through visual storytelling. They spend an enormous amount of time watching animated content, which shapes their understanding of complex social concepts such as gender and diversity (Chakravorty & Tilak, 2021; Magotra & Kaur, 2018). Ahmed and Wahab (2014) noted that animated materials contribute to children's socialization (p. 44). Since children relate easily to animated characters, these figures can serve as positive role models for them. However, gender portrayals are often stereotypical, with male characters depicted as active and adventurous, while female characters are shown as passive and focused on appearance and domestic roles (Wood, 1994, p. 32), which can limit perceptions of human potential.

Media influence our lives, and their misrepresentation of genders can distort self-perception and what people perceive as usual and desirable for men and women (Wood, 1994). Nevertheless, in recent decades, animated media have increasingly featured queer representation (Whitley-Berry, 2021). This shift presents both opportunities and challenges. Some scholars claim that inclusive representation can normalize diverse identities and foster empathy (Van Wichelen et al., 2024), while others argue that limited or stereotypical portrayals may reinforce harmful biases. According to a study by Gökçearslan (2010), animated movies and cartoons are not only a source of entertainment for children but also have educational aspects. The study indicated that cartoons can subtly convey negative messages, including those related to gender. Homosexual characters have become more prominent in children's movies and cartoons over the years (Von Sikorski et al., 2022).

Animation, as a popular mode of entertainment for young audiences (Magotra & Kaur, 2018), possesses a unique potential to influence children's understanding of gender norms and diversity. A Business Insider report noted the growing presence of queer characters in children's cartoons, highlighting 70 programs with 259 characters of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, marking a 222% increase in LGBTQ+ characters from 2017 to 2019 (White & Kalai, 2021). Queer representations include LGBTQ+ characters and themes in animated media (Green, 2013). Additionally, Gökçearslan (2010) noted that media have a significant influence on children's internalization of gender stereotypes. Many children's shows reinforce gender discrimination, with examples such as *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* (Ruby et al., 1969–present), and *Super Mario* (Nintendo, 1985) often portraying female characters as needing rescue, which upholds the stereotype of women as helpless (Derr, 2020; Inness, 2007). Children are highly receptive to the messages conveyed through media, especially animation, which they consume regularly. Van Evra (2004) stated that media significantly shape children's attitudes, beliefs, and values. Media play a crucial role in shaping youngsters' minds, particularly young children and teenagers (Chassiakos et al., 2016).

This study investigates the impact of queer representation in animation on children's perceptions of gender and diversity. It focuses on how the rising visibility of queer characters in animated content influences young audiences concerning gender identities and sexual orientations. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research highlights the role of inclusive storytelling in cultivating empathy, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging inclusivity among young viewers.

Literature Review

Animated films influence the cognitive and social development of young audiences (Gökçearslan, 2010). Their narratives, characterizations, and voice performances convey societal constructs of gender and diversity (Zaheen, 2020). However, scholarship has mainly focused on gender stereotypes and binary representations in this genre. This oversight leaves a gap in the literature regarding the impact of queer representation on children's perceptions of gender diversity. This section examines the existing literature on queer representation, children's views on gender, and media diversity, highlighting the need for further research on how queer representation in animation affects children.

Queer Characters in Animation

Animation has long been perceived as an art form intended for children, and it has a history of association with "queerness" (Johnson, 2010). Dennis (2003) suggested that while early animation often relied on subtle coding to represent homosexuality, recent years have witnessed a shift toward more explicit portrayals. Modern animators can openly depict same-sex desire and gay characters even when such themes are subtle. They can express underlying wishes and fears about same-sex identity. Dhaenens and Van Bauwel argued that, despite often reinforcing heteronormativity, adult animated sitcoms create space for queer resistance through techniques such as exaggeration and intertextuality (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2011). These strategies gradually expose and disrupt normative patterns, enabling more inclusive attitudes.

As Griffin (2017) discussed, animation's inherent "queerness" lies in its ability to transform characters and parody norms, destabilizing fixed identities. The understanding of this "queerness" evolves (Sadiq & Baghavandoss, 2024), and animation can help break down the barriers between traditional heterosexual norms and other forms of relationships (De Beer, 2014). Scholarship, such as Saint-Oyant's work, explores how animation techniques create narratives that challenge heteronormative norms (Saint-Oyant, 2017). Further research is needed to understand the impact of these representations, particularly on children, and this area deserves greater attention.

Children's Views on Gender

Theories of gender development examine how individuals acquire and internalize gender roles through socialization processes. Eisenberg et al. (2013) reviewed major approaches to gender development in psychology: biological, learning-based, and cognitive. The learning-based and cognitive approaches led to two key theories—social learning theory and cognitive-developmental theory. Social learning theory suggests that children learn gender roles through observation and reinforcement (Perry & Bussey, 1979). In contrast, Kohlberg (1966) proposed that children actively construct their understanding of gender in stages, leading to a stable gender identity and identification with their gender.

Children's understanding of gender is a multifaceted developmental process shaped by various influences. Research has shown that children's understanding of gender is heavily influenced by the media they consume, particularly animation (Stockton, 2009). Since children begin to spend considerable time watching animated films and cartoons from a very young age, gender representation in children's animated movies warrants significant attention. Batool et al. (2017) noted that children have a keen understanding of how gender is

categorized in animation. The authors elaborated that portraying gender roles in animated works can shape their beliefs, ideologies, opinions, and concepts regarding social norms, relationships, and behaviors (De Carvalho Baptista, 2020; Martin et al., 2002; Oliver & Green, 2001).

Representations of Diversity in Animation and Media

Animation uniquely expresses human experiences, emotions, ideas, and aspirations through an exaggerated style (Karmakar, 2021). Its unconventional techniques challenge traditional gender roles and offer diverse representations that can positively influence children's views.

Children absorb gender stereotypes from animated films from a young age (Magotra & Kaur, 2018). While many reinforce traditional roles, some characters defy the norms of gender identity and presentation (Thulasi, 2022). Animation can both affirm and disrupt conventional gender understandings. Patterson and Spencer (2017) noted, "Far too often, these films teach children to internalize oppressive messages, which they carry with them (largely unchanged) into adulthood" (p. 73). The effects of queer representation in animation on children's perceptions of gender and diversity are underexplored.

Although research has looked at media's influence on children's views of gender roles and stereotypes (Kimmie, 2024; Knobloch et al., 2005; Zuckerman et al., 1980), studies on queer representation in animation are scarce. This gap highlights the need for further exploration of how queer representation affects children's perceptions of diversity. Hence, this study focused on the following three key research questions (RQs):

- RQ1:** How does animation play a crucial role in children's understanding of gender and diversity?
- RQ2:** How do young children perceive queer characters in animation?
- RQ3:** How can we positively influence young individuals' perspectives on queer characters?

Research Methodology

Methods

Visual Qualitative Research Methodology

This study used an interpretive methodology focusing on the meaning of queer representations in children's animation. To answer the research questions (RQs), a visual qualitative research methodology was applied, involving visual elicitation interviews to understand children's perspectives and gather data. These methods provided a thorough understanding of the project's complexities. Elbardan and Kholeif (2017) noted that interpretivism seeks to understand the meanings behind the data regarding a phenomenon and the attitudes of individuals within a social context. Supporters argue that interpretive approaches recognize that reality is socially constructed through interpretations of events (Putnam & Banghart, 2017). Kamenou (2007) emphasized that unique experiences and cultural contexts shape the understanding of gender and diversity. An interpretive approach examines the perceptions and emotions associated with experiences, influenced by culture and societal context, thereby fostering deeper discussions on gender and diversity. Through visual elicitation interviews, the visual qualitative methodology aims to achieve the project's objectives and effectively address the three key research questions.

Interview Framework

The research interview framework included three main phases.

Phase 1 - Preparation

This research in Hong Kong explored how children's perceptions of queer identity are shaped by animation. Ethical approval was secured, and participants were recruited through purposive sampling to gather a self-selecting sample of informed volunteers (Blaxter et al., 1996). An interview guide was developed, and 15 students, primarily aged 6–11, participated, alongside older children (aged 12–16). The study emphasized media's influence during critical periods of social understanding and media literacy development, especially regarding gender roles, highlighting this age range's importance in forming inclusive attitudes (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004; Strasburger et al., 2014).

This study aimed to include “cisgender” children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in Hong Kong to avoid bias (Aultman, 2014), recognizing the influence of socioeconomic status and family dynamics on perceptions of LGBTQ+ representation (McHale et al., 2003; Nikken & Oprea, 2018). Sensitive topics, such as family income, were addressed with proxy measurements. Eleven stimuli (see Appendix A) were selected by an animation studies scholar, with a focus on American and Japanese animations from 2014 to 2024, a period noted for increased LGBTQ+ representation (Cruz, 2024). A semi-structured interview guide designed for child comprehension was utilized (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017).

Phase 2 - Data Collection

Interview sessions were conducted with primary and secondary school students for data collection. In total, 15 interviews were conducted with 13 boys, aged 6 to 16, and 2 girls, aged 10 and 12. The 12-year-old girl is a Filipino who has been studying and living in Hong Kong since the beginning of her primary school education. Interviewees aged 12 or older were classified as older children for comparison. Two pairs of identified siblings were included. The participants were interviewed via Zoom, individually by availability and willingness, except for siblings, who were interviewed together. This arrangement allowed both children to interact, further investigating their reactions to and perceptions of messages.

Visual stimuli included clips of 1–2 minutes, GIFs, and still images featuring LGBTQ+ characters and those in same-sex relationships. Stimuli of characters challenging gender norms through their appearance or behavior were also included. These were presented one by one, followed by semi-structured interviews with open-ended, child-friendly questions. Follow-up questions further investigated responses. The interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes to keep the children engaged and prevent weariness.

The interview questions (see Appendix B) focused on understanding how media and animation influence children's perceptions. The questions were about favorite cartoons and their connections to real life, as well as children's reactions to queer representations in animated media. Additionally, it explored children's views on gender, diversity, and inclusion, as well as how animation can foster positive attitudes toward these topics.

Phase 3 - Data Analysis and Interpretation

The findings were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). The process began with transcribing the recorded interviews for an accurate textual record. Next, a coding scheme was developed based on the three RQs. The transcripts were coded for recurring themes, patterns, and key concepts related to children’s perceptions of queer representation. Subsequently, similar codes were grouped into broader themes that captured vital patterns and interpretations of the data. The final analysis was clarified by revisiting the written pieces and transcripts. The results were shared with the participants and, if applicable, their parents, to ensure they reflected the participants’ perspectives and to consider any disconfirming evidence. An interpretive approach revealed general perceptions about the central theme and allowed for specific thematization of certain influences expressed by the children. We identified mixed responses and uncertainties in the younger children’s answers. These findings will be discussed in the following section.

Findings

Shifting Media Consumption: Animation, Gaming, and the Digital Landscape

A phenomenon of media multitasking and displacement was observed in the participants’ viewing habits. Most of the children watched cartoons regularly, with their preferences varying from daily viewing to less frequent watching due to other interests and schoolwork. One hobby that the children frequently mentioned was video gaming. When asked how often they watched cartoons or animated shows, those who responded less often indicated that they watched less animation as they spent more time playing video games, such as *PUBG: Battlegrounds* (Greene & Tae-seok, 2017) and *Roblox* (Baszucki & Cassel, 2006). Most of the children watched animations on various media platforms, including streaming services such as Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube, instead of traditional TV programs.

Character Identification and Role Models

This theme examined how the children identified with animated characters and how these characters served as role models in shaping their understanding of gender and diversity. The children were drawn to characters for various reasons, including personality and magical traits, with popular examples being *Nezha*, *Captain America*, and *Super Mario*. The older children often connected their favorite characters to family memories. For example, one 12-year-old boy enjoyed playing *Super Mario* for fun, which he shared with his cousin, while a girl respondent appreciated *Tyke* from *Tom and Jerry* (Hanna & Barbera, 1940-present) for its portrayal of a familial bond, which she found very touching.

The children differentiated between cartoon characters and real-life individuals based on traits and abilities. For example, a 10-year-old noted, “*Buzz Lightyear* in *Toy Story* (Lasseter, 1995) is different because he has a laser gun and wings.” Positive and negative role models affected children’s attitudes. Another 10-year-old child mentioned *Nezha*, explaining that he saw him as “naught” and impulsive, while *Ao Bing* was calm. He also commented that a classmate who imitated *Nezha* left him with a negative impression. The children’s views on the importance of representation varied. Some found it unimportant, while others appreciated relatable traits. The older children generally valued it more; for instance, one 12-year-old boy stated, “If a character’s personality is similar to mine, I would like to watch it even more.” A

12-year-old girl added, “I can relate to it, which brings me comfort.” A 16-year-old boy noted, “If a character resembles me, I would feel a stronger connection and like them more.”

On the other hand, the role of representation in fostering inclusivity was significant. Half (50%) of the interviewees expressed curiosity, indicating a desire to connect with the characters in the clips—specifically, *Given* (Yamaguchi, 2019), which features a childhood montage of the protagonist and deuteragonist, Uenoyama and Sato, growing up and supporting each other—and they wanted to befriend the characters.

Initial Reactions and Understanding of Queer Representations

Most of the younger participants expressed uncertainty about diverse characters in the narratives, labeling them as “strange” or “weird.” This reaction is illustrated by three examples: 1) watching *Luca* (Casarosa, 2021), the children found the sea monster transformations unsettling; 2) watching *Steven Universe* (Sugar, 2013–2019), the children struggled to identify the gender of the lesbian humanoid beings Ruby and Sapphire; and 3) watching *When Queer Eye met Big Mouth* (Flackett et al., 2019), the children disliked the portrayal of the boys’ team (gay portrayal) due to their unattractive design and behavior.

Emotional connections to “unusual” characters differed notably between the age groups. The older children consistently engaged, while the younger ones exhibited a divide—some were curious and asked questions about the characters. In contrast, others preferred to maintain their distance and did not relate to the characters socially.

For instance, only 22% of the young children expressed a desire for connection, while others displayed indifference or discomfort. Most of the younger participants were unable to identify these as queer representations. They often showed fear and discomfort toward the characters due to their unusual traits. When asked about the characters’ feelings, their responses were brief and lacked detail. Some of the young children exhibited openness to different identities, especially in positive contexts such as weddings, as seen in *Steven Universe*, when they erroneously perceived Ruby and Sapphire as a boy and a girl.

In contrast, the older children tended to demonstrate a greater acceptance of queer representations. They found the characters in *When Queer Eye met Big Mouth* hilarious, with one stating, “I really like this. I used to watch them all the time. They were hilarious and chaotic.”

When discussing same-sex relationships, particularly the lesbian wedding in *Steven Universe*, the older children showed more empathy and support. They collectively agreed that “same-sex relationships are normal in modern societies” and that “love is love,” as expressed by a 12-year-old boy and girl, respectively. Overall, the older children tended to approach the narratives with an open mindset, emphasizing that stories are acceptable as long as they are coherent and well-told.

One notable case involved a 10-year-old girl who was initially uncomfortable with queer representations. However, she loved *The Owl House* (Terrace, 2020–2023), an animated series on the Disney Channel featuring a lesbian character, mainly for its magical elements and character design. She had almost finished the entire series and eagerly shared its storyline, recommending it to her friends.

Children's Understanding of Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion

In terms of gender roles, both the older and younger children recognized the physiological differences between males and females but believed that they could perform many of the same tasks, reflecting a progressive viewpoint. Additionally, the younger children often preferred traditionally strong or familiar characters that aligned with societal expectations of gender and power. This was evident in their choices from the visual stimuli—*She-Ra and the Princesses of Power* (Stevenson, 2018–2020)—with most selecting *Bow*, a black soldier in a golden suit.

When it came to family definitions, the responses varied. The younger children often defined family as just parents, while some included grandparents, reflecting a broader understanding of family structures. Traditional and evolving views coexisted, with many of the children recognizing the importance of support systems. After watching a clip from *The Loud House* (Savino, 2016–present) featuring a gay interracial couple, reactions were mixed. The younger children recognized same-sex relationships but found them strange. Conversely, the older children once again demonstrated greater acceptance, defining “family” with a more profound perspective, focusing on a psychological level. Two 12-year-olds claimed, “A family requires two individuals and a child, with both individuals needing to care for the child with their heart actively, and it is important to allow the child to grow up happily,” and “A family needs two role models and caregivers, as well as a younger one who requires care.” A 16-year-old boy expressed:

The definition of family does not necessarily entail biological ties; instead, it is based on intimate relationships characterized by mutual dependence, trust, support, and shared memories. Even if individuals are nominally considered family, a distant relationship may lead them to not feel like a cohesive family unit. Moreover, partners can be regarded as a family unit even in the absence of children.

He advocated for the inclusion of diverse characters in film and television, such as those from LGBTQ and different racial backgrounds, provided that their presence did not disrupt the narrative and was not merely for the sake of inclusion. In addition, he opposed the intentional alteration of existing character settings for the sake of political correctness, arguing that such changes can create a sense of inauthenticity for the audience. Diverse characters contributed to the expression of various perspectives, allowing more individuals to understand their stories.

Regarding the acceptance of differences, 29% of the participants preferred similarities among peers and felt uncomfortable with diversity. However, most were willing to embrace it, highlighting the importance of social integration. Concerning representation, 50% of the young children wanted to see characters like themselves in animations, although this desire often came with a fear of being different. The other half showed less interest in representation.

The older children had a solid view of the desire for representation. One participant noted, “If a cartoon character’s personality is similar to mine, I prefer to watch it,” while another mentioned the comfort found in relatable characters. Additionally, the 12-year-old Filipino girl discussed how animation can impact diversity and inclusion, sharing her experience with friends facing unfair issues in Hong Kong:

Animation can inspire minorities by showing relatable struggles on screen. Seeing someone else take a stand can motivate them to stop accepting disrespect while also humbling those who perpetrate it.

Overall, she believed that animation could empower marginalized groups to courageously resist injustice and educate those who discriminate, ultimately changing perceptions and behaviors. Moreover, she emphasized the significance of encountering characters like oneself and understanding diverse cultures.

Discussion

This study focused on children in Hong Kong, a city where “East meets West.” Hong Kong’s unique and distinctive geographical, cultural, and historical characteristics, especially its openness and Western influence, make it a unique place for exporting cartoons and animations (Wong, 2002). The study highlights the impact of positive exposure to cartoons and character identification on children’s perceptions of gender and diversity, thereby contributing to an understanding of media’s role in shaping these viewpoints.

Hong Kong’s blend of Western and Eastern animation exposes children to a diverse range of storytelling and cultural styles. Parents play a crucial role in shaping their children’s mindsets and values. Traditional Chinese values influence views on gender and sexuality, particularly regarding family structures and the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. In the present study, reactions to a clip from *The Loud House* showed that younger children typically view a family as consisting of parents, sometimes including grandparents, and find same-sex relationships unusual. They may internalize societal pressures for traditional family structures, which can conflict with representations of LGBTQ+ characters in animation. In contrast, older children exhibit greater acceptance, indicating a shift among some Hong Kong parents toward progressive views. However, it is important to note that while children may accept queer characters, their understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation remains limited.

The linguistic landscape of Hong Kong, with its blend of Cantonese and English, influences children’s understanding of gender and sexuality. In the current study, most of the visual stimuli were presented in English and Japanese, with some also featuring Chinese subtitles. During the interviews, the children exhibited hesitation, often struggling to comprehend the content. Access to appropriate terminology is essential for understanding these concepts, as a lack of precise language can lead to misunderstandings. Cultural connotations also affect interpretations; neutral terms in English may carry negative connotations in Cantonese. Children often navigate discussions by code-switching between languages, which impacts their comfort and comprehension. Accurate and culturally sensitive representations of queer identities in subtitles and dubbing are crucial for helping children in Hong Kong accept diverse identities.

The study observed a phenomenon of media multitasking and displacement in viewing habits. Children nowadays consume animation on various platforms, including Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube, instead of via traditional TV, while also engaging with video games such as *PUBG: Battlegrounds* and *Roblox*. This shift underscores the importance of animation being accessible across multiple platforms to reach young audiences effectively. The quantity and types of media children consume can have significant implications for their understanding of gender and sexuality. As children grow older, they gain greater autonomy in their media

choices. While parents still exert influence, children begin to discover content and platforms through their peers, online recommendations, and self-exploration, and older children engage with a broad variety of media platforms.

Preferences for specific genres of animation, such as action, comedy, and fantasy, vary among children. Media streaming platforms, such as Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube, provide on-demand access to a vast library of shows, movies, and animations. They also use algorithms to recommend content, which can significantly shape viewing habits. YouTube is extremely popular among children as it provides access to user-generated content, short-form videos, and channels dedicated to animation and gaming. In addition to emerging streaming services, video games are a significant form of media consumption for many children, as shown by the results of this study. Games often incorporate narrative elements and character development, which can influence perceptions of gender and diversity.

Three of the participants' favorite characters from the interviews were *Captain America*, *Nezha*, and *Super Mario*. The analysis of the younger participants' perceptions focused on the characteristics, motivations, and relationships of many of the characters. Moreover, as they read the narratives—the stories—these characters were involved in, they tended to relate to some of them, imagining their own lives as a mirror of the characters' experiences or as an outcome of their dreams. In many cases, the characters influenced how the children thought and acted. This profound understanding of character enhances the quality of reading and represents the essence of growth and maturity.

Cognitive and social developmental factors may explain the observed differences between younger and older children. The findings indicate that younger participants often perceive diverse characters in narratives as “strange” or “weird,” reflecting their mixed feelings toward queer representations. Additionally, they struggle to understand gender identity and tend to dislike certain portrayals. Emotional connections to these characters vary by age; younger children may display curiosity or discomfort, while older children generally show greater acceptance and empathy. Older children can find humor in queer representations and recognize that same-sex relationships are normal. Their more developed theory of mind aids them in understanding different perspectives, whereas younger children may find it challenging to see that queer individuals have experiences that differ from their own.

These results clearly demonstrate that children's cognitive development evolves as they age, particularly in abstract thinking related to gender perception (Kohlberg, 1966). Older children are better equipped to understand complex ideas such as gender identity and sexual orientation. In contrast, younger children often struggle with these concepts due to a focus on concrete thinking and literal interpretations.

The context in which queer characters are set in animation—taking into account elements such as storylines, secondary characters, and general messaging—can significantly influence children's perceptions of queer identities. Thus, emergent work can begin to explore the specific contexts surrounding queer representation that foster either positive or contradictory understandings of queerness. Positive contexts and familiarity play a significant role in facilitating greater acceptance among younger children. As reflected in the results, positive contexts, such as weddings, make same-sex relationships more understandable for children and serve as affirmations. Despite the children's misunderstanding of gender identifications, the wedding scene from *Steven Universe* (Sugar, 2013–2019) suggested that framing same-sex relationships within established, positive social rituals can enhance acceptance.

Additionally, the present study suggested that repeated exposure to LGBTQ+ characters and stories can help mitigate discomfort and promote inclusivity. The case of the 10-year-old girl who liked *The Owl House* but was also negative on other queer characters might explain that by the time children have had the opportunity to be exposed to LGBTQ+/queer characters and stories over and over, they become more familiar with them as representations, and this mitigates any affront to their sense of strangeness or discomfort. It is important that we continue to expose children to diversity so that it becomes an integral part of how they view the world. Moreover, the more children hear these characters and stories, the better they will come to understand that people, even if they may be different in specific ways, share more similarities than differences, thus prompting them to think inclusively.

These findings have several practical and theoretical implications for animation and media production. First, creators should strive for nuanced portrayals of queer characters and avoid harmful stereotypes. Instead of reducing characters to their sexual orientation or gender identity, it is essential to depict them as complex individuals with diverse personalities and backgrounds. Second, placing queer characters in everyday scenarios promotes a culture that embraces diversity, enabling audiences to see themselves reflected in the stories they encounter. Ultimately, empowering marginalized communities through inspiring narratives is vital in combating injustice and discrimination. These stories can illustrate pathways to a more just society while promoting resilience and advocacy. Increased representation of women and minorities in higher industry positions is essential, supported by opportunities that uplift diverse talent and address unfair hiring practices. This emphasis on inclusion, accessibility, and representation not only benefits the animation industry but also enriches its depiction of society. This study contributes to theories of media effects and social learning by underscoring how media consumption shapes children's attitudes toward gender and diversity. It reinforces the idea that positive representation and repeated exposure can foster greater acceptance and understanding.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of queer representation in animation on children's perceptions of gender and their understanding of diversity. The findings suggest that while younger children may initially struggle to understand queer identities, older children generally demonstrate greater acceptance and empathy. It shows that being mature and understanding can lead to increased acceptance of diverse identities. This suggests that exposure to queer representation in animation can play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity and empathy among children as they grow and develop their understanding of the world. Furthermore, positive contexts and increased familiarity with queer characters can facilitate greater understanding among younger audiences. Additionally, animation has the potential to shape children's worldviews, challenge gender stereotypes, and promote inclusivity.

The findings of this study are manifestly limited due to the relatively small sample size (15 students). The focus was restricted to Hong Kong, potentially failing to represent children from other cultural background contexts. In addition, although the qualitative approach provides abundant insights, it may not be generalizable to larger populations. Furthermore, there was a marked imbalance in the gender representation of the participants, with 13 boys and only two girls. This skewed distribution raises concerns that the findings may disproportionately reflect the perspectives and experiences of boys in Hong Kong, potentially leading to bias in the results. It is plausible that girls' perspectives on queer representation in animation may differ significantly from those of boys. Future research should address these

limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, as well as considering the use of quantitative methods to further examine the topic. Prolonged studies could investigate the long-term effects of exposure to queer characters on children's identity development and social perspectives. It is also necessary to explore the role of parental mediation, cultural context, and specific animation techniques in shaping children's perceptions of queer representation.

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Appendices

Appendix A: List of Animated Movies and Cartoons for Stimulus Selection

Table A1

List of Potential Animated Movies and Cartoons for the Visual Elicitation Interviews

	Movie/Cartoon Title (Country)	Year(s)	Character(s)	Creator(s)
1.	Adventure Time (US)	2010–2018	Marceline and Princess Bubblegum	Pendleton Ward
2.	Steven Universe (US)	2013–2019	Ruby and Sapphire	Rebecca Sugar
3.	The Loud House (US)	2016–Present	Howard and Harold McBride	Chris Savino
4.	Yuri!!! On Ice (JPN)	2016	Victor Nikiforov and Yuri Katsuki	Sayo Yamamoto and Mitsurō Kubo
5.	She-Ra and the Princesses of Power (US)	2018–2020	Adora, Bow, and Sea Hawk	Nate Stevenson (Original by Larry DiTillio and J. Michael Straczynski)
6.	Given (JPN)	2019	Mafuyu Sato and Ritsuka Uenoyama	Hikaru Yamaguchi
7.	When Queer Eye met Big Mouth (US)	2019	The Fab 5	Jennifer Flackett, Andrew Goldberg, and Nick Kroll
8.	Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina (JPN)	2020	Elaina and Saya	Jougi Shiraishi
9.	The Owl House (US)	2020–2023	Luz and Amity	Dana Terrace
10.	Luca (US)	2021	Luca and Alberto	Enrico Casarosa
11.	Look Back (JPN)	2024	Fujino and Kyomoto	Kiyotaka Oshiyama (Original by Tatsuki Fujimoto)

Note. Only American and Japanese animated movies and cartoons created between 2014 and 2024 were considered within the scope of the study.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Table B1

List of Interview Questions for the Visual Elicitation Interviews

	RQ1: How does media, especially animation, play a crucial role in children's understanding of gender and diversity?
Q.	
1	你多久會看卡通或動畫節目？ How often do you watch cartoons or animated shows?
2	你最喜歡的卡通或動畫電影是什麼？為什麼喜歡它們？ What are your favorite cartoons or animated movies? Why do you like them?
3	告訴我一個你特別喜歡的卡通角色！他們有什麼特別之處 Tell me about a cartoon character you really, really like! What makes them so cool?
4	所有卡通角色都看起來一樣嗎？還是彼此之間有不同的地方？怎麼不同？ Do all cartoon characters look the same? Or are they different from each other? How?
5	你認為卡通裡發生的事情像現實生活嗎？為什麼或為什麼不？ Do you think the things that happen in cartoons are like real life? Why or why not?
6	你覺得在卡通和電影中看到像你的人重要嗎？為什麼？ Is seeing people like you in cartoons and movies important? Why?
	RQ2: How do young children perceive queer characters in animation?
Q.	
7	這個片段/圖片在表達什麼？ What's happening in this clip/picture?
8	你對這個角色有什麼看法？你喜歡他們嗎？ What do you think about this character? Do you like them?
9	你認為這個角色在想什麼？ How do you think this character is feeling?
10	這個角色/這些角色有什麼不同或獨特的地方嗎？ Is there anything different or unique about this character/these characters?
11	如果你可以問這個角色一個問題，你會問什麼？ If you could ask this character one question, what would it be?
12	這個角色讓你想起你認識的任何人的嗎 Does this character remind you of anyone you know?

	RQ3: How can we to positively influence young individuals' perspectives on queer characters?
Q.	
13	你認為有哪些事情只有男孩/女孩可以做嗎？ Are there things that only boys/girls can do?
14	你有沒有見過有人因為與他人不同而受到不公平對待？發生了什麼事？ Have you ever seen someone being treated unfairly because they were different? What happened?
15	你認為家庭的定義是什麼？ What do you think makes a family?
16	誰在你的家庭中照顧你？是你的媽媽/爸爸嗎？也許你的奶奶或爺爺也有幫助？誰愛你並幫助你成長？ Who takes care of you in your family? Is it your mom/dad? Maybe your grandma or grandpa helps too? Who loves you and helps you grow up?
17	人們不同是很酷的嗎？還是每個人都應該一樣？ Is it cool for people to be different? Or should everyone be the same?
18	你有沒有遇到過和你不同的同學或朋友？那是什麼樣的感覺？ Have you ever met some classmates or friends different from you? What was that like?
19	你想在動畫中看到一個和你相似的角色嗎？為什麼？ Do you want to see a character similar to you in the animation? Why?
20	你認為每個人都在卡通和電影中看到像他們的人重要嗎？ Is it important for everyone to see people like them in cartoons and movies?

Note. Different sets of questions were developed for the interviews, tailored to the specific research questions (RQ). These questions were created in a bilingual format to enhance the children's understanding.

From Patients to Partners: Citizen Engagement in Hong Kong's Carescape

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Abstract

In Hong Kong, community engagement in health management has surged, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has generated a wealth of health information, reshaping cultural meanings of “good health,” resilience, and community well-being. Vibrant discussions about health, both online and offline, have created a unique public health culture that often relies on word-of-mouth knowledge alongside traditional medical establishments. Amidst this evolving landscape, the Hong Kong government's Health Bureau of the HKSAR Government introduced the *Primary Healthcare Blueprint* in 2023, emphasizing a crucial shift from a treatment-oriented to a prevention-oriented mindset. This initiative aims to enhance community involvement and empower citizens in managing their health. This study employs a critical health-humanities approach to explore “citizen self-health,” which includes community deliberation and sharing of health information. We conducted focus group discussions with four diverse groups—young adults, the elderly, mothers/housewives, and ethnic minorities—to examine the value, risks, and sustainability of grassroots health discourses. Our findings reveal that personal networks, especially friends and family, are vital sources of health information, though trust levels and preferred sources vary widely, from community recommendations to digital platforms. While there is appreciation for Hong Kong's public health system—highlighting personalized care for mothers, community support for ethnic minorities, affordability for the elderly, and technological advancements for youth—challenges persist, including overwhelmed providers and inequitable access. This pilot study underscores the importance of empowering individuals and communities through a citizen health approach, enhancing healthcare engagement and equity in Hong Kong.

Keywords: health discourses, citizen self-health, social care, digital cultural analytics, Hong Kong

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Introduction

In January 2023, the Hong Kong government's Health Bureau of the HKSAR Government launched the Primary Healthcare Blueprint (PHB), marking a pivotal shift in the city's healthcare landscape. Secretary of Health Prof. Chung-mau Lo emphasized the need to transition from a treatment-oriented to a prevention-oriented system (Health Bureau of the HKSAR Government, 2023a). This shift responds to the pressing challenges of an aging population and the increasing prevalence of chronic diseases burdening public hospitals.

The PHB advocates for a transformation from “institution-centric secondary/tertiary healthcare to prevention-oriented family-centric primary healthcare” (Health Bureau of the HKSAR Government, 2023b). This transition aims to empower individuals and communities, fostering a proactive rather than reactive approach to health management. By prioritizing primary healthcare, the PHB recognizes that health is a shared responsibility involving active citizen engagement.

Our project aligns with the social significance of the PHB, aiming to examine community-oriented healthcare and explore the discourse of “citizen self-health” rooted in community communication practices. The WHO defines community engagement as a process fostering relationships to address health issues and promote well-being (WHO, 2020). Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of community-oriented primary healthcare and the explosion of health information shared in social spaces.

A key objective of this paper is to explore local knowledge and competencies related to health among specific population segments, examining concepts like resilience, self-care, and health literacy.

Citizen Self-Health

The growth of critical health/medical humanities emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary collaboration across medicine and social sciences (Atkinson et al., 2015; Magaña & Hsu, 2023; Riegel & Robinson, 2023; Sufian, 2020; Whitehead & Hagan, 2016). This paper aims to contribute by capturing insights into community health literacy and competencies, informing strategies for future global health crises. By focusing on “health discourses from below,” we draw on Citizen Healthcare theories that emerged from family therapy and citizen health science (Doherty & Mendenhall, 2006; Metcalf & Style, 2019; Omer, 2016; Scally, 1996; Scherger, 2006; Van Eijk & De Lange, 2023).

Historically, citizen health evolved from the blend of professionalism and democracy in 19th-century medicine, aiming to mobilize underutilized community resources in addressing health challenges (Starr, 1982). This approach integrates citizens' cultural health traditions with contemporary medical practices, positioning them as “co-producers” of care.

This paper investigates dominant community discourses in both digital and offline spaces, exploring how they shape Hong Kong residents' quest for a pragmatic and self-competent approach to wellness. We examine practices of citizen self-health among four diverse groups: young adults, the elderly, housewives, and ethnic minorities, assessing the sustainability and value of grassroots health discourses.

Citizen health mobilization was notably evident during the COVID-19 crisis, where social media facilitated “risk deliberation networks” that allowed citizens to assess public health measures (Lim & Nakazato, 2020). This perspective encourages viewing citizens as co-producers of health rather than mere consumers.

“Citizen self-health” emphasizes proactive engagement in health management, allowing individuals to make culturally informed decisions about their health. Paul Farmer’s perspective on medicine as social justice highlights how access to resources and systemic inequalities shape self-health practices (Marquard, 2022). In Hong Kong, many communities struggle with affordable healthcare, making the concept of citizen self-health increasingly relevant.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an “infodemic,” complicating health communication. Investigating health literacy becomes essential in combating misinformation, particularly among minority and disadvantaged populations, and developing strategies to reduce healthcare inequities (McCaffery et al., 2020; Nan et al., 2021; Nielsen-Bohlman et al., 2004; Paasche-Orlow & Wolf, 2010).

Methodology

To study citizen self-health in Hong Kong, we conducted focus group discussions in the summer of 2024. We selected four stakeholder groups: young adults, mothers/housewives, the elderly, and ethnic minority residents. Each group presents different health risks, levels of self-care knowledge, and social media usage patterns. Young adults face challenges transitioning to independence and managing stress, often adopting new health technologies. Mothers and housewives, as primary caregivers, navigate limited resources while integrating self-health practices. Senior citizens provide insights into healthcare access and traditional self-care. Ethnic minorities, facing disparities in health outcomes, offer unique perspectives on cultural beliefs, language barriers, and social determinants.

This study aims to understand how these groups engage with health practices and social media, informing strategies to promote health equity within these communities.

Table 1
Composition of the Focus Groups

Focus Group	No.	Alias	Gender	Age
Elderly	1	Henry	M	78
	2	Kelly	F	68
	3	Jenny	F	50
	4	Hannah	F	67
	5	Anthony	M	72
	6	Kathy	F	60
	7	Shelly	F	60
	8	Tammy	F	68
	9	Tracy	F	71
	10	Peggy	F	66
Youth	1	Charles	M	24
	2	Hailey	F	24
	3	Suky	F	22
	4	Wendy	F	23
	5	Fred	M	26
	6	Candy	F	19
Mothers/Housewives	1	Winnie	F	48
	2	Hattie	F	56
	3	Carol	F	50
	4	Nancy	F	54
	5	Teresa	F	55
	6	Lily	F	31
	7	Larissa	F	41
Ethnic Minorities	1	Abby	F	22
	2	Kathrina	F	24
	3	Victor	M	35
	4	Alex	M	36
	5	James	M	33
	6	Danny	M	36
	7	Amy	F	34
	8	Selina	F	23
	9	Jeff	M	34

The elderly group, comprising ten members aged from 50 to 78, has a notable predominance of women. The youth group consists of six individuals aged between 19 and 26. This group is balanced in gender. The younger members, Candy (19) and Suky (22), bring fresh and dynamic perspectives, representing the voices of a generation keen on change and innovation.

The mothers/housewives group includes seven women, primarily in their 30s to 50s, with ages ranging from 31 to 56. Winnie (48) and Hattie (56) represent the older segment, while Lily (31) provides a younger viewpoint within this demographic. The mothers and housewives share insights rooted in family dynamics, societal roles, and the challenges of

balancing home life with personal aspirations. Finally, the ethnic minority group consists of nine members, predominantly men. Their ages range from 22 to 36, featuring individuals like Abby (22) and Kathrina (24) among the younger members. These focus groups represent a tapestry of experiences and viewpoints that can inform our discussions that integrate community needs and intergenerational understanding from different cultural backgrounds.

Results and Analysis

Comparing Sources of Health Information

We begin by looking at a comparative analysis of how various demographic groups seek health information to reveal diverse preferences and reliance on different sources (see Table 2). Across all groups, there is a notable reliance on personal networks—friends and family play a crucial role in shaping health-related decisions. However, the degree of trust and the sources of information vary significantly. While mothers/housewives and EMs depend on community and personal recommendations, the elderly lean towards professional healthcare advice, and youth embrace digital platforms.

Indeed, our youth informants actively seek health information online. They frequently use Google for research on health topics, particularly regarding supplements. Their reliance on social media platforms, such as Xiaohongshu, reflects a popular approach to information gathering, though the reliability of such sources remains a concern. Additionally, their interactions with peers significantly influence their health decisions, particularly in areas like sports science. In contrast, the senior citizens demonstrate a more traditional reliance on healthcare professionals for health advice. They consult doctors for issues related to nutrition and medication, showcasing a preference for authoritative sources. This group does not so much reference online health websites or engage with social media for health information, indicating a potential gap in digital literacy or access. They may benefit from targeted outreach efforts to increase their engagement with modern information sources. As for the mothers/housewives, they indicated to us that they primarily trust personal connections and local resources for health advice. They often turn to friends knowledgeable in traditional practices, such as a trusted Chinese doctor, for guidance on supplements. This group values community input, relying on shared experiences to make health decisions. In addition, they actively use health apps to stay informed and acknowledge notifications about relevant health topics. For our ethnic minority informants, community institutions play a significant role. The Islamic Center, for example, provides not only vaccination services but also vital community support. This group also relies on family and friends for health advice, particularly regarding family protection. Unlike the mothers/housewives, they do not appear to engage with health apps, indicating a preference for more community-based information sources.

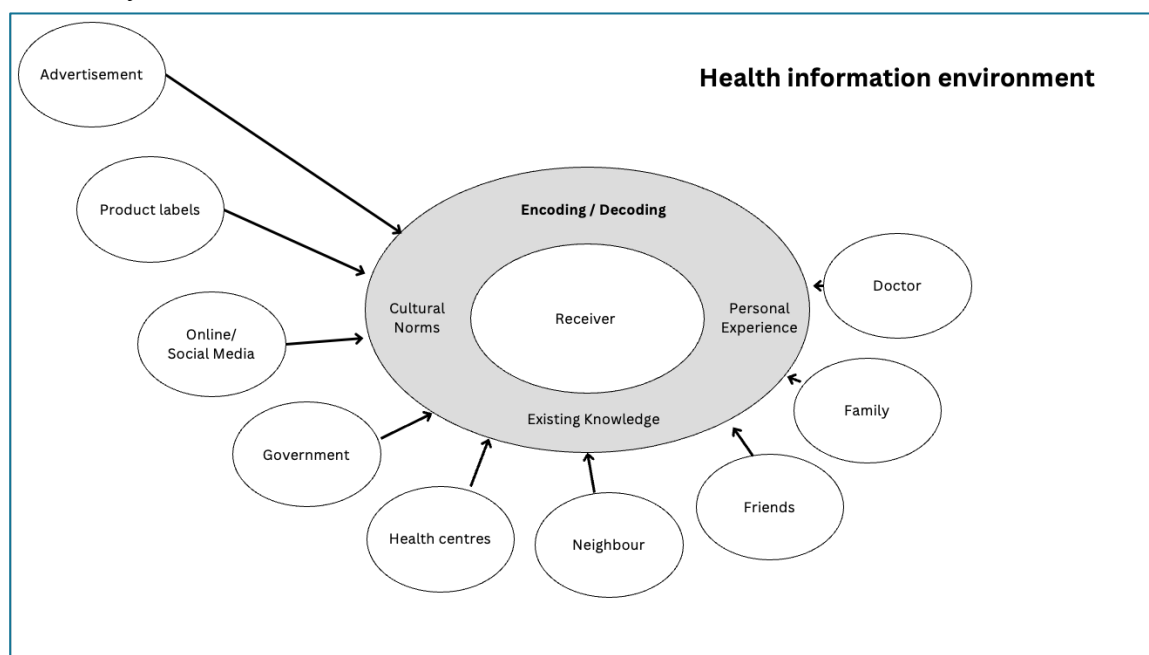
Cultural norms, existing knowledge, and personal experience are pivotal influences on health information reception, each contributing uniquely to how our four demographic groups interpret health messages (see Figure 1). For mothers/housewives, cultural norms may dictate reliance on traditional health practices and community input, shaping their beliefs about health information. Their existing knowledge, likely rooted in personal experiences and shared information from trusted sources, helps them navigate health decisions. In contrast, EMs may find that cultural norms strongly influence their trust in community institutions, such as Islamic Centers, which provide health services and support. Their existing knowledge might be limited, leading them to prioritize community advice over broader health guidelines. The elderly often rely heavily on existing knowledge gained from years of healthcare

interactions, yet personal experiences, such as adverse reactions to medications, can lead them to question established medical advice. Youth, on the other hand, frequently turn to digital platforms for health information, driven by personal experiences and peer recommendations that may override their understanding of scientific principles. For instance, Wendy (23) prioritized the positive feedback from friends about a supplement, despite knowing the general risks associated with unregulated products. In all these cases, personal experiences can strongly shape perceptions, sometimes overriding existing knowledge. For example, Larissa (42), a housewife, who has witnessed a friend's negative reaction to a vaccine became hesitant, despite having previously understood its benefits. Similarly, Suky (22) dismissed reliable health information after a personal experience where a recommended treatment did not work for her.

Table 2
Comparing Sources of Health Information

Source of Information	Mothers/Housewives	EMs	Elderly	Youth
Healthcare Professionals	Trusted friend who is a Chinese doctor for health advice.	School teachers provide information about vaccinations.	Consult doctors for nutrition and medication advice.	Influenced by personal experiences and friends knowledgeable in sports science.
Online Health Websites	Check user reviews, ingredient details, and side effects before purchasing supplements.	Health department's website is referenced for information verification.	NIL	Frequently use Google for health information and supplement research.
Social Media	Rely on peer recommendations shared by friends.	Facebook provides updates, though often negative.	Friends share information on platforms like WeChat, but reliability is questioned.	Casual scrolling on Xiaohongshu for health information.
Friends and Family	Trusted friend knowledgeable in Chinese medicine shares supplement information.	Information shared among friends and colleagues about family protection.	Friends introduce supplements, but consider personal suitability and medical advice.	Trust advice from parents and friends' experiences with supplements.
Scientific Journals and Publications	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Health Apps	Notifications about health topics are acknowledged and sometimes shared.	NIL	NIL	NIL
Community Health Organizations	NIL	Islamic Center provides vaccination services and community support.	NIL	NIL
Support Groups	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Books and Magazines	NIL	NIL	NIL	NIL
Other Media	NIL	News sources, especially from government health departments, are trusted for updates.	YouTube for health information and TV for COVID-related updates.	NIL

Figure 1
Health Information Environment



Besides looking at the interplay of cultural norms, prior knowledge, and personal experiences, our focus group findings also help to indicate how the sources of health information are prioritized to play critical roles in shaping how individuals make health-related decisions. Among these, medical doctors are recognized as a primary and trusted source of information. Family and friends serve as informal yet influential resources in health decision-making. Our informants shared with us how the personal relationships they have with their loved ones create a supportive network where experiences and advice are freely shared. For instance, recommendations from family members about dietary changes or treatment options can heavily influence some of our informants' choices, often rooted in personal anecdotes rather than clinical evidence. Then, health centres and neighbours come to play crucial roles in providing accessible information and services. Local health centres offer a community-oriented approach to healthcare, delivering resources and support that are often more relatable and convenient for individuals. Neighbours can share valuable insights based on shared community experiences, fostering a sense of trust and familiarity that might be absent in more formal healthcare settings. A good number of our informants stressed that such interactions can help demystify health issues and encourage community members to seek necessary care. In contrast, government health campaigns that aim to educate the public on various health issues, are taken to be of lower priority for influencing health behaviours. These campaigns often target specific health challenges, making information accessible and relevant to diverse populations. Among our informants, the influence brought by the digital landscape, while valuable for helping to seek health information, is received with scepticism because their reliability can vary significantly, leading to potential misinformation. Meanwhile, product labels and health product advertisement do offer the details about ingredients and health claims, are of the lowest priority for the our informants in their health information seeking behaviour.

Citizens' Views of Hong Kong's Public Healthcare System

In the focus group discussions, informants expressed both appreciative and critical views of Hong Kong's public healthcare system (see Tables 3 and 4). Appreciation varies among mothers/housewives, ethnic minorities (EMs), the elderly, and youth, each highlighting aspects relevant to their experiences.

Mothers/housewives generally value the system's accessibility and personalized care, benefiting from medication delivery for chronic conditions, which reduces hospital visits. They appreciate improved waiting times for appointments, reflecting a more efficient experience. In contrast, EMs focus on community support and the cultural relevance of healthcare services, valuing local health centers and mosques for vaccinations and fostering a sense of belonging. They appreciate the system's adaptability, especially for refugees, emphasizing a community-driven perspective. The elderly highlight cost-effectiveness and targeted support, benefiting from programs like the Elderly Health Care Voucher, which provides free consultations. Their satisfaction reflects a focus on accessibility and affordability, contrasting with mothers/housewives, who prioritize personal relationships with providers. The youth appreciate technological advancements, particularly telehealth options that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, valuing convenience in accessing medical advice.

Despite their appreciation, informants reported significant challenges accessing healthcare, identifying six major issues. Overwhelmed healthcare providers emerged as a concern across demographics. Mothers/housewives noted inattentiveness and rushed diagnoses, while EMs and the elderly expressed frustration with long wait times in public hospitals. Youth also reported delays, leading to perceptions of a breakdown in the system. Long waiting times were another major concern. Mothers/housewives critiqued delays in specialist appointments, often preferring private doctors for quicker service. EMs relied on emergency services for minor issues due to availability concerns, while the elderly found excessively long waits discouraging. Youth described complex procedures and delays as barriers to care. Equity in access to healthcare services was particularly concerning for EMs and the elderly. EMs highlighted vaccination access issues for refugees, feeling that inequities based on employment status favored civil servants. The elderly shared similar sentiments, raising fairness concerns that undermine trust in the system. Systemic inefficiencies also troubled mothers/housewives, who noted a shortage of medical personnel and slow response times. EMs expressed dissatisfaction with triage processes, while the elderly doubted government efforts to improve the system.

Concerns about overseas-trained doctors were prominent among housewives, who preferred local practitioners due to perceived differences in care. The elderly also expressed skepticism about bureaucratic processes associated with these doctors. Appointment challenges led to frustration across demographics. Mothers/housewives reported difficulties securing appointments, creating competition among patients. The elderly described the booking process as a race, contributing to their dissatisfaction. While EMs did not specifically mention appointment issues, frustrations resonated across all groups.

In summary, while focus group participants share common challenges—overwhelmed providers, long wait times, inequity, and systemic inefficiencies—their perspectives and experiences are unique. Recognizing these differences is crucial for developing targeted interventions to address the specific needs of each demographic group.

Table 3
Informants' Appreciation of Hong Kong's Healthcare System

Issues	Mothers/ Housewives	Ethnic Minorities	Elderly	Youth
Access to Services	Benefit from medication delivery for chronic conditions.	Community support through local health centers and mosques for vaccinations and healthcare.	Regular users express satisfaction with affordable public healthcare services.	Appreciate clinics and emergency services for urgent care.
TeleHealth Options	Online consultations provided accessible medical advice during the COVID-19 pandemic.	N/A	N/A	N/A
Personalized Care	Positive experiences with long-term doctor relationships.	N/A	General satisfaction with public healthcare and affordable services.	Favorable comparisons with healthcare systems in other countries for thorough care.
Chinese Medicine	Public services perceived as attentive with thorough examinations and flexible treatments like acupuncture.	N/A	N/A	N/A
Improvements in Appointment Wait Times	Noted improvements in reduced waiting times for scheduled appointments.	N/A	Positive experiences with appointment scheduling at certain hospitals.	N/A
Community Support	N/A	Access to local health centers and mosque provides comfort and familiarity.	Community visits to clinics foster shared experiences for those with chronic conditions.	Regular visits with peers enhance support networks.
Access to Vaccination	N/A	Solutions for refugee vaccinations via electronic cards show adaptability.	N/A	N/A
Preference for Private Care	Some prefer private doctors for quicker service, viewing it as more efficient than public hospitals.	N/A	N/A	N/A
Cost-Effectiveness	Private healthcare seen as affordable for certain services compared to public hospitals.	N/A	Public healthcare is cost-effective with low consultation fees.	N/A
Availability of Medication	Options to obtain medications from home countries or online for easier access.	N/A	N/A	N/A
Elderly Benefits	N/A	N/A	Elderly Health Care Voucher and free consultations provide additional support.	N/A

Table 4
Informants' Criticism of Hong Kong's Healthcare System

Issues	Mothers/ Housewives	Ethnic Minorities	Elderly	Youth
Overwhelmed Healthcare Providers	Perception of inattentiveness and rushed diagnoses due to limited time with patients.	Frustration with lengthy wait times in public hospitals.	Long waits for appointments and treatment, feeling system doesn't prioritize urgency.	Long wait times at public clinics and hospitals, leading to inefficiency perception.
Long Waiting Times	Criticism of long wait times for specialist appointments and diagnostic tests.	Preference for private doctors for quicker service.	Concerns about doctor availability lead to reliance on emergency services for minor issues.	Excessively long wait times and complex procedures discourage some from using public healthcare.
Inequity in Access	Civil servants have easier access to services, raising fairness concerns.	Issues with vaccination access for refugees and the need for proper identification.	Perceived inequities with civil servants having advantages in accessing healthcare.	System perceived to favor certain groups like civil servants, leading to unfair advantages.
Systemic Inefficiencies	Shortage of medical personnel and slow response times remain unaddressed.	Mixed experiences with the quality of care, leading to dependence on private healthcare.	Dissatisfaction with triage and care, feeling it doesn't effectively address needs.	Skepticism about government efforts to improve the system, with doubts about positive outcomes.
Scepticism of Overseas Doctors	Reluctance to accept doctors trained outside Hong Kong.	N/A	Perceived lack of attentiveness from Western doctors compared to holistic approach by Chinese practitioners.	Frustration with bureaucracy and administrative processes.
Appointment Challenges	Difficulties in securing appointments lead to frustration and a sense of competition among patients.	N/A	Appointment booking process described as a race, leading to frustration.	N/A

Implications

Our findings on health information-seeking preferences and views of Hong Kong's public healthcare system reveal several implications. For mothers/housewives, empowerment through trust and tradition is crucial. Encouraging their participation in healthcare decisions fosters trust in diverse medical professionals while integrating culturally familiar practices, such as Chinese medicine. Ethnic minorities (EMs) benefit from a community-driven approach to healthcare access. Leveraging community networks enhances healthcare literacy while respecting cultural preferences for traditional remedies. Bridging language gaps is essential, allowing EM communities to navigate the healthcare system effectively. Additionally, developing community-led initiatives to address economic barriers ensures that EMs can access affordable healthcare without financial strain, improving overall health outcomes. For the elderly, advocating for holistic care approaches is vital. Empowering them to seek personalized treatments that combine traditional and modern healthcare acknowledges their unique needs. Promoting affordable care options allows older citizens to engage in discussions about cost-effective solutions, safeguarding their access to necessary services. Youth engagement in health innovation is equally important. Supporting youth in navigating

healthcare systems by blending traditional wisdom with modern practices empowers them to address bureaucratic frustrations. Educating them on sustainable health choices is essential; by balancing cost and quality, they can demand transparency in healthcare pricing, leading to informed decisions and responsible consumption.

What about the policy implications? Participatory policy development is vital for all groups. Involving citizens in policy dialogues can address systemic inefficiencies, ensuring that their voices shape integrative approaches reflecting cultural values. For EMs, inclusive policy design is crucial; engaging EM communities in co-creating policies can improve language accessibility and cultural competence in healthcare services. Streamlining access processes can eliminate barriers that hinder EMs from receiving appropriate care. Collaborative healthcare planning involving elderly representatives can enhance doctor availability and improve triage systems, ensuring the healthcare system effectively serves older adults. Lastly, promoting digital health literacy and policy advocacy among youth is essential. Encouraging their participation in initiatives that simplify healthcare administration and improve information access can enhance overall system agility, leading to more effective utilization of digital health resources.

Conclusion - Reframing the Implications According to Community Organizing and Research Paradigms

This pilot study adopts a citizen health approach, focusing on empowering individuals and communities to engage in self-health practices. We reframe our major implications according to community organizing traditions and community-based participatory research, emphasizing citizen engagement and empowerment in shaping healthcare environments.

Central to our findings is the *cultivation of agency and embodied health practices*. Empowering individuals to engage in self-health fosters cultural agency through integrating traditional and contemporary health practices, allowing ownership of well-being. Strengthening communal bonds through health dialogues nurtures a sense of community and shared responsibility. *Enhancing health literacy as a form of cultural capital* is also vital. Health literacy enables individuals to navigate complex healthcare landscapes and assert their rights. By facilitating community-driven financial education, we empower participants to make informed healthcare choices, promoting equitable access to resources. We also advocate for *participatory and culturally resonant policy formation*. Engaging diverse cultural voices in policymaking is crucial for creating inclusive health systems that reflect community values. Policies that support culturally embedded self-health practices enhance the relevance of health initiatives and build community trust. *Harnessing digital narratives for self-health empowerment* is another essential aspect. Digital platforms can amplify culturally specific health narratives, fostering belonging and mutual support. Promoting access to digital health tools that respect cultural contexts enables effective health management. Finally, the community organizing framework emphasizes *resilience through cultural health practices*. Supporting community-led initiatives that foreground traditional practices strengthens community ties and enhances overall health resilience.

In summary, the five dimensions—cultivating agency, enhancing health literacy, participatory policy formation, harnessing digital narratives, and promoting resilience—contribute to a more inclusive and culturally sensitive healthcare system. As Hong Kong advances its *Primary Healthcare Blueprint* (PHB), this shift from treatment-oriented to prevention-oriented care highlights the importance of active citizen engagement. The PHB

aligns with our goals of fostering a “citizen self-health” discourse that emphasizes community-based communication. By viewing citizens as co-producers of health, we can address ongoing healthcare challenges and systemic inequalities. Understanding health literacy is vital for countering misinformation and promoting informed decision-making, particularly among minority and disadvantaged populations. Ultimately, advocating for citizen health necessitates interdisciplinary collaboration across medicine, social sciences, education, and cultural studies. By fostering a critical, humanistic perspective on public health, we can empower individuals and communities in Hong Kong to engage proactively in their health, paving the way for a resilient and equitable healthcare landscape.

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Overview of Egg Donation in Japan and One Japanese Woman's Life Story of Egg Donation

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Abstract

In this report, the current situation regarding egg donation in Japan is presented as an explanation of the symposium as a whole. Japan does not yet have a law on donor conception and does not guarantee rights, including the right to know one's origin. In addition, the targets and conditions of use of donor conception are not clear and there is no support system. In the overview presentation, the content and issues of the bills that had been submitted to Parliament at the time of the symposium were explained (e.g. insufficient right to know one's origins, limiting the scope to heterosexual couples who are legally married, foreign criminal provisions, etc.). Against this background, a longitudinal follow-up interview with one woman who had a child through egg donations was reported. Long-term life stories revealed that attitudes towards "lack of blood ties" can change. Support systems need to be considered with a view to change.

Keywords: egg donation, Japan, donor conception, right to know one's origins

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Introduction

This report was the first report of a symposium entitled "Third-Party Reproduction in Asia: The Case of Egg Donation in Japan." This symposium examines the nature of reproductive technologies involving third parties in Asia, using egg donation in Japan as a case study.

Symposiasts comprise sociologists, medical anthropologists and STS researchers. By discussing the experiences of parents who have a child conceived using donor eggs, and the political issues related to egg donation, we aim to illuminate the social and cultural context of technology. Family norms, gender, patriarchy, blood relations, views of the body and science in East Asia will be keywords.

As the symposium's positioning and the situation in Japan were explained at the beginning of the symposium, using the time of this report, they are also discussed in this full paper. Finally, the author's own abstract, "One Japanese Woman's Life Story of Egg Donation," is briefly discussed; it will be discussed in detail in a separate paper.

Japan's Overview of Gamete Donation

Japan is currently at a crossroads in terms of whether it can create an environment that provides the basis for ethical donor conception, as a donor conception bill is currently being proposed. (At the time of the conference, the bill was before Parliament. It has since been repealed, but this paper discusses the situation at the time). Therefore, I will argue that ethical donor conception requires not only cultural considerations but also environmental arrangements.

First, I seek to elucidate the interplay between ethical donor conception and the realms of law, society, and culture, using Japan as an illustrative case study, to illuminate the broader social milieu in which ethical donor conception is situated.

Historical Background

As of May 2025, there is no law on third-party reproduction in Japan, and egg donation is neither legal nor illegal. This lack of legislation has compelled professional associations such as the Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology to withhold their stance on the implementation of donor conception, thereby hindering its widespread domestic implementation. This ambiguity in legal status stymies the development of essential psychological, legal, and social support mechanisms for the parties involved.

Let me begin with a historical overview of donor conception in Japan. The first instance of birth through donor conception was announced in 1949, accomplished through artificial insemination using donated sperm. Thereafter, hospitals and clinics operated independently in administering sperm donation. By the late 1990s, the proliferation of the Internet brought to light the existence of private sperm banks, prompting the Japan Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology to establish guidelines in 1997. These guidelines restricted third-party reproduction to anonymous sperm donation and mandated certification and performance reporting to the Society. During this same period, the success and spread of in vitro fertilization in the United States led to the introduction of egg donation, facilitated by reproductive tourism and intermediary agencies. In 1998, the first announcement of a child born from donated eggs occurred in Japan, followed by the initiation of egg donation

programs in private clinics in 2008. These programs, which were non-commercial in nature, required clients to independently secure donors, who were then vetted by screening committees. In 2012, an Non Profit Oorganization, Oocyte Donation NETwork, OD-NET was established in cooperation with this organization to support egg donation without financial compensation. However, the volume of such donations has remained modest, with reports indicating the birth of 12 children in the 10 years leading to 2023.

There have been movements calling for legalization due to the grey area between legal and illegal in terms of third-party reproduction, the complications arising from reproductive tourism, and the growing advocacy for the right of donor-conceived persons (DCPs) to ascertain their origins.

In 1998, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare convened an expert committee, culminating in a 2000 report that advocated for disclosure of non-identifiable donor information. Subsequently, the 2003 report by the Assisted Reproductive Technology Subcommittee of the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare permitted requests for disclosure, including information that might identify individual donors. However, these proposals were never codified into law. In 2005, the support group DI Offspring Group (DOG) was formed to represent individuals born via donor insemination, and their efforts yielded the publication of influential works (DI Offspring Group & Nagaoki, 2014).

Lack of Consensus

There are many reasons why a legal system has not been established, but one obstacle may be the absence of societal consensus on third-party reproduction. For instance, a 2014 survey by the University of Tokyo and the Japan Agency for Medical Research and Development revealed a divided public: 36.2% supported egg and sperm donation, 26.6% opposed it, and the highest percentage, 37.3%, expressed uncertainty (Yamamoto et al., 2018). In Japan, not only was there no consensus, but it could also be said that the actors who wanted to either legalize or outlaw it did not command significant influence in the academic community, the government, or the wider population.

Table 1

2014 Attitude Survey

	Should be approved	Should not be approved	Indecisive
Gamete donation, embryo donation	36.2	26.6	37.3
Gestational Surrogacy	40.9	21.8	37.3

Source. The University of Tokyo and the Japan Agency for Medical Research and Development, 2014 Attitude survey (2,500 men and women aged 20-59 each from the general public)

Ethical Donor Conception

Drawing on global ethical frameworks such as the World Health Organization : WHO, Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority: HFEA, and The International Federation of Fertility Societies: IFFS, ethical donor conception necessitates transparency, autonomy, fairness, responsibility, dignity, non-maleficence, welfare, and care. Specifically, ethical donor conception must safeguard: (1) the rights of donor-conceived individuals (including legal protections regarding the right to know one's origins, proper information management, and

provision of information), (2) the rights and responsibilities of donors (e.g., privacy, respect for decision-making, clarity of responsibility, informed consent, counseling, proper information management), (3) the rights and responsibilities of recipients who will become parents (e.g., education, psychological support, accountability), and (4) the ethical obligations of medical institutions (e.g., safety, information management, donor selection, counseling). Measured against these criteria, Japan's current situation remains gravely deficient.

The absence of a robust legal infrastructure generates multiple challenges: the invisibility of donor conception and DCPs, the lack of psychological, social, and legal support, the scarcity of advisory resources, and inadequate mechanisms for managing and disclosing information.

Secrecy, Pressure for Resemblance: From the Survey

As an example of invisibility, I would like to share the results of a survey I conducted (Shirai, 2016). I asked women who had become mothers through egg donation regarding their openness with medical institutions and their social circles. Only 36.4% disclosed the egg donation to their own parents, 30.0% to their husband's parents, and 36.4% to their siblings. Approximately half (54.5%) informed the medical institution where they gave birth.

Table 2

Announce to the Surrounding (by attribute, %)

	Disclosure before donation	Disclosure immediately after birth	Currently know
Parents	27.3	36.4	36.4
Husband's parents	30.0	30.0	30.0
Siblings	27.3	36.4	36.4
Medical institution	54.5	54.5	54.5
Friends	18.2	18.2	18.2
Other kinship	27.3	27.3	27.3

Source. Shirai (2016)

Secrecy fosters an expectation that parents and children must resemble one another. One respondent confessed that they chose their donor based on physical resemblance:

The criteria I look for in a donor are that she is Japanese, has the same blood type as I do, and has a face and height not too different from mine, so that my child and I will look like parent and child to others as well.

Another respondent stated that she prioritized resemblance more for her child than for herself.

The respondents were also very sensitive to whether or not there were similarities between themselves and their children. In the same survey, 90.0% believed their child did not look like them, and 60.0% had actually been told so by acquaintances. Furthermore, 40.0% sensed a divergence in personality and temperament, and 60.0% noted differences in mannerisms and habits. Rather than delving into the genetic basis of resemblance, I wish to emphasize the high degree of sensitivity to the similarities or lack thereof.

Table 3*On the Similarities Between Self and Child (%)*

1. I think my child looks like me	I think my child doesn't look like me
10.0	90.0
2. People say that I and my child look alike	People say that I and my child doesn't look alike
40.0	60.0
3. I think we have similar personalities and temperaments	I think we don't have similar personalities and temperaments
60.0	40.0
4. I think my child's behavior and habits are similar to mine	I think my child's behavior and habits are not similar to mine
40.0	60.0

Source. Shirai (2016)

For example, one respondent described how she would observe unrelated passersby and remind herself that “even parents and children who are related by blood can look different.” Another shared that in Japan, it is not uncommon for family photos to be printed on New Year postcards. During those occasions, she would select photos wherein she and her child had similar smiles. She realized that, although she intended to build a parent–child relationship independent of genetic ties and to eventually inform her child, she had still chosen photos in which they looked similar. It will reflect the conflict between integrity towards children and social pressure for similarity.

2025 the Special Assisted Reproductive Medicine Bill

There have been several attempts to institutionalize this legal system, yet none have culminated in law. In February 2025, a bill concerning specific assisted reproductive technologies was introduced by a member of the ruling party. According to the bill, a DCP will not be able to obtain information about their origins until they reach adulthood, at which point they will only be able to learn the donor’s height, blood type, and age at the time of donation. Furthermore, donor conception is only available to legally married infertile couples; same-sex couples, single individuals, and others cannot use it. The donation must be free of charge. Violations, even if committed abroad, are classified as criminal offenses.

The bill was opposed by DCPs, prospective parents, and advocates for sexual diversity rights. I personally attended a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan.¹ The demands articulated were: (1) the protection of children’s rights to know their origins from early childhood, and (2) safe and equitable access to assisted reproductive medicine for all individuals, regardless of marital status, along with the removal of extraterritorial criminal provisions.

¹ The Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan, PRESS CONFERENCE: Objections to the Assisted Reproductive Medicine Bill, Wednesday, February 26, 2025
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaByBqUeQqA>

The Rights to Know One's Origins

I will explain the current situation regarding the right to know one's origins, both in Japan and abroad. It is a fundamental right of the child, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Japan has ratified. This right encompasses two key dimensions of: social information, such as the donor's personality, reasons for donating, and current circumstances, and biological information such as genetic and medical details. Origins are not just a collection of basic facts like a name or height—they are deeply connected to a person's sense of self and their ability to navigate life. Further, simply having access to donor information is not enough. People need options for if, how, and when they learn this information, and the right support systems to help them make informed decisions along the way. That means providing psychological, legal, and social support—all of which are overlooked in the current bill.

In Victoria, Australia, the anonymity of sperm and egg donation has been completely abolished. When the system was reformed, individuals born through donation received a notification upon adulthood, allowing them to decide whether to learn about their origins—regardless of parental disclosure. Later, birth certificates were updated to reflect birth circumstances, and eventually, donor anonymity was fully abolished, enabling access to identifying donor information if desired. Victoria also offers support services for those involved in sperm or egg donation, including help with meeting donors if desired.

Some argue Japan's cultural context differs from Australia's, but Japan's adoption system already recognizes a child's right to know their origins. The family registry records adoptions. In special adoptions, adoptees can obtain court documents with details about their birth parents, while regular adoptions are directly noted in the registry.

Japanese law also mandates long-term support from adoption intermediaries, with systems to help adoptees connect with birth parents and relatives. It's clear that Japan's adoption system for accessing origin information resembles the approach taken in Victoria, Australia. Yet, in stark contrast, the bill on assisted reproduction was far more restrictive and lacks support. Further, the bill would prohibit actions that people have taken until now. That is, people are traveling abroad to ensure a child's right to know their origins exactly because it is hard to attain within Japan. Instead of protecting children's rights, the bill can be regarded as severely restrictive.

The activities surrounding the bill were transmitted by DCPs, sexual minorities and people in non-legal marriages, as the right of DCPs to know their origins and the right to access Donor Conception regardless of marital status were asserted.

Strong Modern Family Model and Signs of Change

In terms of the family system in Japan, same-sex marriage is not legally recognized. In alternative care, institutional care is more central than family care, only about 8 000 of the about 42 000 children in foster care are being fostered by foster parents. It account for only 25.1% of foster care (as of 2023). Similarly, 587 cases of adoption were recorded in 2023. However, single mothers and stepfamilies are gradually gaining visibility, as single-mother and single-father households account for 2.3% and 0.29% of all households, respectively, according to the 2022 national survey. The actual number of step-families is not known, but 25.2% of all marriages in the 2020 demography include remarriages. The archetypal image of

the Japanese family is, therefore, beginning to evolve. In general, Japan is characteristically East Asian, but there are signs of change.

What I have said today about the situation in Japan is not the whole story. Private initiatives like Donor Link Japan have emerged. Donor Link Japan is an organisation that aims to connect DCPs with donors and people born of the same donation. In addition, some prospective parents now shun ethnic restrictions in selecting donors. Single women and lesbian couples are increasingly sharing their stories of having children through sperm donation.

Today, society stands at a critical juncture. What we need is a civil, inclusive discourse on technology, reproduction, and ethics. We must develop a legal framework and establish formal psychological, social, and legal support structures. To this end, it is imperative to convene a forum where experts, stakeholders, and citizens can come together and discuss the issue.

In sum, to achieve ethical donor conception, we must first create an environment that earnestly addresses ethical, legal, and social issues, thereby enabling a just and humane future for all parties involved. To understand the life history of one woman's egg donation, it is necessary to take into account this interaction with the Japanese context.

One Woman's Life Story of Egg Donation

The Need for Longitudinal Studies

The author analyses the changing positioning and impact of egg donation through a follow-up longitudinal qualitative study of one Japanese woman who became a parent through egg donation. This paper provides an overview.

There are many qualitative studies of participants in third party reproduction, many of which are one-off snapshots; however, the experience of egg donation, like any other life experience, is likely to change with the passage of time, the child's development, interactions with the child and other stakeholders, and changing times and institutions.

Therefore, there are limitations in trying to capture the experience of egg donation by piecing together snapshots, and there is utility in capturing life stories. However, retrospective life story research constructs a narrative based on attitudes and evaluations of the experience concerned at the time of the survey, which in itself has significance in understanding how people organically narrate their own processes and environments, but is limited to evaluations at the time of the survey. On the other hand, follow-up longitudinal interviews can capture perceptions at different points in time.

Interview Overview

The case study presented in this report concerns Yui Sato (a pseudonym). This paper analyses changes in attitudes towards “blood relation” based on a follow-up longitudinal qualitative study (follow-up period of 13 years and still ongoing). A research ethics review was completed and approved by Shizuoka University Human Subjects Research Ethics Review Committee.

Result

It found that immediately after becoming a parent through egg donation, she was aware of the “lack” of blood relation, but that in the course of raising her child, she relativized blood relation and shifted to admiration of being born *per se*.

I think that all sperm and eggs are arranged with the aim of being born as life. Human beings have a miraculous probability of being born and coming into the world, so why can't we rejoice in that? People think too much that it is a tragedy that the nurturing mother and the biological mother are different, but I don't understand why that is a tragedy. I want to tell these children not to think of their origins as a tragedy. (Ms. Sato)

By way of creating a picture book, Ms. Sato informed her children that they had been born with another person's egg, one that were not their mother's. While Ms. Sato had thought a lot about breaking this news and felt a lot of pressure concerning it over the years, her children's reaction was less than expected and out of sync with Ms. Sato's expectations. After that, Ms. Sato said that she still wanted her children to grow up to be strong, as she had before, but she also separated her hopes for strong children from her expectations for them to survive the announcement, saying that their strength was not needed just because they had been the result of an egg donation. However, the foundation for celebrating the life force remains the same, and it should be noted that she speaks of “strength” as “the power to live again, no matter what.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the follow-up longitudinal interviews revealed that the case study woman experienced a complex array of emotions at the outset of the birth of her child with no genetic link, encompassing secrecy, loneliness, responsibility and pressure, along with joy. However, as she progressed through the process, she reported a shift towards more positive sentiments, including growth, environmental control, power, acceptance and other relationships. This suggests that it is indeed possible for individuals to undergo such a process and emerge with a more positive outlook.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the survey contributors.

Author's Note

At the time of the May 2025 conference, the bill had been submitted to Parliament, but was scrapped in June. At the time of writing this full paper, Japan does not yet have legislation on gamete donation. It is necessary to pay attention to the future.

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Understanding *Ngokang* as a Cultural and Livelihood Practice in Dumai, Indonesia

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Abstract

Coastal areas have become a home for 50.4% (140 million) of the population in Indonesia. Coastal communities have a way of life closely related to the sea and its natural resources. One of the practices that has been carried out for generations among the coastal communities of Dumai is the “*Ngokang*” activity. This study examines how *Ngokang* practice is a source of livelihood and plays a vital role in shaping the identity and cultural practices of the local community. Qualitative methods were used in this study, such as collecting data through in-depth interviews with 10 *pengokang* and community leaders and tracing secondary sources. The study results indicate that the practice of *Ngokang* is part of a broader culture or tradition of society that has been passed down from generation to generation in the Dumai City area. *Ngokang* is an adoption of the Japanese word 交換 “*kokan*,” which means to exchange. *Ngokang* is a livelihood activity of the community that involves buying and selling on the sea, with large ships docked around the port of Dumai City. This buying and selling activity is unique because the payment system still uses “*barter*.” This activity supports the local economy and is some people’s primary source of income. However, the *Ngokang* activity is currently facing a serious dilemma because *Ngokang* is considered by most people to be an illegal activity. This activity also raises the potential for danger and loss for *Pengokang* in terms of material and non-material.

Keywords: culture, coastal communities, Dumai, livelihood, *Ngokang*

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Introduction

Indonesia is a maritime country with a water area of 3.25 million square kilometers, which accounts for approximately 63% of its national territory (Aguw et al., 2021). As an archipelago comprising more than 17,000 islands and bordered by two major oceans, Indonesia has tremendous marine potential in the marine and fisheries sector, maritime transportation, as well as marine tourism, which are important aspects of national development (Ramadhan & Chaerul, 2023). The country's geographical characteristics, primarily defined by its vast water expanse, provide significant opportunities for livelihoods, especially for communities residing in coastal areas (Susanti, 2023). Therefore, the sea's existence is not only a part of Indonesia's geographical identity but also significantly supports the lives of millions of coastal communities across the archipelago.

Indonesia's coastal areas have become home to 50.4% (140 million) of the population in Indonesia (Nuryanto & Haryono, 2017). According to the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the Republic of Indonesia, as many as 1.28 million households depend on capture fisheries activities for their livelihoods. The large number of people living in this area shows that the coast is very strategic as a center of economic, social, and cultural activities (Sambodo et al., 2023). People who live in coastal areas generally have a way of life that is very closely related to the sea and its natural resources, such as fisheries, marine cultivation, marine trade, and tourism (Hajrah, 2016). This dependence makes the sea the primary source of livelihood and part of their cultural identity, which has a major impact on the welfare and survival of coastal communities.

One of the most famous coastal areas in Indonesia is Dumai City, located in the waters of the Malacca Strait, which is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, making Dumai waters a port city that plays a vital role in international trade (Amin et al., 2009; Santosa et al., 2024). Since 1956, a pier has been built as a dock for tanker ships (oil distribution). Its strategic location has made Dumai develop rapidly as a center for maritime economic activities and sea transportation, significantly contributing to regional economic growth. On the other hand, the people who lived on the coast of Dumai, some of whom worked as fishermen at that time, experienced obstacles due to the decline in fish catches at sea. Various factors, including changes in marine environmental conditions, overfishing, and pollution from industrial waste and shipping activities around the coastal area, greatly influence this condition. In addition, climate change causes shifts in seasons and ocean current patterns, affecting fish availability in the coastal waters of Dumai.

The potential for busy Dumai waters by tankers, in addition to the declining fish catch, has encouraged fishermen to look for alternative sources of income. This condition is where the community's livelihoods changed from "fishermen" to "*Ngokang*." The *Ngokang* activity is a buying and selling activity in the form of food ingredients, including fruits, vegetables, and drinks for the crew's needs. Over time, this practice has not only become an economic solution for fishermen's families but has also developed into part of the culture and identity of the Dumai coastal community. *Ngokang* is also considered a local heritage passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the heavy traffic of tankers in the busy waters of Dumai, combined with a declining fish catch, which has prompted fishermen to seek alternative sources of income. As a result, the community has shifted from relying solely on fishing to engaging in a practice known as "*Ngokang*." To meet the crew's needs, *Ngokang* involves buying and selling various food items, such as fruits, vegetables, and beverages. Over time, this practice has become more than just an economic solution for fishermen's

families; it has also evolved into a significant part of the culture and identity of the Dumai coastal community. *Ngokang* is viewed as a local heritage passed down through generations, reflecting the community's ability to adapt to the social and economic changes in this strategically crucial coastal area community's adaptation to this strategic coastal area's social and economic dynamics.

Ngokang is understood as a form of adaptive strategy carried out by the Dumai coastal community in responding to the decline in fish catches at sea. In this context, the practice of *Ngokang* emerged as an alternative livelihood that utilizes the potential for new livelihoods that are considered more sustainable. The transition effort from fishermen to *Ngokang* can be seen as a form of rational adaptation due to external pressures. The community is not only looking for ways to survive economically, but also trying to maintain their social and cultural continuity. Therefore, this study examines how the practice of *Ngokang* becomes a source of livelihood and plays an important role in shaping the identity and cultural practices of the local community.

Methods

This research was conducted from August 2024 to January 2025 in the coastal area of Dumai, Riau Province, Indonesia. The approach used in this study was a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018) to understand the practice of *Ngokang* in depth as part of the livelihood strategy as well as the cultural identity of coastal communities. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with key informants (Boyce & Neale, 2006): active *Ngokang* actors (*Pengokang*) and local community leaders. Informants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement in *Ngokang* practices and their knowledge of the socio-cultural dynamics in coastal communities. Some of the questions asked to informants include: (1) When did you start getting involved in *Ngokang* activities? (2) What motivated you to move from working as a fisherman to *Ngokang*? (3) How does this activity affect your economic and social life? (4) What are the main challenges faced in conducting *Ngokang* practices today? In addition to primary data, this study is also supported by secondary data obtained from local government documents, previous research reports, local news, and other written sources relevant to the social and economic context of Dumai coastal communities. The data obtained were then analyzed thematically to identify patterns of meaning, motivation, and structural changes related to the practice of *Ngokang* in the context of social, economic, and cultural changes in Dumai coastal communities.

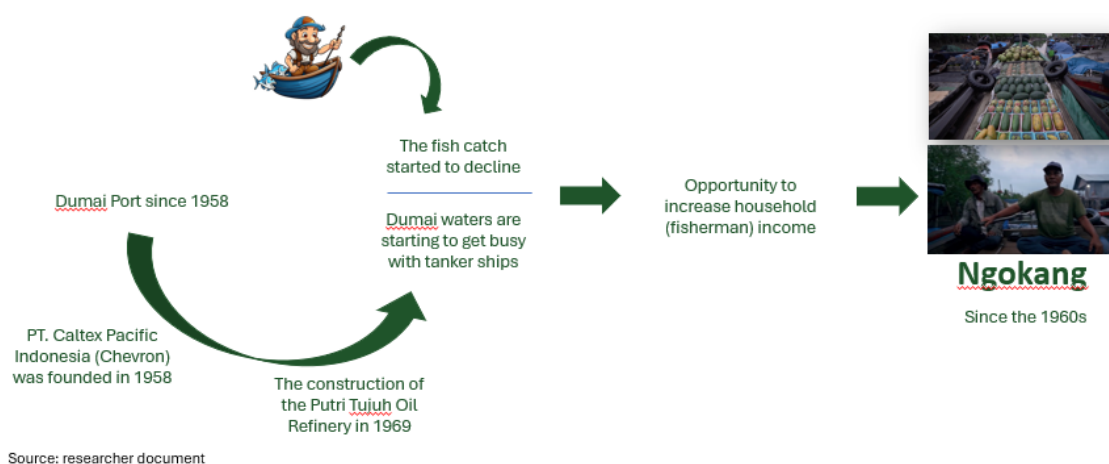
Result and Discussion

The *Ngokang* in History

Historically, *Ngokang* originated from the problems experienced by fishermen fishing in Dumai waters. Since 1956, a port has been built as a dock for tanker ships (oil distribution). Its strategic location has allowed Dumai to develop rapidly as a center for maritime economic activities and sea transportation, significantly contributing to regional economic growth. On the other hand, the coastal communities of Dumai, primarily composed of fishermen, have encountered difficulties due to a decline in fish catches. Various factors, including changes in marine environmental conditions, overfishing, and pollution from industrial waste and shipping activities around the coastal area, greatly influence this condition. In addition, climate change causes shifts in seasons and ocean current patterns, affecting fishermen's income.

The potential for Dumai waters to be crowded by tankers, in addition to the declining fish catch, has encouraged fishermen to look for alternative sources of income. Seeing the high ship traffic as an opportunity, some have started to switch professions by offering services to docked ships; this activity is then known as “*Ngokang*.” Over time, this practice has not only become an economic solution for fishermen’s families but has also developed into part of the culture and identity of the Dumai coastal community. *Ngokang* is also considered a local heritage passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the community’s adaptation to the social and economic dynamics in this strategic coastal area.

Figure 1
“*Ngokang*” in History



The term “*Ngokang*” is derived from the Japanese word “*kokan*” (交換), meaning “exchange” or barter. It refers to a traditional economic practice in Dumai City, Riau Province. *Ngokang* refers to the community’s buying and selling activities directly at sea, precisely around the Dumai Strait, from one large ship to another ship that is moored there. This “*Ngokang*” livelihood activity is unique because the transaction system still uses the barter method, where goods are exchanged for goods rather than money. The community approaches the docked ship with small boats carrying materials to be sold, including fruits, vegetables, and drinks, to be exchanged for used goods from the boat.

Figure 2*The “Pengokang” Activity Brings Market Products to Tanker Ships*

Although it seems simple and still relies on a traditional barter system, the *Ngokang* activity plays a crucial role in the people's economic life on the Dumai coast. For most people, this activity is not just a way to meet daily needs but also a source of primary income that supports their families. In this condition, the *Ngokang* activity not only has value for increasing the family economy, but this livelihood activity also reflects local wisdom, namely the ability of the community to adapt and utilize the resources available in their environment. During the increasingly widespread flow of modernization and digital trading systems, the sustainability of *Ngokang* shows cultural resilience—an ability to maintain local identity and traditions without closing oneself off from the developments of the times. This activity symbolizes the adaptation of traditional communities that continue to survive and are economically empowered through methods passed down from generation to generation.

***Ngokang* as the Livelihood Practices**

Ngokang emerged as a response from the coastal communities of Dumai to changing economic conditions, particularly in light of declining income from the fisheries sector. As fishing became insufficient to support their livelihoods, some fishermen turned to *Ngokang* activities as an alternative source of income. Over time, *Ngokang* has become a crucial livelihood for specific households in Dumai City. This activity falls within the informal trade sector and features a distinct transactional system based on barter. The goods exchanged typically consist of food items such as fruits, vegetables, and young coconuts, which are traded for used items from ships, including scrap iron, used drums, and other metal goods. The sector features a unique transaction system based on barter. The goods exchanged typically include food items such as fruits, vegetables, and young coconuts, which are traded for used items from ships, like scrap iron, used drums, and other metal goods.

Figure 3
“Ngokang” Activities in Dumai Waters



In practice, the *Pengokang* will approach tankers anchored in Dumai waters to offer food and drinks to the crew. This activity is carried out directly from one ship to another with barter transactions on the water so that the *Ngokang* activity can create economic dynamics that are not found in other areas of Indonesia. Its uniqueness and close relationship with geographical and socio-cultural conditions make *Ngokang* a distinctive identity of Dumai City.

If our family only depends on the results of ngokang, it will not be enough. That is why we must look for other jobs when not at sea. (rmn ,45 y/o)

However, along with the development of the era and increasingly complex economic needs, people engaged in business are now starting to diversify their income. They make *Ngokang* an additional livelihood while pursuing other jobs on land to increase their revenue and reduce dependence on just one source of income. This condition is done because the income from *Ngokang* has not been able to meet the needs of the family, so it is necessary to find other income on land to meet the needs of the family, such as that done by PT Kilang Pertamina Internasional Refinery Unit II Dumai which empowers (*Pengokang* families) in improving the economy through the Corporate Social Responsibility program.

***Ngokang* as the Cultural “Identity” From Dumai**

The practice of *Ngokang* reflects how traditional communities can creatively adapt to external economic and social pressures. Although initially emerging as a response to declining marine yields and pressing financial needs, looking has now developed into a unique part of the maritime culture in Dumai City. This activity is not only a livelihood but also reflects traditional values, local resilience, and the ability of communities to maintain their identity amidst the ongoing changes in Indonesia’s economic conditions.

Figure 4
“Ngokang” Journey to the Tanker in Dumai Waters



Ngokang shows adaptation is about survival and building an economic system that fits the local context. In practice, the skills needed in *Ngokang* cannot be learned instantly. Knowledge such as how to navigate a tanker, communicate with foreign crews, and understand the ebb and flow of the sea is a form of hereditary expertise passed down from generation to generation, usually from father to son. This condition makes looking not just a livelihood but part of a cultural heritage deeply embedded in everyday life in certain areas.

More than just an economic activity, *Ngokang* has become part of the local identity of the Dumai community. The uniqueness of this practice lies in the fact that it is not found in other areas of Indonesia, making it a very distinctive social and cultural phenomenon. The activity of *Ngokang* reflects the way of life of the Dumai coastal community, which is closely related to the sea, especially in trade. The attachment between this practice and geographical conditions and local values makes it a means of earning a living and a symbol of uniqueness that represents the character and cultural heritage of the local community.

The practice of buying and selling that still uses the barter system is of particular concern because it shows an effort to maintain the traditional payment system inherited from our ancestors. Although most transactions have shifted to cash or digital payment systems in the modern era, barter practices such as in *Ngokang* activities reflect the strength of local cultural values that remain alive amidst the changing times. This system not only functions as a means of exchange but also as a symbol of social and economic ties built on trust and mutual needs between transaction actors. Thus, the sustainability of the barter system in the practice of *Ngokang* shows the resilience of coastal communities' culture in maintaining their ancestral traditions.

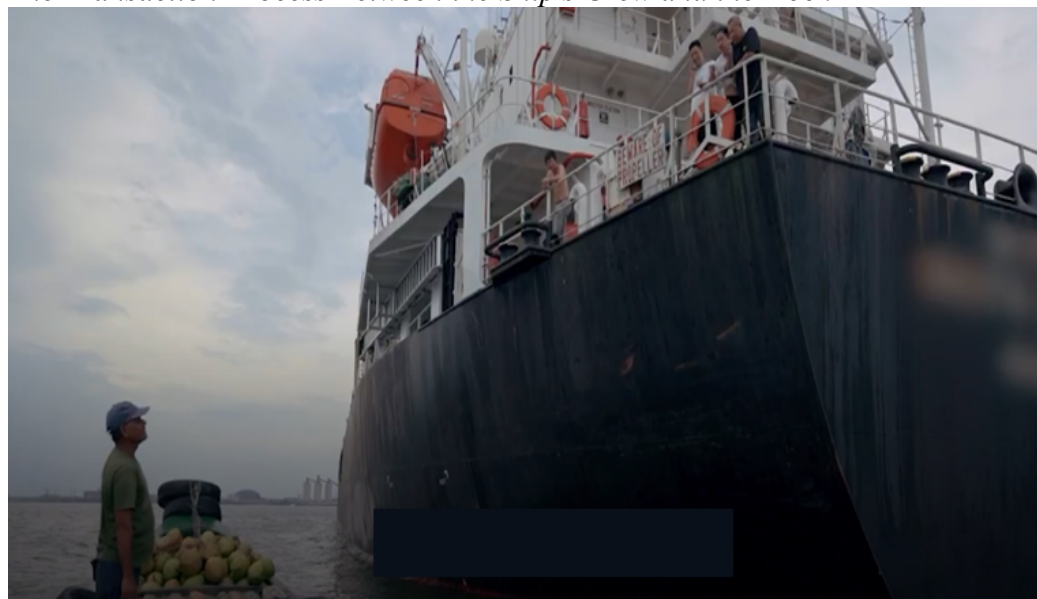
The Challenges of *Ngokang* in the New Era

In the current situation, *Ngokang* activities as a livelihood for coastal communities face a serious dilemma. The first challenge is its status as a form of informal trade that the government has not officially regulated. In fact, in some cases, this activity is considered illegal because it does not have a clear legal basis, especially regarding licensing,

supervision, and legal protection for the perpetrators. Moreover, “KEPMENHUB No. 819 of 2018 Concerning the Determination of Shipping Lanes, Route Systems, Traffic Procedures, and Ship Anchoring Areas According to Their Interests in Shipping Lanes Entering Dumai Port” explains that all ships owned by the community are prohibited from approaching the vessel crossing route that will dock at Dumai City Port (Mulyani, Wahyuni, et al., 2024). This activity is undoubtedly against the law, so those involved will face legal consequences that can further worsen the situation of the *Pengokang* families.

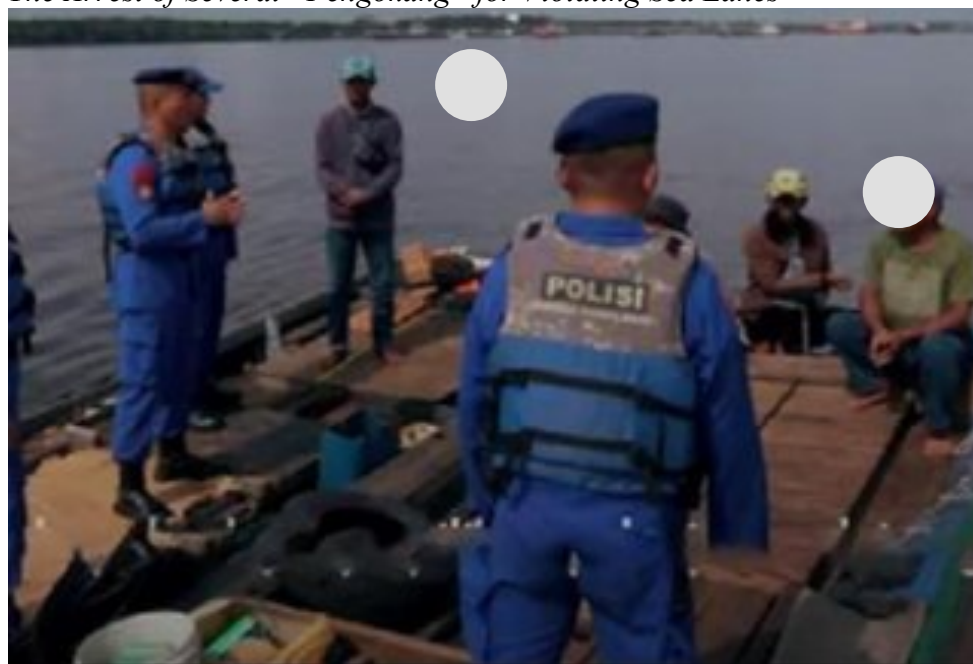
Figure 5

The Transaction Process Between the Ship's Crew and the Dock



Second, the practice of *Ngokang* has the potential for significant danger and loss, both in terms of material and the safety of the perpetrators' lives. The *Ngokang* must face various risks, such as bad weather, sea accidents, and damage or loss of merchandise during the barter process in the middle of the sea. *Ngokang* activities are generally carried out using small boats that must be alongside large ships during the transaction. This condition is hazardous because if not carried out carefully and without adequate safety procedures, the ships can collide with each other, which has the potential to cause small boats to capsize or sink. The lack of infrastructure support and social protection for *Ngokang* fishermen further exacerbates this risk. In addition, the lack of guaranteed security at sea makes the *Ngokang* vulnerable to crime or fraud. *Ngokang* activities also have the potential for illegal buying and selling activities in the waters. The barter process used in *Ngokang* activities usually occurs by exchanging goods that are no longer used on ships. However, this condition is what triggers the exchange of illegal goods such as oil and drugs. Transactions carried out above waters and not monitored become a means to circulate these illegal goods (Mulyani, Fatkhullah, et al., 2024).

Dumai waters are an area where it is very easy to spread drugs because the location is very strategic. (akm, 54 y/o)

Figure 6*The Arrest of Several “Pengokang” for Violating Sea Lanes*

Third, the increasingly uncertain climate conditions in the Dumai region are one of the main challenges threatening the safety and continuity of *Ngokang* activities. Extreme weather, such as heavy rain, coastal storms, and strong winds, often occur suddenly and are difficult to predict. This situation is perilous for *Ngokang*, who use small boats to approach large ships in the middle of the sea. Light and open boats are very vulnerable to being tossed by waves or even capsized when hit by high waves. In bad weather conditions, visibility decreases drastically, increasing the possibility of collisions between small boats and tankers. In addition, uncertain tidal conditions also worsen the situation. High tides can make it difficult to dock with large ships, while low tides can cause boats to run aground or make it difficult to return to land. In addition to impacting safety, changes in weather and tides also impact merchandise, especially fruits and perishable foods. These goods can get wet from seawater, rot due to the hampered buying and selling process, or be damaged during the unstable transportation process due to waves. As a result, the *Ngokang* often suffer economic losses, especially if they carry large quantities of merchandise. These conditions indicate that climate factors significantly influence the sustainability and safety of *Ngokang* practices, so better anticipation and protection are needed for the perpetrators.

The current problem we face when carrying fruit is hazardous because the freshness of the fruit is not long; we go to the hot sea, making the goods we sell rot quickly. This kind of condition makes us lose money. The weather lately is also unpredictable, sometimes hot, sometimes rainy. (rmn, 45 y/o)

Various problems faced in the practice of *Ngokang*, ranging from safety risks due to extreme weather and traditional transaction systems that are no longer efficient to the threat of economic loss, have contributed to a significant decline in the number of *Ngokang* practitioners. It is estimated that only around 50 to 60 people are still actively practising this profession in Dumai waters. This number shows a fairly drastic decline compared to previous times when *Ngokang* was one of the main livelihoods of coastal communities. This decline

reflects the weakening interest of the younger generation in continuing this tradition, both for safety reasons, economic challenges, and shifts in cultural values.

Most now consider *Ngokang* only a side job, no longer a primary source of income. To meet the economic needs of their families, they must look for additional work on land, both in the formal and informal sectors. This condition reflects that although *Ngokang* is a unique cultural heritage and local identity, without regulatory support, protection, and official recognition from the government, this tradition is at risk of extinction in the future.

Conclusion

The activity of *Ngokang* in Dumai waters has been considered a local heritage passed down from generation to generation, reflecting the community's adaptation to the social and economic dynamics in the coastal areas of Dumai. The activity of *Ngokang* has become a livelihood for the community, involving unique buying and selling at sea because the payment system still uses "barter," with large ships anchored around the port of Dumai City.

Ngokang is currently facing a serious dilemma because *Ngokang* is considered by most people as an illegal activity. This activity also poses potential dangers and losses for *Sengkang* materially and non-materially. The practice of *Ngokang* is undoubtedly a challenge because it is in the informal economy, which sometimes intersects with aspects of legality or shipping regulations. This condition caused some of the informants we interviewed to hesitate to openly convey information in this study.

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Disability and Modernity in Buck's Works

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Abstract

The early twentieth century's prevailing stigma against disability—particularly mental impairment—was reinforced by the rise of Social Darwinism and the eugenics movement. This paper examines the relationship between disability and modernity in Pearl S. Buck's works, arguing that her experience as a mother of a disabled child and her concern for disability shaped her understanding of modernity. As the mother of a severely mentally impaired child, disability became an important influence on her literary career, beginning with her breakthrough novel *The Good Earth*. Buck's bicultural experiences of disability culture in China and America further informed her unique perspective, allowing her to challenge rigid narratives of modern progress. In Buck's works, disability is not a static condition but a dynamic force that reveals her complex attitudes toward modernity. This paper categorizes Buck's representations of disability into three modes. The humanistic mode portrays disabled individuals as cared for within traditional Chinese family structures, as seen in Wang Lung's mentally impaired daughter and elderly father in *The Good Earth*. The resilient mode depicts disabled characters who navigate society despite their impairments, such as the half-blind land dealer and the deaf rickshaw passenger in *The Good Earth* and the hare-lipped servant in *Sons*. Lastly, the tragic mode presents disability as a source of suffering and marginalization, exemplified by the hunchbacked young man in *Sons* and the blind girl in *The Mother*. By analyzing these portrayals, this paper explores how Buck's depictions of disability reflect her struggles, "inner rebellion," and a broader critique of Chinese traditions and modernity.

Keywords: humanistic mode, resilient mode, tragic mode, modernity, inner rebellion

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Introduction

Pearl S. Buck's portrayals of Chinese rural life and modernity have long drawn scholarly interest. Since the publication of her most acclaimed novel, *The Good Earth* (1931), critics have interpreted her work through a range of ideological lenses, including Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial frameworks. Much of this scholarship has focused on Buck's representations of peasant life, the agrarian economy, and gender roles, often evaluating her narratives in terms of cultural politics and orientalist critique.

While these ideological lenses shed their light on Buck's works, they tend to overlook a personal and emotional influence that shaped her literary legacy: her experience as the mother of a child with an intellectual disability. As believed by her daughter Janice Walsh, if not for her mother's experiences as a mother of disabled children, her legacy in literature probably would be very different. Disabled characters in Buck's novels, especially the unnamed daughter in *The Good Earth*, are not merely narrative devices but reflect her intimate confrontation with the emotional, cultural, and ethical dilemmas of disability and modernity in her time.

In contrast to dominant early twentieth-century ideologies shaped by social Darwinism and eugenics, which often cast disabled individuals as burdens and threats to progress, Buck's work offers a radically humanizing counter-narrative. Her fiction disrupts the binary between tradition and modernity by embedding disability within broader moral and cultural inquiries. Scholars in disability studies, such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Lennard Davis, have emphasized literature's power to either reinforce or resist stigma. Buck's writing does the latter: informed by her bicultural upbringing in China and her disillusionment with Western ideologies of progress and normalcy, she constructs an ethical landscape that foregrounds compassion, interdependence, and the inherent dignity of disabled lives.

This paper argues that Buck's treatment of disability reveals a complex and often ambivalent critique of modernity. Through a close analysis of *The Good Earth*, *Sons*, and *The Mother*, the study traces how disability functions not as a symbol of lack or failure but as a lens through which to reconsider familial ethics, cultural identity, and societal values. Drawing on biographical sources, disability theory, and cross-cultural analysis, the paper positions Buck's disability narratives as a form of ethical resistance—personal, spiritual, and ideological—to the modernizing discourses of her age.

The Humanistic Mode: Wang Lung's Mentally Impaired Daughter and Aged and Disabled Father

In this mode, Buck portrays disabled characters not as marginal or burdensome but as integral members of the traditional family. It emphasizes traditional ethical responsibilities, particularly within the family, where disability is not pathologized but rather treated as a natural part of life. *The Good Earth* offers two emblematic figures within this framework: Wang Lung's intellectually disabled daughter and his aged, infirm father. Though both are vulnerable and dependent, the responses they evoke reflect a cultural logic of inclusion grounded in acceptance of fate and Confucian filial duty. This analysis examines how such portrayals resist modern utilitarian norms and subtly express Buck's "inner rebellion," especially through the emotionally charged depiction of Wang Lung's relationship with his mentally disabled daughter, often interpreted as a literary tribute to Buck's child.

The Contradiction Between Wang Lung's Gender Bias and His Unconditional Love Towards His Mentally Impaired Daughter in *The Good Earth*

The contradiction between the widespread patriarchal ideology of valuing sons over daughters and Wang Lung's love for his intellectually disabled daughter is one important feature of the father-daughter relationship in *The Good Earth*. This paradox becomes even more complex when viewed through the lens of Buck's personal experiences prior to writing the novel. Why does Buck choose Wang Lung—an Oriental male figure shaped by a patriarchal society, to embody such profound care for a daughter with a disability? Traditionally, such tenderness and unconditional nurturing are more commonly associated with maternal figures like O-lan.

This subversion of traditional gender role expectations becomes even more striking when we consider Buck's own life experiences as both a daughter and a mother, which reflect a stronger emotional bond between mother and daughter rather than between father and daughter. Situating those questions simply in the Chinese context did not provide sufficient and convincing answers. It wasn't until I turned to the disability culture in Western societies that a more complete picture began to emerge. I argue that Buck's depiction of disability in *The Good Earth* is profoundly shaped by Buck's responses to the disability culture in Western society. Buck transforms her private pain into a form of rebellion/resistance.

Buck's disability narratives in *The Good Earth* embody three interconnected forms of rebellion/resistance: personal, religious, and societal. First, Buck's depiction of Wang Lung as a compassionate and attentive father can be interpreted as a personal rebellion against her own husband's emotional and parental failures. Drawing from Buck's memoir *The Child Who Never Grew* and her semi-autobiographical novel *The Time Is Noon*, this section will explore how her experience of raising a disabled child without the emotional support of her husband influenced her literary construction of an idealized father figure. Wang Lung's quiet acceptance of his daughter's disability and unconditional love for her functions as a therapeutic outlet for Buck during a time of frustration and isolation.

Second, Buck's resistance extends into the religious sphere, particularly against Christian gospels on disability, which fail to offer her any spiritual solace, be it divine punishment for sin or healing narratives. Buck, raised in a missionary family and being a missionary herself, struggled with these theological contradictions, and her eventual disillusionment with Christian doctrine contributed to the fading of her missionary zeal (Wacker, pp. 852–74). This spiritual conflict is reflected in her literary choice to depict Wang Lung as an authentic Chinese figure, firmly rooted in traditional belief systems and entirely untouched by Christian ideology.

Third, Buck's work stages a resistance against the dominant ideologies of Western modernity, particularly those shaped by early twentieth-century Social Darwinism and eugenics. These ideologies promoted the notion of "survival of the fittest," casting disability as a deviation from social and biological norms that must be corrected or eliminated. In contrast, Buck offers a vision of pre-modern Chinese family life in which disabled individuals are not stigmatized or pathologized but are accepted and cared for as part of the natural order of familial life. This depiction shows a very different culture with the stigmatizing attitudes she encountered in both American society and the American expatriate community in China. Buck's portrayal of such inclusive familial structures not only reflects her nostalgia for a more humane world but also serves as a form of personal healing. At the same time, Buck

does not romanticize Chinese tradition uncritically; she is deeply aware of the threats posed by modernization in China, especially when modeled on Western values. This anxiety surfaces in *The Good Earth* and becomes even more pronounced in her later novels, where disabled characters increasingly reflect the cultural and ideological tensions of a society in transition.

Non-utilitarian Ethics of Care — Filial Piety and the Aging Disabled Elder in the Confucian Household

In *The Good Earth*, Buck adopts a realist narrative style to depict the endurance and adaptability of traditional Chinese family ethics amid social and economic upheaval. Through Wang Lung's care for his aging father, Buck presents a version of filial piety without sentimentality and idealization. This portrayal demonstrates how filial piety, as a culturally embedded ethical practice, continues to operate even under the harshest conditions.

When drought devastates the land and famine grips the countryside, Wang Lung continues to prioritize feeding his frail father, even over his hungry children. This choice stems not only from personal feelings but also from deeply ingrained cultural expectations. As Wang Lung says to himself proudly that “none should say in the hour of death he had forgotten his father. Even if his own flesh went to feed him the old man should eat” (p. 65). This desperate internal monologue shows how failing to care for one's father wasn't just a personal failing—it was an offense against the entire community's values. In a society where filial piety was sacred, abandoning an elder in hard times would bring both deep personal guilt and public disgrace.

During the family's journey south to escape starvation, Wang Lung's frail father is too weak to walk on his own and thus becomes a heavy burden. Yet Wang Lung never considers leaving him behind. Instead, he carries his father on his back all the way to the train station. In the southern city, the family survives by pulling rickshaws and begging. Even the old man is given a role as a beggar, though he often just naps by the roadside. Wang Lung and his wife accept this without complaint, recognizing that he is no longer able to contribute. The old man, in turn, rests peacefully, confident that his family will not abandon him. Beneath this quiet mutual understanding lies a rich cultural ethic that is produced through a long process of civilizational evolution, tested and validated by countless generations—filial piety.

As the family returns to their village and becomes wealthy, the old man's physical condition deteriorates—he grows nearly deaf and blind, completely reliant on others. Yet he continues to wield symbolic authority within the household, rooted in traditional values. He serves as the family's “line of defense” in upholding ethical order.

Buck's portrayal of Wang Lung's aged, disabled father highlights a compelling aspect of Chinese family ethics: as a person's physical abilities fail, their status within the family does not decline. On the contrary, age equals experiences, contribution and respect. This reverence is not based on the elder's continued productivity or capacity to care for others but rather on the symbolic authority that comes with the role of “father.” Buck insightfully captures how this ethical relationship—rooted in identity rather than function—acts as a key stabilizing force in traditional Chinese society. It is precisely this deeply embedded norm of filial piety, which transcends physical condition that enables families to preserve moral structure even in times of material scarcity or personal frailty.

Buck neither romanticizes filial piety as an exotic curiosity nor dismisses it as a feudal relic. Instead, she presents it as a culturally rooted survival strategy—an ethic forged through lived experience and adapted to endure crises. Although Wang Lung exists in a pre-modern world, largely untouched by the ideological upheavals of modernization, Buck uses his instinctive reverence for his aging father to illustrate a traditional ethic grounded not in abstract principles but in tangible, bodily care. This “embodied tradition” allows her to critique the alienating tendencies of Western modernity while reclaiming filial piety as one of the most profound sources of moral meaning in her literary imagination.

The Resilient Mode: Functional Inclusion, Disability, Social Pragmatism, and the Pre-modern Public Sphere

In this mode, Buck broadens her focus from the family unit to the wider social structure. She moves from the domestic sphere to the public sphere by portraying characters such as a half-blind merchant, a deaf rickshaw customer, and a soldier with a cleft lip. These individuals are not hidden or sidelined. Instead, they are active participants in public spaces, realms such as land deals, urban marketplaces, and military service that are typically associated with full social agency. Their presence challenges the traditional portrayal of disabled people as dependent or marginal.

Importantly, Buck adopts a “deproblematizing” narrative strategy. While these characters are identified by their conditions as “one-eyed man” or “the hare-lipped,” these terms function more as neutral descriptors than as stigmatizing labels. Through the craftiness of the half-blind merchant, the assertiveness of the deaf passenger, and the competence of the cleft-lipped soldier, Buck shows that people with disabilities can and do participate in the world around them as a matter of course, without the need for extraordinary achievements or dramatic personal transformations to justify their inclusion.

This normalization is different from the popular Western “overcoming narrative,” epitomized by figures like Helen Keller. In the popular Western imagination, Keller's story is framed as one of heroic triumph over adversity, with disability cast as a barrier to be conquered through discipline, determination, and the interventions of modern education (Nielsen, 2012). While Keller's life has undeniably inspired and advanced the disability rights movement, her story also reinforces the notion that disability must be overcome to gain social value. As Kim E. Nielsen observes in *A Disability History of the United States*, such narratives can be alienating, particularly for those with severe cognitive or physical impairments who may not be able to “overcome” their condition in socially visible ways. The emphasis on personal achievement risks marginalizing those who cannot fit that mold (Nielsen, p. 11).

Buck's approach, by contrast, portrays disabled individuals as part of society simply because they exist. Their presence is not exceptional; it is accepted. This view is deeply rooted in Buck's personal experience with Chinese culture. In her memoir *The Child Who Never Grew*, she writes:

I had grown up among the Chinese, who take any human infirmity for what it is. Blind people, the lame, the halt, the tongue-tied, the deformed—during my life in China, I had seen that all came and went among others and were accepted for themselves. Their infirmities were not ignored. Sometimes, they were even made the cause of nicknames... But the Chinese did not mean it so. That was the way he was, literally, and his twisted legs were part of himself... The sufferer did not feel any need

to hide himself. There he was, as he was, and everybody knew him. It was better than any sweet pretending that he was like everybody else. (Buck, pp. 12–13)

She further explains that the traditional Chinese belief in fate fosters a culture of acceptance: physical impairments are not treated as personal or familial failings but as natural occurrences—acts of “heaven.” Sometimes, disability is even endowed with spiritual significance.

This cultural framework plays out in multiple aspects of Buck’s fiction. Her disabled characters are shown taking part in economic, cultural, and military life, embodying a representation of disability that is neither heroic nor compensatory. Rather than emphasizing personal triumph over impairment, Buck highlights the roles these individuals fulfill and how their physical differences can be reinterpreted as forms of social or cultural capital. Her depiction reflects a more localized and inclusive understanding of disability, one that diverges significantly from Western modernity’s focus on achievement, normalization, and productivity.

Tragic Mode: The Fragmentation of Kinship — Disability and the Collapse of Familial Ethics in the Face of Modernity

This section explores the changing roles and fates of disabled characters within the domestic sphere in Buck’s works, focusing on two interrelated narratives: the hunchbacked grandson in *Sons* and the blind daughter in *The Mother*. These stories reveal how traditional ethical frameworks begin to unravel and distort under the pressures of modernity—but with a key difference. In *Sons*, the collapse unfolds from within the story itself, while in *The Mother*, the alienation is largely imposed by external forces.

Temples in Religious Culture: The Last Sanctuary for Disabled People

In *Sons*, the hunchbacked grandson—abandoned by a family that has embraced modern values—embarks on a symbolic journey from the city to the countryside and finally to a temple. This spatial movement reflects the disintegration of kinship as a protective system and presents religious space as the last sanctuary for those cast aside by modernized society.

As Buck turns her attention to increasingly modernized families, how traditional society once accommodated disabled individuals begins to narrow. This transformation does not just alter family structures but also recalibrates how societies assess human worth. For example, a person’s worth is reduced to a checklist of functions: intact physical abilities, economic productivity, and conformity to social norms. The inclusive ethics of traditional rural life, grounded in kinship and agrarian interdependence, give way to a stricter modernist logic of exclusion. The hunchbacked grandson in *Sons* offers a striking illustration of this shift.

His disability stems from a preventable accident: as a baby, he was dropped by a careless wet nurse onto a brick courtyard, permanently damaging his spine. Though the injury was accidental, its consequences mark him for life. In his modernizing family, he is stripped of his name and referred to only by the degrading label “the hunchback.” Even his immediate family—parents and siblings—view him as a source of shame, a burden in contrast to his healthy siblings, who are seen as carriers of the family’s future. He is systematically excluded from education, household responsibilities, and even ordinary family interaction. His dehumanization is so complete that even servants regard him with indifference.

From a young age, the hunchbacked grandson suffered from the cruel mockery and bullying of his peers. His loneliness drove him into the shadows of cities and the hidden trails of the countryside, yet his awkward, misshapen body never quite belonged anywhere. What he endured went far beyond physical discomfort—it was a deep emotional trauma. Over time, his heart is filled with hatred. Unable to express his pain directly, he turned to mischief and pranks—distorted behaviors that reflected the alienating social environment around him.

But a flicker of hope arrived when he secretly followed his father to the countryside where his grandfather once lived. There, he met Pear Blossom, whose warmth pierced through his emotional darkness. Instead of scolding him for his misbehavior, she offered him sweet pastries and spoke to him with gentle kindness. Her compassion soothed his wary, wounded heart. In her embrace, the boy trembled and burst into tears: “I wish you would not make me weep so—I do not know why I weep so—.” As she gently stroked his curved back, he felt, for the first time in his life, the healing warmth of human connection.

Eventually, the hunchback chose to remain in his grandfather's old rural home, living with Pear Blossom and his intellectually disabled aunt. On the land, which is not yet fully consumed by modernity, his spirit began a quiet transformation. He no longer played mischief and found purpose in caring for his aunt alongside Pear Blossom. Helping others gave him a sense of fulfillment he had never known. Although he is not the central character of the novel, we learn through a conversation between the hunchback and his uncle Wang the Tiger that after the aunt's death and Pear Blossom's ordination as a nun, he too would enter into the monastery, seeking solace in the temple.

The journey of Wang Lung's hunchbacked grandson traces a symbolical spatial transformation: urban exile – rural healing – spiritual refuge. This physical movement and psychological change reflect not only an individual's survival strategy amid modernization but also the broader ethical and societal shifts in early 20th-century China.

Spatially, this path maps a full civilizational transition. The city represents a cold, alienating modern space, where, shaped by Western ideals and Darwinian competition, the hunchback's body is deemed “unfit.” The countryside—especially his grandfather's old home—becomes the last fragile bastion of traditional warmth, its protection weakened but not yet erased. Finally, the temple emerges as a transcendent space of spiritual peace, where the sound of bells and drums offers sanctuary beyond worldly judgment. These three stages echo the gradual erosion of traditional Chinese society under the pressures of modernity and the slow disappearance of humanistic care from both private and public life.

Ultimately, this spatial-psychological journey reflects a deeper civilizational dilemma: as kinship's traditional protective role erodes under modernity, where can those deemed “unfit” by dominant standards find refuge? Through the hunchback's quiet decision to enter religious life, Buck suggests that the temple—perhaps the last inclusive space in traditional Chinese culture—can still offer dignity to the marginalized. This poignant ending becomes a kind of elegy for a vanishing civilization. And yet, it also carries a quiet note of resignation: religion can soothe individual souls, but it cannot change the structural forces that cast people out. In this light, the hunchback's curved spine becomes more than a physical trait—it becomes a haunting measure of a society's moral depth and a silent question about the cost of modern progress.

Eugenic Nightmare of Degeneration: The Blind Daughter in *The Mother*

If we examine the plot developments that lead to the blind daughter's tragic fate in *The Mother*, we can identify two crucial turning points. One aspect is the traditional Chinese culture of “a grown man should marry, and a grown woman should be married off.” This results in their increasingly marginalized and awkward position within their original families. However, Buck's critique of this traditional culture is significantly weakened by other plot developments. Even though the blind girl's brother and sister-in-law want to marry her off, they do not have a time urgency. Rather, it is the mother's impatient temperament and her hasty decision, made unilaterally, that ultimately leads to the daughter's tragedy. Later, when the mother blames her son and daughter-in-law for not accommodating the daughter, they defend themselves, saying they have no objection to taking time to find a suitable match for the sister; it is the mother, without consulting anyone or understanding the nature of the family the daughter is to marry into, who hastily allows them to take her away.

For a mother who deeply loves her daughter, Buck's unconvincing plot arrangement in *The Mother* not only weakens her critique of certain aspects of the traditional Chinese family system but also leaves the reader confused. At the critical juncture of the blind girl's fate, why did Buck not choose to introduce a more positive narrative, such as enabling the blind girl to be married into a kind-hearted family or overcome her physical limitations through special education, to become self-sufficient and an inspirational figure like Helen Keller? Especially since the blind girl has already shown a strong desire for independence in the story and has made efforts to help the family, this character trait could have been a powerful force to turn her fate around. Or, the plot could also have included a turning point where the girl's fate changes through seeking treatment from Western modern medicine, particularly since the girl's disability was not congenital but developed over time, with a lack of timely intervention leading to her eventual blindness. However, Buck leaves these possibilities unexplored, instead consigning the blind daughter to a grotesque familial archetype—impoverished, regressive in behavior, and ostensibly intellectually deficient. This representational strategy proves deeply problematic, as it not only uncritically reproduces period-specific eugenic paradigms but, more disturbingly, implicates the author herself in their ideological perpetuation.

What is even more perplexing is that the arrangement of the blind girl being brought to the remote mountain family blurs the boundaries of identity between her and them. Her agency is entirely dissolved in this process, and her hopes as an individual are completely stripped away. Her fate seems to be reduced to two extreme possibilities: either the blind girl's demise or the total eradication of the mountain family in the harsh natural and social environment. Buck's portrayal of the mountain family is also intriguing. The impoverished, degraded and animalistic family embodies the eugenic nightmare. They are not only marginalized members of society but also seem to carry a symbolic implication of being “meant to be eliminated.”

Another problem is that, in Buck's narrative, the distinctions between the blind girl and her “witless” husband, as well as between her birth family and the family she marries, are not effectively explained. After the blind girl's fate is sealed by marriage into the mountain family, it seems to be consumed by an invisible narrative logic—she is no longer a subject in need of rescue but has become part of the mountain family's fate, even to some extent “assimilating” with them. As for the girl's birth family and husband's family, aside from their geographical difference, both belong to rural households, and economically, they are at the

bottom of society. What exactly distinguishes the two and prevents the former from descending into the latter's state?

Buck does not provide a clear answer. She does not give any background information on the migration of the family from the northern region to the mountain household. Whether it is culture, religious beliefs, or specific reasons for migration—war, famine, or others—the reader is left in the dark. The lack of backstory for the mountain family undermines their characterization, leaving readers with little basis for connection or empathy. Reduced to vague outlines, they become less fully realized individuals than symbols—embodiments of a eugenicist's “undesirable” population, deemed unworthy of survival.

The blind girl's tragic fate exposes the unsettling tension in Buck's work: her apparent internalization of Social Darwinist rhetoric clashes with her lived experience as the mother of a disabled child. While Buck critiques how modernity weaponizes eugenics to marginalize people with disabilities, her narrative choices—consciously or not—replicate the very logic she seeks to challenge. This contradiction forces us to grapple with the uncomfortable duality of her position: a critic of American modernity who nevertheless reproduces its dehumanizing frameworks.

Conclusion

The above three modes of disability narratives in Buck's works trace a shift from ethical embeddedness in traditional kinship structures to the frank atmosphere in the public sphere to the alienation and moral displacement engendered by modernity. Buck's rural Chinese settings serve not as nostalgic backdrops but as ethical testing grounds, where the fate of disabled individuals reveals broader societal transformations. Through her nuanced portrayals of care, abandonment, and survival, Buck critiques both the strengths and limitations of Confucian patriarchy as well as the rationalism of modernization, suggesting that neither tradition nor progress guarantees sufficient moral protection for the vulnerable. This ethical ambiguity, central to Buck's literary vision, emerges from her unique position as an American author raised in China, shaped by yet not fully belonging to either cultural system. In contrast to the iconoclastic fervor of many May fourth intellectuals, who often rejected Confucian tradition in favor of Westernization, Buck adopts a more ambivalent, human-centered perspective. She navigates the ethical ambiguities embedded in both traditional and modern worldviews, foregrounding the precarious realities faced by the vulnerable across cultural, temporal, and ideological boundaries.

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