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SJAS is a peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journal that publishes works across the humanities and social sciences within the broad field of Asian and Asian Diasporic Studies. The journal is published annually in the spring.

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Student Journal of Asian Studies



Foreword

An Editorial Introduction

| NICHOLAS FERNACZ AND TIAN JING TEH

As co-Editors-in-Chief, we would like to present to you the latest issue of the *Student Journal of Asian Studies* (SJAS) at the University of Southern California. Having received numerous inspiring articles ranging in both geographic and temporal focus, and which contribute to ongoing discussions in the fields of Asian Studies, we have brought together nine articles within this edition. This greatly expands on our previous issue which featured five articles, but demonstrates the journal's ongoing commitment to the study of Asia without the limitation of borders wrought by area studies. Brought together in this issue, we hope to show how scholarship across borders and temporalities can be demonstrative and influential in concert. For this reason we organize the articles thematically, rather than by discipline, country or language of study, or period. Further, this journal is dedicated to elevating the next generation of scholars and thus this issue includes contributions from the ranks of recently admitted Ph.D. students, MA and BA students, and even a high school senior!

New to this issue is a special section. This section sheds light on the films of the Taiwan director Edward Yang (Yang Dechang) as we were fortunate to receive two outstanding articles dedicated to his cinematic practice. Sergey Zanchevskiy's article, "Taipei Story

or Qing Mei Zhu Ma? On the Discrepancy Between the Chinese and English Titles of Edward Yang's Film," explores the linguistic difference across the English and Chinese titles for Yang's films. Zanchevskiy shows that these titles are not necessarily translations, but rather are at times altogether changed to signal discrepant meanings across Chinese and English-language audiences. Likewise, Luoyang Gao's article, "Exploring the "Non-Places" in Edward Yang's *Yi Yi: Identity and Locality in Transition*," touches on ongoing discussions in Cinema Studies regarding the universal versus the local, a key issue in the study of Taiwan as both a flashpoint in global geopolitics, and a site of minor literatures among Sinophone cultural practices. The spatial dimension of translation as explored in Naoki Sakai's writings manifests here, and when read together these two articles nuance each other and the larger body of scholarship dedicated to Yang's filmmaking.

Following the special section are seven articles that explore a myriad of premodern and contemporary issues relevant to Japan, Korea, China, and Vietnam. Brayden Dare contributes to the field of popular music in his article that argues South Korea has created a "Soft Power Playbook," from which other countries can learn and model their own popular music industries, notably Japan. Rebecca Dewitt's article examines princess myths in Korean literature to understand a Joseon attitude towards women. Xiyu Mao's article explores the role of podcasts, namely Bomi's *Kaiju de zhongju*, in the micromobilization of an affective public in contemporary China, arguing that the podcast equips listeners with the vocabulary to live through an era of historical amnesia. Lei Gong's article reads atmospheric memory in Wang Anyi's *And the Rain Patters On*, and how this can be taken up in postsocialist China. Alisa Luchinina examines inter-party cooperation in South Korea in the later half of the 1950's, expanding the scholarship beyond studies of Yi Sŭng-man's presidential term. Devin Sanders investigates contemporary Japanese foreign security attention paid to Chinese and Vietnamese nationals living on the archipelago and the potential futures of

Japan-China and Japan-Vietnam relations. In studying late-Ming China, Xueting Shen explores how commercial values transform marital relationships as written about in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*.

This issue also marks a significant transformation for *SJAS*. From the cover design to the overall layout and visual presentation, the journal has undergone a comprehensive redesign aimed at providing a more professional and accessible reading experience. These changes reflect our ongoing commitment to scholarly excellence and our desire to better serve both contributors and readers. As the journal continues to grow, we hope this renewed format will strengthen *SJAS* as a vibrant platform for interdisciplinary dialogue within Asian Studies.

As part of the journal's new direction, each issue will feature original cover artwork. For this issue, we are honored to present a photograph by Sichong Xie, Ph.D. Candidate in Media Arts and Practice at the University of Southern California. Xie is an awarded multidisciplinary artist whose practice combines materiality, movement, and the performance of memory through elemental media and site-specific installations. The cover image is drawn from her recent project, *Trampoline House: Memory Drawing Series, Iteration I & II* (2025).

In *Trampoline House*, Xie transforms a playground into a stage of temporal disintegration. Drawing from children's games and the raw materiality of construction sites, the durational performance collapses the boundaries between play and labor, memory and erasure, and construction and decay. The work resonates with contemporary developments in Asian Studies, where increasing attention has been devoted to questions of embodiment, materiality, affect, space, and the politics of memory. By foregrounding the entanglement of bodies, environments, and historical traces, Xie's work invites viewers to reconsider how personal and collective memories are continually produced, negotiated, and transformed.

Beginning with this issue, *SJAS* also adopts a new publication

structure. Each volume will span two years and consist of two issues, with one issue published annually during the summer. This revised schedule will allow the editorial team to devote greater attention to the review and production process while maintaining the journal's commitment to publishing high-quality scholarship. Also, in keeping with a more rigorous academic standard, all submissions from this issue onward undergo a double-blind peer-review process involving at least two reviewers. Following the reviewers' recommendations and feedback, the Editorial Board makes the final publication decisions. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers who generously contributed their time, expertise, and thoughtful evaluations to this issue.

At present, opportunities for undergraduate and master's students to publish original academic research remain relatively limited, both within North America and across the broader field of Asian Studies. *SJAS* seeks to provide a dedicated venue for showcasing outstanding scholarship produced by undergraduate and master's students worldwide across the diverse disciplines that constitute Asian Studies. The vision behind the journal is to cultivate a space where emerging scholars can contribute meaningfully to ongoing academic conversations through interdisciplinary research, while fostering a stronger tradition of publishing undergraduate and master's scholarship for future generations.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the people who helped enable the publishing of this issue of the Student Journal of Asian Studies including the staff members of the East Asian Studies Center, the many volunteers who worked on the issues copy, layout, and editing, and our predecessors as Editor-in-Chief, Alice Dong and Chaeyeon Park.

Nicholas P. Fernacz and Tian Jing Teh
Co-Editors-in-Chief, *Student Journal of Asian Studies*

Edward Yang

| **SPECIAL SECTION** |

Exploring the “Non-Places” in Edward Yang’s *Yi Yi*

Identity and Locality in Transition

ABSTRACT This essay examines the spatial narrative of Edward Yang’s *Yi Yi* to explore locality and identity in Taiwan amid globalization. Through an analysis of the film’s spatial imagery, the study argues that traditional, fixed places no longer provide a sense of belonging, while the proliferation of homogenized “non-places” produces relational alienation, the erosion of traditional bonds, and crises of identity. Yet *Yi Yi* also suggests possibilities for reconstructing meaning through its spatial design. The film reassigns emotional and regional meaning to these non-places through its use of dialects and its juxtaposition of transnational spaces. Ultimately, the study shows that the film’s spatial narrative reflects the tension between global homogenization and local identity, offering insight into how urban life reshapes belonging and identity.

KEYWORDS Edward Yang, *Yi Yi*, globalization, non-places, identity

Introduction

In the 1980s, Taiwan’s economy was impacted by globalization, with heavy industrialization giving way to an information-based, high-

technology, and consumption-oriented economy.¹ As a postcolonial region, Taiwan simultaneously faced a long-standing identity crisis.² Its multicultural background was shaped by both economic globalization and colonial history. This cultural intersection has engendered spiritual disorientation among individuals navigating the dual forces of modernization and globalization.

Against this backdrop, Taiwanese filmmakers focused on the tensions between tradition and modernity, as well as the existential crisis of a society in transition. This led to a film movement “devoted to local experiences of growing up, social transformation, and the history of Taiwan.”³ As a key director of this period, Edward Yang’s oeuvre centers on “the cultural multiplicity of Taiwan, the fragility of its traditional foundations, and the temptations of its economic prosperity in the 1990s.”⁴ These films reflect on the space of local existence in a globalized world.

Yi Yi (2000) is one of Edward Yang’s representative works. With this film, Yang won the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000. Through the everyday life of a middle-class family in Taipei, the film portrays the emotional and social experiences of different generations in the modern metropolis. The story centers on the father, NJ, the mother, Min-Min, the daughter, Ting-Ting, the son, Yang-Yang, and the grandmother. Through multiple narrative threads, including family life, work, and the experiences of growing up, the film presents the complexity of contemporary urban life. It also transforms the individual identity formation and local identity crisis produced by multicultural impacts on Taiwanese society into a visual narrative. Therefore, the film is not only a family narrative but also an important cultural text about modern urban experience.

1. Daisuke Kawahara, “Floating Across a Shifting Border: Transnational Subjects in *Yi Yi: A One and a Two* and *Café Lumière*,” *Studies in Languages and Cultures* 37 (2016): 104, <http://hdl.handle.net/2324/8551>

2. Flannery Wilson, *New Taiwanese Cinema in Focus: Moving Within and Beyond the Frame* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1.

3. Chih-Chung Wu, “Festivals, Criticism and International Reputation of Taiwan New Cinema,” in *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, Popularity and State of the Arts*, ed. Darrell William Davis and Ru-shou Robert Chen (London: Routledge, 2007), 76.

4. John Anderson, *Edward Yang* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 5.

At the same time, Yang's *Yi Yi* has attracted considerable scholarly attention in the fields of Chinese-language cinema. Researchers generally consider Edward Yang and his works to be an important part of the Taiwan New Cinema.⁵ Ivy I-chu Chang points out that the works of Taiwan New Cinema directors often present experiences of social transformation through narratives of urban space and everyday life, thereby reflecting the social transformations shaped by colonial history, globalization, and capitalism.⁶

Recent scholarship further argues that the development of Taiwanese cinema has always been shaped by the intersection of multiple historical and cultural forces. As a result, its identity must continually be negotiated among local culture, language, politics, and transnational circulation.⁷ Within this research context, *Yi Yi*, as a representative work of Taiwan New Cinema, not only reflects the experience of modernization in Taiwanese society but also serves as an important case for understanding Taiwanese cinema's position within the global film system.

Employing close textual analysis and Marc Augé's (1995) concept of "non-places", this study addresses the central question: How does *Yi Yi* reflect transformations in individual emotions, identities, and relationships within globalization through its spatial narratives? By focusing on cinematic space rather than plot alone, the essay highlights how everyday environments mediate individual experience in late modern urban life in Taiwan.

French anthropologist Marc Augé introduced the concept of "non-places" in *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995) to describe new types of spaces emerging under globalization and the flow of capital. He distinguishes "non-places" from "anthropological places". Anthropological places

5. Ronggang Chen, "From New Taiwan Cinema to World Cinema: A Critical Case Study of Edward Yang's Career," *Art and Performance Letters* 4, no. 11 (2023): 96-104, <https://doi.org/10.23977/artpl.2023.041115>

6. Ivy I-chu Chang, *Taiwan Cinema, Memory, and Modernity* (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 19-41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3567-9>

7. Chris Berry, ed., *Taiwanese-Language Cinema: Rediscovered and Reconsidered* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781399527880.001.0001>

are social spaces rooted in shared meanings of identity, relations, and history.⁸ A non-place, on the contrary, “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity”.⁹ Augé developed this concept to expand anthropological inquiry, arguing that non-places have become a common form of contemporary social life.

According to Augé, non-places emerge from the condition of supermodernity, which is characterized by the “excess of time, of space, and of individual references”.¹⁰ Under such conditions, the transit points and temporary abodes proliferate.¹¹ Augé refers in particular to places created by late capitalism, such as shopping malls, airports, train stations, hotel chains, and highway stops.¹² These functional, impersonal, and transient sites epitomize the non-places. Augé further argues that non-places create a modern spatial experience, marked by alienation and solitude. As he states, “the space of non-places creates neither singular identity nor relations, only solitude and similitude”.¹³ These spaces emerge to meet the needs of transportation and consumption. People pass through, stripped of their identities, existing only as consumers or passengers. No meaningful interactions occur, leading to a sense of “perpetual present and an encounter with the self”.¹⁴

Since it was proposed by Marc Augé in 1995, the concept of *non-place* has become an important theoretical tool for understanding spatial experience in the era of globalization. It has also generated sustained discussion in fields such as cultural studies and anthropology. Scholars have not only focused on the characteristics of modern space revealed by this concept, but have also continued to critique or reinterpret its theoretical boundaries

8. Sandra Ponzanesi, “The Non-places of Migrant Cinema in Europe,” *Third Text* 26, no. 6 (2012): 676.

9. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 77.

10. Augé, *Non-Places*, 29.

11. Augé, *Non-Places*, 78.

12. Ponzanesi, “The Non-places of Migrant Cinema in Europe,” 676.

13. Augé, *Non-Places*, 103.

14. Augé, *Non-Places*, 105.

and explanatory power. For example, the scholar Peter Merriman criticizes Augé's spatial binary distinction. Merriman argues that simply defining transportation spaces such as highways as "non-places" tends to underplay the diverse practices, memories, and experiences through which such spaces become meaningful.¹⁵ He further notes that even highly mobile and standardized spaces can acquire a sense of place through everyday practices, emotional experiences, and social interaction. Therefore, Merriman argues that the strict distinction between "place" and "non-place" has become increasingly difficult to maintain. Rather than treating "place" and "non-place" as completely opposed spatial types, it is more productive to understand them as a constantly changing relational structure. Within this structure, spatial meanings are continually produced through concrete social practices.¹⁶

Augé himself further developed his theory in his 2003 book *Pour Quoi Vivons-nous*. He emphasizes that the relationship between non-place and place is dialectical.¹⁷ The essay by Emer O'Beirne reviews the evolution of the concept of non-places. It points out that the core of Augé's theory is not simply to describe a particular type of physical space. Instead, it reveals a transformation in modern subjectivity: individuals often exist in these spaces with anonymous and temporary identities. In this sense, "non-place" is both a spatial concept and a cultural diagnosis of identity crisis and experiences of alienation in modern society.¹⁸

In general, Augé's theory offers a productive lens on spatial experience in the context of contemporary globalization. He incorporates the fluidity, temporality, and dehistoricized non-places of modern society into an anthropological framework. This provides a theoretical foundation for understanding space and

15. Peter Merriman, "Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-Places, and the Geographies of England's M1 Motorway," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 4–5 (2004): 152.

16. Merriman, "Driving Places," 153–154.

17. Marc Augé, *Pour quoi vivons-nous?* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 140.

18. Emer O'Beirne, "Mapping the Non-Lieu in Marc Augé's Writings," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 42, no. 1 (2006): 42–43, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cqio38>

modernity in *Yi Yi*. To investigate contemporary urban space and individual modes of existence, this essay draws on Augé's three-dimensional framework of "relation, history, and identity," which he uses to distinguish places from non-places, and applies it to the analysis of cinematic space. The first three sections examine the alienation of relations, the failure of traditional communities, and the inability to establish a stable identity within non-places. The latter three sections further analyze how the film presents the potential for emotional communication, the formation of belonging, and the construction of collective memory.

The Failure of Relation, History, and Identity in Non-Places

Yi Yi employs a *frame-within-a-frame* composition to depict domestic space, revealing the dissolution of "place" at the level of social relations. Traditionally, the family, as a fixed spatial unit, is imbued with relational attributes; it is not only a dwelling but also a site of familial and emotional bonds. However, in *Yi Yi*, although family members live under the same roof, their relationships remain limited to ethical ties, lacking emotional reciprocity. The film emphasizes expressions of individual confusion and helplessness, transforming domestic space into a collective embodiment of characters' isolated existential states.

The *frame-within-a-frame* technique visualizes the breakdown of communication and relationships through spatial separation. It refers to the use of elements like doorways, windows, and mirror frames to create an inner frame within the shot, confining characters to bounded visual spaces. As Bazin observed, "the frame creates an introversion of space."¹⁹ This compositional strategy separates the space inside and outside the frame, placing the characters within the frame in isolation from the external realm.

A representative example appears in the scene where Min-Min complains to her husband, NJ, about the monotony and repetitiveness of life. Throughout this scene, the couple never

19. André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, trans. J. Cui (Beijing: China Film Press, 1987), 183.

appears within the same frame. Min-Min remains alone in a medium close-up, her silhouette reflected in the mirror behind her, creating a composition that contains only her and her mirror image. The reverse shot presents NJ in a more distant frame, his movements confined to the corridor at the bedroom doorway. The doorframe and mirror frame segregate the couple's respective spaces, using symbolic visual division to reveal the isolation and estrangement within family relationships, thereby dissolving the sense of belonging and relationality traditionally associated with domestic space.

Beyond relationality, the historicity of space enables "the continuity of generations" on the temporal plane.²⁰ In the film, transitional rituals that take place in non-places reveal, at the level of history, a rupture in the connection between individuals and the collective.

Rituals play a crucial role in forming a community. Victor Turner proposed that rites proceed through three stages—separation, liminality, and reaggregation—thereby establishing social order and preserving historical memory.²¹ In traditional family rituals, shared emotions reinforce bonds between individuals and the collective. The temporal relationship between past, present, and future is internalized as emotional memory through symbolic rituals. In modern society, ritual spaces shift from traditional "places" to "non-places." *Yi Yi* begins with a wedding and ends with a funeral, constructing individual existence through transitional moments, such as birth, first love, and reunion. These transitional rituals are held in non-places such as hotels, hospitals, and restaurants. Rituals once anchored in collective memory and social order are now enacted in functional spaces, thereby forfeiting their communal significance. They become symbols of historical disconnection and the collapse of shared belonging.

20. Augé, *Non-Places*, 86.

21. Victor Turner, Roger D. Abrahams, and Alfred Harris, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1969), 94, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315134666>

For instance, the wedding's loss of sanctity metaphorically reveals the rupture of history. The wedding scene in the film takes place at a commercial hotel. The camera follows the actions of Yun-Yun, who arrives to disrupt the wedding, gradually revealing the spatial environment in which the ritual unfolds. While the celebration incorporates traditional Chinese red decorations, the upside-down placement of the wedding photo suggests that within this space, traditional symbolic markers have become displaced and disordered.

Furthermore, the bride is already pregnant at the time of the wedding, signifying an inversion of the sequence where childbirth precedes marriage; this is a temporal disorder. This symbolic and temporal disorder resonates with the characters' chaotic relationships. Yun-Yun's anguished outburst at the wedding reveals the triangular relationship among A-Di, Xiao-Yan, and Yun-Yun, a relationship that emerges from the proliferation of unbridled desire within non-places. When living space is occupied by consumption and takes on the characteristics of temporality and transit, these "intermediate zones stripped of historical and humanistic value"²² lead to the anonymization of individual identity and the blurring of psychological social boundaries, thereby resulting in the breakdown of moral order. Xiao-Yan's involvement in another's relationship and her marriage due to pregnancy, as well as A-Di's infidelity and emotional entanglements within marriage, both exemplify the ethical consequences that arise after the rupture between individual and collective relations.

At the cinematic level, the film employs long takes to reinforce this critique. In the static long shot of wedding toasts, distant framing maintains physical separation between the camera and the noisy crowd. The use of long takes "presents reality more equitably to the audience", thereby "preserving the audience's freedom to choose and interpret objects or events"²³, producing a sense of

22. Augé, *Non-Places*, 106.

23. Fan Lan, "The Theory of Truth: A New Historical Dialectic on Montage and Long Take," *Art Studies* 29, no. 5 (2013): 75.

objective observation. This cinematographic approach avoids emphasizing the joy or festive atmosphere of forming a new family. Instead, it adopts a detached stance to reflect on this traditional ritual: a ritual that should establish order instead produces symbolic inversion, relational misalignment, and visual chaos within a space of consumption, preventing individuals from successfully forming connections with the collective. After the wedding, the grandmother, who symbolizes familial memory and history, fell into a coma. Her unconsciousness further signifies the rupture of the traditional community in modern non-places.

When the relational and historical attributes of “places” are dissolved, individuals are unable to situate themselves socially or temporally, precipitating an identity crisis. The film illustrates identity anxiety in non-places through homogenized architecture and mirrored spaces.

Augé points out that the proliferation of global images and commodities has shaped “a universe that is relatively homogeneous,”²⁴ within which non-places emerge. When local distinctions are erased, and spaces no longer bear unique histories or social relations, individuals lose the possibility of affirming themselves through others’ differences. The film’s sequence of NJ traveling by car from Taipei to Tokyo presents urban landscapes through a series of long takes. Whether in Taipei or Tokyo, clusters of high-rises and glass curtain walls exhibit strikingly similar spatial forms, directly illustrating the homogenized characteristics of non-places. The skyscrapers in the shot divide individuals into countless similar grids. Against this backdrop, individuals cannot form deep connections with others and instead encounter only their own image.

The film further visualizes this modern urban experience through glass spaces and mirror reflections. Glass possesses dual properties of transparency and reflection, visually juxtaposing the relationship between the individual and the world, and between the

24. Augé, *Non-Places*, 32.

individual and the self. On one hand, transparent glass functions as a “window,” pointing toward the external world while simultaneously serving as a physical barrier, which symbolizes the “visible yet unreachable” separation between the subject and the world. On the other hand, glass acts as a “mirror,” reflecting the subject’s own image.

Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage”²⁵ reveals the intrinsic link between the mirror image and the establishment of the subject. He argues that the subject’s recognition of its image in the mirror constitutes the prototype of self-consciousness, yet the object of identification is not the real self but an external, complete, and illusory *Ideal-I*. The mirror image thus symbolizes both the illusion of self-unity and the foretelling of its alienation.²⁶

In *Yi Yi*, the mirror does not merely reproduce the subject; it presents the process by which the subject, unable to encounter the *other*, can only confirm its self within the mirror image, thereby splitting from its real self. In the scene where Min-Min gazes out the office window at night, the exterior streets and traffic are mirrored against her reflection inside the glass. A red light flickers precisely over her heart, forming a liminal psychological space between reality and illusion. In this shot, Min-Min stares at herself within a transparent yet isolating world, unable to establish authentic contact with others or reality. Her reflected image is submerged in the urban spectacle, evoking both the solitude and disorientation of the modern subject, and also exposing her core existential crises: in the homogenized spaces of globalization, identity collapses into a hollow image of itself.

To briefly conclude the idea: under globalization, homogenized non-places proliferate, rendering the separation between individuals and others, individuals and the collective, and individuals and the self a normalized condition. However, *Yi Yi*, while reflecting on the social problems brought about by modernity, further interrogates

25. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1977), 1.

26. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, 3.

the question of how identity, social relations, and history might be established in modern life.

Reconstructing Emotion, Connection, and Belonging

This section explores how the film reflects on the possibility of affirming identity, seeking belonging, and coexisting through the construction of private space, the use of local language, and the spatial juxtaposition of images.

The film creates possibilities for emotional communication through private spaces. Augé (2003) notes that non-places and places are not absolute opposites. Non-places can only be defined through places; and never exist in pure form; rather, places can reconstitute themselves in it.²⁷ He further argues that this conceptual distinction illuminates the blurred boundaries between public and private spaces in modern society, as well as two major evolutionary trends in urban spaces: the tilt of public space toward private space, and the transformation of public space into non-place.²⁸ Simultaneously, when private living spaces are encroached upon by public affairs and consumer logic, they too risk becoming an “individual non-place”.²⁹

However, *Yi Yi* reestablishes emotional communication between individuals by reconstructing private spaces endowed with privacy. The private car, as an enclosed space, replaces the home and becomes an extension of private life. The film repeatedly stages emotional exchanges within vehicles: NJ’s conversations with his brother-in-law A-Di, and his, as well as NJ’s interactions with Japanese client Ota in a shared ride, all occur within this mobile, enclosed space.

Although the private car is conventionally designed for transportation, it partially assumes the role of a personal dwelling. A-Di recounts his marital difficulties in the car, while NJ and Ota establish an emotional connection that transcends linguistic

27. Augé, *Pour quoi vivons-nous?*, 140.

28. Augé, *Pour quoi vivons-nous?*, 139.

29. Augé, *Non-Places*, 144.

and cultural differences through a shared melody. The car's privacy allows the characters to temporarily detach from the role-based pressures of family and public spaces, enabling emotional expressions that cannot occur elsewhere. Through this circulation of emotion, interpersonal connections formed.

A similar mechanism manifests in the enclosed space of the grandma's room. At the beginning of the film, the grandma lies unconscious. To rouse her, family members take turns pouring out their hearts in her room, producing speech that straddles dialogue and monologue. Since their words are directed at an empty presence, no substantive exchange of information occurs. Yet it is precisely this absence of response that allows the characters to confront their own struggles, express emotions, and reflect on life, thereby forging a relationship with their inner selves.

Edward Yang's exploration of modern interpersonal relationships explains why private spaces can foster genuine emotion. He notes that the problems of modern society stem not merely from interpersonal "alienation," but from individuals' need for privacy.³⁰ In *Yi Yi*, the dilemmas faced by each character, whether Min-Min's existential crisis or NJ's moral predicament, cannot be openly discussed in "traditional anthropological places" and can only be expressed within spaces marked by privacy and boundaries. By protecting privacy and limiting the scope of communication, private space instead creates the conditions for genuine emotional expression and the reconstruction of relations. Thus, within an urban structure dominated by non-places, emotion does not disappear entirely but is regenerated in more intimate and indirect forms.

If enclosed spaces enable emotional bonds and connections, the use of local language further solidifies and validates these ties as a sense of belonging to place and identity. The non-places produced by supermodernity dissolve locality through their de-differentiating

30. Chi-keung Wong, "Edward Yang Talks about *Yi Yi*," *City Entertainment* 576 (2001): 28.

characteristics. This transformation undermines stable senses of belonging, leaving one perpetually unsettled.³¹ Within this context, the clamor of the “home” rises.³²

In Taiwan, this tension is particularly pronounced, as modernization and globalization create non-places, while post-Cold War political isolation and cultural rupture have sparked a pursuit of locality. Filmmakers responded to this reality. As many scholars observe, “Taiwanese filmmakers actively resist the homogenizing impacts of globalization...by reinterpreting local surroundings and renewing local languages”.³³ This responds to Taiwan’s social reality of seeking identity and a sense of place.

In *Yi Yi*, local language becomes a crucial medium through which individuals reconstruct a sense of place within non-places. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it also carries community memories and a mark of identity. People often judge identity and belonging through language.³⁴ Taiwanese society exhibits a multilingual cultural phenomenon rooted in its long history of immigration, colonial rule, and shifting language policies.

Since the 17th century, *Minnan* (Taiwanese dialect) has gradually become the common language on the island following waves of migration from Guangdong. During the Japanese colonial period, Japanese-language education suppressed *Minnan* at the official level, forming a layered linguistic structure. After the war, the monolingual policy linked language with ethnic distinctions and political power relations. With advancing localization efforts, multilingual hybridity has been reinterpreted as embodying

31. Augé, *Non-Places*, 109.

32. Augé, *Non-Places*, 34.

33. Fan Fan Yang and Abu Hassan Abu Bakar, “Recontextualizing Landscapes and Mapping Identity in Taiwanese New Cinema: Decolonizing the Screen,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 14, no. 9 (2024): 2422, <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i9/22831>

34. Chengyu Quan, “The Significance and Value of Multilingual Phenomena in Taiwanese Cinema,” *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University* (Social Science Edition) 18, no. 5 (2018): 95.

Taiwan's historical experience and multicultural coexistence.³⁵

Within this context, *Minnan* functions in *Yi Yi* as a carrier of Taiwanese identity and historical experience, establishing a sense of home in non-places. Notably, *Minnan* dialogue occurs exclusively within private conversations between NJ and his first love, Sherry. It first appears in the transitional space of an elevator, where they reunite and reminisce about their early romance. It occurs again within the institutionalized non-place of a transnational corporation's office, where, following an English voice prompt, NJ explains to Sherry in Minnan his abrupt departure years earlier. The appearance of dialect in these non-places becomes a medium for evoking shared memories and recalling locality.

Furthermore, the presence of *Minnan* within transnational non-places becomes a means for individuals to trace history through nostalgia. In Tokyo, NJ, and Sherry traverse non-places like subways, streets, and hotels, becoming modern subjects perpetually in transit. As they take a train to Atami, the camera focuses on the tangled railway lines and dense urban blocks. Here, Sherry initiates a reminiscence in *Minnan*. The nostalgic voiceover elevates the railway beyond its functional role, transforming it from a transit space into an emotional conduit linking past and present. Within this space, the characters transfer emotions and memories from their past in Taiwan to Japan. The paradox lies in nostalgia unfolding not within the homeland, but within non-places distant from one's local daily life.

When individuals experience emotional dislocation in highly modernized cities, they reclaim the past within spaces reminiscent of memory. In this sense, the similarity of non-places becomes a trigger for nostalgia. Local language functions as a means of constructing collective identity and a sense of belonging.

Beyond language, *Yi Yi* also reveals the latent interconnectedness among individuals in the modern city through

35. Chengyu Quan, *The Significance and Value of Multilingual Phenomena in Taiwanese Cinema*, 96.

its narrative structure and visual expression. The film enables a dialogue between space and time through parallel narration and visual juxtaposition, thereby linking dispersed individual memories and lived experiences within a modern metropolis saturated with non-places and forming a mode of co-presence characteristic of modern life. For example, the reunion of NJ and Sherry in Atami is juxtaposed with the dating scenes of Ting-Ting and Pang-zi in Taipei. The emotional experiences of the two couples mirror one another across generations and geographical locations. When the image of NJ and Sherry holding hands at a street corner in Japan appears, the young couple in Taipei performs the same.

This form of parallel montage constructs what Hao describes as a “dynamic symmetry of time and space,”³⁶ allowing the past and the present to coexist within the same visual system. The structure resembles Deleuze’s “time-crystal,” in which the actual and virtual image refract one another within the same present moment.³⁷ One person’s present experience is precisely another generation’s memory. Ting-Ting’s first love reenacts a stage once lived by NJ, while NJ’s walking and pauses in Atami repeatedly return him to his own past through recollection. Thus, the modern urban space, originally de-historicized, is re-endowed with the density of personal memory and lived time.

In this sense, *Yi Yi* reveals the interconnected destinies of individuals in modern life. Such connections do not necessarily arise from direct social interaction but through similar experiences, recurring emotional structures, and shared memories. As Yang notes, “*Yi Yi* represents everything simple and natural; what this actually refers to is the relationship between people. This relationship is not only mutual verbal communication, but, more importantly, emotional exchange. I insist on the importance of

36. Xiaoshuo Hao, “Yi Yi: Nostalgia upon Diaspora,” in *Motion Pictures and the Image of the City: A Documentary Interpretation* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2016), 42, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-14340-4_3

37. Bo Zhang, “Interpretation of Core Concepts in Deleuze’s Time-Image,” *Film Literature*, no. 3 (2009): 112.

every individual life.”³⁸ Through shared life histories and emotional experiences, individuals fill transient, anonymous non-places with modest shared experiences, endowing these non-places with a collective history constituted by personal memories.

Conclusion

Through its depiction of domestic spaces, ritual spaces, and homogenized urban landscapes, *Yi Yi* reveals the rupture of relation, history, and identity within non-places in modern cities. This rupture plunges individuals into isolation, disorder, and identity anxiety. However, the film reinfuses meaning into non-places through the communication of emotion within private spaces, the use of local language, and the juxtaposition of spaces. The film’s spatial presentation and cinematic language reveal a contradictory modern experience: within the homogenized landscapes of globalization, people lose their sense of belonging through mobility, yet still retain the possibility of recalling locality, establishing connections, and constructing shared memories.

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38. Danny Yang, “Edward Yang: An Interview about *Yi Yi*,” *Culstudents*, April 28, 2009, <http://www.culstudents.com/Article/mediastudents/200904/6193.html>

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Taipei Story or Qingmei zhuma?

On the Discrepancy Between the Chinese and English Titles of Edward Yang's Film

ABSTRACT This essay explores the discrepancy between the Chinese and English titles of Edward Yang's *Taipei Story* (*Qingmei zhuma* 青梅竹馬, 1985), arguing that the two titles illuminate different yet intertwined dimensions of Taiwanese modernity and the director's critical stance on it. While the Chinese title references Li Bai's "Changgan Song," evoking the innocence and purity of childhood love, Edward Yang deploys it ironically to critique the sentimental escapism of Taiwanese melodramas of that period. The English title, by contrast, situates the film within the lineage of East Asian urban cinema, linking Taipei's transformation with that of postwar Tokyo, while also drawing on the aesthetics of city symphonies. Through this double title, the filmmaker reveals a tension between tradition and modernity, the local and the global, though in a more complex way than it was interpreted in the existing scholarship on Edward Yang. Overall, the paper serves as a case study, proposing the problem of bilingual titles in Sinophone cinema as a method and an object of concern for future research.

KEYWORDS Edward Yang, Taiwan new cinema, Taipei Story, Taiwanese modernity, Li Bai, Tokyo Story, film analysis

Introduction

Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), deemed as one of the greatest films in history¹ and one of the most famous works of Chinese-language cinema, has a peculiar Chinese title, *Huayang nianhua* 花樣年華. The *chengyu*²-like phrase was borrowed from a song 花樣的年華 [lit. "the blossoming-flowers-like years of life"], performed by an important figure in the 1940s Shanghai music industry, Zhou Xuan (周璇). The song, in turn, was composed for the soundtrack to *An All-Consuming Love* (*Changxiangsi* 長相思, He Zhaozhang, 1947), in which Zhou played the leading role. The film is set in Shanghai during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), an essential context for the Shanghai-born Wong Kar-wai.³ However, in Wong's film, the title refers neither to the golden age of Shanghai⁴ nor to abstract "blossoming years," but to Wong's "new" home: "it's the age of flowers of Hong Kong."⁵ After the film gained popularity, the phrase began to enter common usage, acquiring another specific meaning: "the prime of a young woman," similar to *Huaxin* [nianhua] 花信[年華], a term for a young lady reaching her 24th year. The English title was borrowed from another popular song, "I'm In the Mood for Love," introduced by Frances Langford in a Classical Hollywood-era movie *Every Night at Eight* (Raoul Walsh, 1935), thus ultimately completing the extra-diegetic network that envelops Wong's *In the Mood for Love*.

1. Joshua Rothkopf and Matthew Singer, "100 Best Movies of All Time That You Should Watch Immediately," with Phil de Semlyen, *Time Out*, September 21, 2024, <https://www.timeout.com/film/best-movies-of-all-time>; "The Greatest Films of All Time," *British Film Institute*, 2024, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/greatest-films-all-time>.

2. *Chengyu* (成語) is a form of idiomatic expression in the Chinese language, usually consisting of four characters.

3. Tsin Fung Law 羅展鳳, "'Chang Xiangsi'—Jiedu 'Huayang Nianhua' de Yi Tiao Yaoshi 《長相思》—解讀《花樣年華》的一條鑰匙" ["An All-Consuming Love"—A Key to Interpreting "In the Mood for Love"], *Xianggang Yingping Ku* 香港影評庫 [Hong Kong Film Critics Society Archive], January 2011, <https://www.filmcritics.org.hk/film-review/node/2015/09/14/《長相思》—解讀《花樣年華》的一條鑰匙>.

4. The film consists of many other references to Shanghai, including the fact that two major characters, played by Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung, are Shanghaiese immigrants, thus reflecting the origin of Wong Kar-wai and his family.

5. Cited in Alexis Cheung, "In the Mood for Love," *Sewanee Review* 131, no. 3 (2023): 439.

The tension arising from deliberately different English and Chinese film titles can be found not only in multilingual Hong Kong but also in cinematic works from other Chinese-speaking localities. For example, it is a common characteristic of Jia Zhangke's (mainland China) films, including *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren* 三峽好人 [lit. "Good People of the Three Gorges"], 2008) and *Ash is Purest White* (*Jianghu ernv* 江湖兒女 ["Sons and Daughters of Jianghu"], 2018). Singaporean *Ilo Ilo*⁶ (Anthony Chen, 2013) also has a completely different Chinese title, *Bama buzaijia* 爸媽不在家 ["Mom and Dad Are not at Home"]. This phenomenon is ubiquitous in Sinophone cinema and should be explained in each case independently. In some cases, filmmakers and producers simplify the original Chinese title to make it more understandable for foreign viewers (e.g., John Woo's action films). In others, authors use the literal translation of a *chengyu* without providing its implied meaning, as in the case of Ang Li's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong* 卧虎藏龍 [hidden talents]), to attract foreign viewers through exoticization. But there are also pairs of titles that engage in an intellectual game, thus not only reflecting the film's narrative but also expanding it: the discussed *In the Mood for Love* is an example of this type.

In other words, by examining the discrepancy between Chinese and English titles, one can deepen one's reading of the film or even discover the coexistence of multiple interpretations. Two distinct titles might emphasize contrasting aspects of the film to the point that there are two different films, not one. Not only do different titles work for different audiences with distinct perceptions of the same narrative, but they might even evoke quite the opposite associations. Therefore, this paper argues for devoting separate attention to different film titles, just as one may analyze a particular scene. This proposal is in line with Gérard Genette's concept of *paratext*, by which he means everything that accompanies the major text "to *make it present* [emphasis in original], to assure its presence in

6. The English title, *Ilo Ilo*, is a reference to Iloilo City (the Philippines), a hometown of Terry, a nanny and one of the major characters in the film.

the world”⁷: title, author’s name, preface, notes, etc. Title, as part of the paratext, functions as a threshold (using Genette’s metaphor) and is never neutral: it directs our reading, often being the first information we have about the text. In his writings, Genette sets the task to analyze different forms of paratext in accordance with their “illocutionary force”, or function. Here, I continue Genette’s discussion by arguing that in Sinophone cinema, there is another “functional type”—a pair of Chinese and English titles, not connected to each other by direct translation.

When approaching this kind of pair, one should investigate both “internal” and “external” aspects of the tension. The “internal” perspective involves inquiring how each title summarizes several issues presented in the film and the relations among them, while the “external” perspective involves addressing references to other works, including *homages*. The problem of two different titles raises questions such as: Who made the decision to avoid a direct translation of a Chinese title into English? Why did they choose an entirely different title? When the literal translation is impossible, why did they refuse to find the closest alternative?

This paper explores this discrepancy by focusing on a Taiwanese filmmaker, Edward Yang. His oeuvre is suitable for this paper’s analytic purpose because of his international background and the influence this background—and hence his multilinguality—had on his career. Yang was born in Shanghai and, as a child, moved with his parents to Taipei; he then spent more than a decade in the United States, living between the two worlds until his death. This had a significant impact on his work: even though each of his movies was filmed in Taiwan, many of his ideas were first written down in English. Also, out of seven of his full-length feature films, at least four have divergent pairs of titles: *Taipei Story* (*Qingmei zhuma* 青梅竹馬, 1985), *A Brighter Summer Day* (*Gulingjie shaonian sharenshijian* 牯嶺街少年殺人事件, 1991), *A Confucian*

7. “Introduction to the Paratext,” trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 261, <https://doi.org/10.2307/469037>.

Confusion (*Duli shidai* 獨立時代, 1994), and *Yi Yi: A One and Two* (*Yi yi* 一一, 2000), thus this phenomenon in Yang's filmography is more than just a coincidence.⁸ Finally, the context of Taiwan is also relevant: similar to Hong Kong, it is a multilingual locality—at least three variants of Chinese are common there: Taiwanese Mandarin, Taiwanese Hokkien,⁹ and Taiwanese Hakka—which has successively been under multiple cultural and political influences: Japanese, the KMT-led martial law, and American. This “triangular”¹⁰ connection, especially the impact of American popular culture and the English language on modern Taiwan, is often the object of concern in Edward Yang's films.

In particular, the essay continues and deepens the discussion of the two titles of Yang's second feature film, *Taipei Story*.¹¹ To do this, I start by approaching the phenomenon as two-fold, double-title, where each title functions as a part of a central dichotomy-like structure of the film, revolving around the “modernity and tradition” binary opposition, and then, dialectically, I challenge the proposed dichotomy, showing that each of the titles references modernity and

8. While I do not have direct documentary evidences that Edward Yang was responsible for creating these discrepancies by himself, it is still plausible that he exercised the major influence over the paratextual choices, given the presence of multiple possible Chinese and English titles in his script drafts, presented in Jun-Jieh Wang and Song-Yong Sing, eds., *A One and A Two: Edward Yang Retrospective* (Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2023).

9. In this paper, I refer to Taiwanese Mandarin as Mandarin and to Taiwanese Hokkien as Hokkien.

10. In *Confucius Confusion*, a new important player has been introduced—the post-socialist People's Republic of China, with which Taiwan (the Republic of China) established diplomatic relationships in the early 1990s.

11. Relevant studies include but not limited to: Nicholas Bugeja, “A City in Transition in Taipei Story (Edward Yang, 1985),” *Senses of Cinema*, October 2018, <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2018/cteq/a-city-in-transition-in-taipei-story-edward-yang-1985/>; Andrew Chan, “*Taipei Story*: Modern Planning,” *The Criterion Collection*, May 17, 2017, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4628-taipei-story-modern-planning>; Jian-yeh Huang 黃建業, *Yang Dechang Dianying Yanjiu: Taiwan Xin Dianying de Zhixing Siban Jia* 楊德昌電影研究：台灣新電影的知性思辨家 [*Edward Yang: Taiwan New Cinema's Speculative Intellectual*] (Yuen Liu Publishing, 1995); Ling Zhang, “*Taipei Story* (1985) Floundering in the City of Stone and Glass,” in *Thirty-Two New Takes on Taiwan Cinema* (University of Michigan Press, 2022), https://www.academia.edu/104306805/Taipei_Story_1985_Floundering_in_the_City_of_Stone_and_Glass.

tradition simultaneously.

The Dichotomy and the Two-Fold Title

Taipei Story can be called an “artificial” and “functional” project: the whole plot and the characters originated from an idea, not personal experience. As Yang said, the story was created “out of nothing—something that was not based on my own experience, or that of anyone else I knew. So my starting-point was essentially conceptual. I wanted to tell a story about Taipei.”¹² To “build muscle” on this idea, Yang developed a complex system of characters and related details: spaces, means of transportation, occupations and hobbies, desires and values—all working to the “tradition and modernity” opposition. This opposition is an analytical tool the author uses to reflect on the film’s central theme, “urban life of 1980s Taipei,” or how the Taiwanese middle class “confront[s] the spread of a dominant ideology of foreign culture and experience the process of a transforming Taiwan.”¹³

In particular, it is a story about two “childhood sweethearts,” Lung (阿隆) and Chin (阿貞), a young couple who plan to move in together but never do, instead gradually alienating each other. Lung, a former baseball player who still dreams of returning to the sport, works at a family-owned fabric firm on Dihua Street (迪化街), which thrived during the late Qing and throughout Japanese rule.¹⁴ Throughout the film, Lung also considers moving to the United States, where his relatives have successfully started a business, but later gives up the idea. Various obstacles stand in his way. First, Chin’s father borrows money to pay off his debt; then Lung becomes disappointed by the changes in his family members’ morale living in America; and finally, he breaks up with Chin after she finds out he

12. “Taiwan Stories,” *New Left Review*, no. 11 (2001): 132.

13. I.-Fen Wu, “Tokyo Love Story and NY Bagels: East-West Cultural Encounter in Edward Yang’s *Taipei Story*,” in *Asian Cinemas: A Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 384–85, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474468039-028>.

14. By the moment the film takes place, this area had fallen into complete decline. It was then restored at the end of the 20th century, thus becoming a new center for tourism, Chinese medicine products, and Chinese New Year celebrations.

met his ex-girlfriend, Gwan (阿娟). At last, he ends up losing all his money and a car after gambling in a Japanese-style bar, just to be later stabbed to death by a young admirer of Chin.

Chin’s perspective is different. She used to work as an assistant to a manager at a construction company that was bought out by competitors. As a result, Chin became unemployed. At the same time, she starts renting an apartment in a wealthy international neighborhood of Taipei, expecting Lung to join her. Their plans, however, are not destined to come true, and her younger sister, Ling (阿玲), becomes her roommate. Qin’s move to a new apartment (as well as her plans to leave Taiwan) is also justified by her desire to escape from the influence of her patriarchal-minded father. To brighten up the agony of waiting, she tries to “dilute the gloom” of the present by entertaining herself in the company of arrogant colleagues, who constantly mix Mandarin with English words, and her sister’s reckless friends, racing around night Taipei on motorcycles. Her fate is different from Lung’s. She accepts an offer from her ex-boss to join an American electronic company, but soon loses enthusiasm as she is completely crushed by the spleen, possibly caught from Lung.

Based on this description, it is possible to reconstruct the set of binary oppositions mentioned before, using Huang Jianye (黃建業)’s table¹⁵ as a model (see Table 1).

Table 1. The dichotomous structure of the film

ASPECT	TRADITION	MODERNITY
REPRESENTATIVE MAIN CHARACTER	Lung	Chin

15. *Yang Dechang Dianying Yanjiu: Taiwan Xin Dianying de Zhixing Siban Jia* 楊德昌電影研究：台灣新電影的知性思辨家 [Edward Yang: Taiwan New Cinema’s Speculative Intellectual], 111.

PERSONALITY	Lung: open in public, but easily gets angry, reserved in personal interactions, especially with women (Chin and Gwan)	Chin: reserved and modest in public, becomes more open in private conversations
OCCUPATION	Lung: owner of a fabric shop	Chin: first, senior assistant in a construction company; later, the same position in a branch of an American electronic company
HOBBIES	Lung: <i>baseball; xiangqi</i> ; ¹⁶ <i>card games (/poker)</i>	Chin: (possibly) darts

16. *Xiangqi* (象棋, lit. “elephant chess”) is a traditional Chinese board game for two players.

LOCATIONS	Old Dihua Street; Japanese-style karaoke bar; Ch'en's (阿欽, Lung's old friend) hovel; night time half-empty streets; Chin father's old-fashioned house; <i>baseball field</i> ; Lung family's abounded house in Yangmingshan	Modern apartment in recently developed Eastern district; Ximending (西門町) shopping streets; American-style pub; abounded empty apartments in high-rise buildings; office spaces; highways full of cars; buildings of international companies (Fujifilm, NEC, etc.)
MUSIC	<i>Modern Enka</i> , a genre of Japanese music originated in the 1950s	<i>Bach</i> ; rock-and-roll
FAMILY OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS	Conflicting emotions regarding <i>relatives residing in the US</i> ; close ties with Chin's and Gwan's fathers	<i>Lung's mother moved the US</i> , Chin has tense relationships with her father; pity for mother; close connection with a young sister

LANGUAGE	Lung: primarily Hokkien, sometimes Mandarin with Chin; Mr. Lai (賴先生): Hokkien, <i>Japanese</i> (when speaking with his grandson)	Chin: primarily Mandarin, sometimes Hokkien with Lung; English words when speaking with friends; <i>Japanese</i> (Ling watches Japanese commercials without translation to Mandarin and uses some Japanese words when speaking to a woman who appears to be her grandmother).
CLOTHING STYLE	Lung: simple, casual	Chin: modern, she often wears business outfits and sunglasses
DRINKS	Lung drinks <i>beer</i> ; Chin and Mrs. Mei (梅小姐) participate in a simplified <i>traditional tea ceremony</i>	It is hardly shown how Chin drinks beer: she refuses to drink with Mr. Ke (小柯), and she easily gets sick after drinking beer in a night club

MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION	Lung: a driver (<i>car</i>), also enjoys walking; <i>taxi</i>	Chin: a passenger (taxi, Lung's car, young admirer's motorcycle); walking is shown as dangerous (crossing the street); <i>Lung took an airplane</i>
ATTITUDE TOWARDS EMIGRATION	Lung: doubt, although he actually <i>traveled to the US, staying the whole trip in the room watching baseball games</i>	Chin: Very positive but <i>most likely has never been to the US</i>
SOCIAL CIRCLE	Lung: baseball trainer (Gwan's father); Chin's father; former baseball teammate; friends in a bar; street market sellers; <i>friend-lawyer</i>	Chin: westernized colleagues, younger sister and her peers, US-oriented boss
LOVER	Lung: Japanized Gwan, who is married to a Japanese businessman	Chin: Westernized Mr. Ke, a desperate architect
OTHER SYMBOLIC OBJECTS	<i>Chin's collection of old pictures</i>	Phone (Chin uses it quite often, and Lung does not answer it); TV (<i>by Lung and Ling</i>)

RELATION WITH THE PAST	<i>Chin often immerses herself into memories of the past; her father recalls his childhood and so do Gwan and her father</i>	<i>Lung motto: “let bygones be bygones”</i>
MAIN CHARACTER’S DESTINY	Lun: loses most of his possessions and dies	Chin: gets new career prospects
TITLE	<i>Qingmei zhuma</i> 青梅竹馬	<i>Taipei Story</i>

Table 1 presents the dichotomy, whose blueprint was previously introduced in Anderson’s¹⁷ and Huang’s¹⁸ works, by highlighting several aspects of the plot and relevant fragments of the diegesis. *Italic* is used here to highlight the most contradictory elements of the system that call the dichotomy into question. Apparently, the two titles (see figure 1) can supplement the system if interpreted in a certain way.¹⁹ Namely, “*Qingmei zhuma*” [lit. “Green Plums and a Bamboo Horse”], a quote from Li Bai’s famous poem, may function here as a reference to either the wisdom of tradition—through the use of Classical Chinese—or childhood, full of pure feelings, still untouched by the hardships of adult life. *Taipei Story*, by contrast, references the cold-hearted city of Taipei, symbolizing cruel modernity. On the one hand, there is an allegory of puppy

17. *Edward Yang* (University of Illinois Press, 2005), 37–38.

18. *Yang Dechang Dianying Yanjiu: Taiwan Xin Dianying de Zhixing Siban Jia* 楊德昌電影研究：台灣新電影的知性思辨家 [*Edward Yang: Taiwan New Cinema’s Speculative Intellectual*], 111.

19. Originally, Edward Yang wrote a screenplay for a “prototype” of *Taipei Story*—a film that would have been called *Summer in the City* (信念與疑惑：炎夏之都, lit. “Faith and Suspicion: The Capital in the Scorching Summer”), see Wang and Sing, *A One and A Two: Edward Yang Retrospective*, 164–65. It is clear that this phrasing directly influenced the choice for the English title of his second feature, while the Chinese title was reimagined from scratch.

love, and on the other, just a story, about what? Not people, but the city, the capital with its crowds on the streets and almost empty buildings, patriotic slogans, and portraits of the former leader of the nation Chiang Kai-shek. However, if one reads the film through this dichotomy and interprets the titles as allegories, it would be impossible to explain the problematic areas highlighted in italics. Therefore, the two titles should be discussed separately, with a consideration of their complex origins.



Figure 1. *Taipei Story*'s title[s] sequence

“Qingmei zhuma” (青梅竹馬): Between Symbolism and Irony

As previously mentioned, the phrase “Qingmei zhuma” was first coined by the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai in his “Changgan Song” (長干行), starting like this:

妾髮初覆額，折花門前劇。
郎騎竹馬來，遶牀弄青梅。
同居長千里，兩小無嫌猜。

[In the past], when my hair still covered my forehead,
[When] I was picking flowers in front of the gates.
[You], my darling, came [to me] on a **bamboo horse**,
Circling around my bed, playing with **green plums**.

[We used to] live together in Changgan,
Two little ones, with no suspicion.
[My literal translation—S. Z.]²⁰

“Bamboo horse and green plums” represent here the carefree time of childhood, when the loved one was always nearby. The poem’s lyrical subject is a woman awaiting her beloved husband, who has been forced to leave her for unknown reasons. The first half of the poem (lines 1-9) is written in a retrospective style, recalling past events as if they were unfolding before the reader. The second and final part (lines 10-15), on the contrary, is a description of the current state of loneliness, the languor of anticipation, and a sense of the passage of time, expressed mostly through nature-related symbols: moss, butterfly, defoliation, and fall wind. In other words, the poem is centered around the transition from the memory of the beautiful childhood love, darkened by the forced separation, to the melancholy of the present. This important conjunction, however, has been lost in the colloquial use of the phrase “*Qingmei zhuma*” (青梅竹馬), emphasizing only the innocence and purity of puppy love. Despite this, Edward Yang was most likely aware of the phrase’s overall context and referred to the poem’s complexity. This can be exemplified by the fact that *Taipei Story*’s structure, to a degree, reproduces that of the poem in its complexity: departing from the preconditioned close relationships between Lung and Chin, the narrative gradually exposes a more gloomy perspective. Similar to the lyrical subject in the poem, Chin is also confronted with nostalgia, especially when experiencing Lung’s alienation. In both works, the heroines are physically abandoned by their loved ones: while the reason why the husband in Li Bai’s poem left his wife is unclear, Lung delays moving to Chin’s place until the very end, thus demonstrating his doubt about the future of their relationship. The

20. The full text is available on Chinese Wikisource, see “Changgan Song (When my hair still covered my forehead) 長干行 (妾髮初覆額),” Wikisource 維基文庫, accessed November 17, 2025, [https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/%E9%95%B7%E5%B9%B2%E8%A1%8C_\(%E5%A6%BE%E9%AB%AE%E5%88%9D%E8%A6%86%E9%A1%8D\)](https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hant/%E9%95%B7%E5%B9%B2%E8%A1%8C_(%E5%A6%BE%E9%AB%AE%E5%88%9D%E8%A6%86%E9%A1%8D)).

emotions expressed in the poem highly resonate with those of Chin.

At the same time, there is also an ironic dimension to this title. Since this phrase refers to a couple who have been together since their youth in colloquial speech, it is ironic that in the film, this childhood love falls apart. Furthermore, Lung's first love was likely Gwan, not Chin.²¹ Edward Yang constantly mocks Chin's naïve desire to be loved. When going through old images in her room at her parents' house, Chin discovers a booklet of an old romantic movie à la *Romeo and Juliet*—*Christine* (1958)—where forbidden love ultimately ends in death for both lovers. Chin and Lung's love, however, is not prohibited. On the contrary, both families encourage it, but it still fails.

The ironic dimension becomes even more noticeable when reading *Taipei Story* in the context of film production in Taiwan of that period. Prior to the emergence of the Taiwanese New Wave in the 1980s, Taiwanese cinema was represented mainly by ideological "Health Realism" (健康寫實) films and mass-oriented genre movies: kung fu films, adaptations of Chiung Yao (瓊瑤)'s popular melodramas, and Huangmei Opera-style movies (黃梅調電影).²² Edward Yang was skeptical of these escapist movies, noting that, until the Republic of China lost its seat in the United Nations in 1971, foreign films were shown across the country, but the situation changed for the worse thereafter.²³ Given that, I suggest that the Chinese title of the film, *Qingmei zhuma* (青梅竹馬), ridicules the tastes of the Taiwanese audience of the late 1970s-early 1980s. Most Taiwanese people of that period, upon hearing of a film called "Bamboo Horse and Green Plums," would think of a love story with a happy ending, in the spirit of popular films such as *Outside the Window* (*Chuangwai* 窗外, Sung Tsun-shou and Yu Cheng-chun,

21. I would like to thank Louis Lo (Institute of Visual Studies, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University) for this suggestion.

22. Anderson, *Edward Yang*, 12–13; Chan, "Taipei Story"; Yeong-Rury Chen, "A Study of the Huangmei Opera Film Genre: Huangmei Opera as a Film Genre," *Zhaoyang Xuebao* 朝陽學報 [*Journal of Chaoyang University*] 0, no. 11 (2006): 189–205.

23. Yang, "Taiwan Stories," 129–30.

1973) or *The Unforgettable Character* (*Zaishui yifang* 在水一方, Chang Mei-chun, 1975). Instead, Yang presented an urban drama about people slowly breaking apart—something that runs counter to viewers' expectations.

In summary, this section argues that the title *Qingmei zhuma* (青梅竹馬) has two major yet contradictory implications. It refers to Li Bai's poem and its plot to provide a specific angle on Chin and Lung's story, while simultaneously criticizing the naivety of love stories like this. It also mocks Edward Yang's contemporaries who were not eager to face reality— a status quo that, according to the director and other filmmakers of Taiwanese New Cinema, must change. This is why, despite the deliberately serious tone of the film, Edward Yang resorts to irony as a powerful means to convey this message, not diegetically but extradiegetically, through the symbolism embedded in the Chinese title. However, while the Chinese title, through its symbolic reference, implies a tragic separation of lovers, only the English title presents the major force behind it—(post-)modernity, manifested in urbanization.

Taipei Story: Japan as a Mediator

The second title, *Taipei Story*, belongs to a long tradition of using place names in film titles. Very often, these films focus not so much on a specific place but refer to a phenomenon, a background, or a certain atmosphere, usually playing on the associations of the audience: *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *Paris, Texas* (Wim Wenders, 1984), or *Moscow on the Hudson* (Paul Mazursky, 1984), just to name a few. *Taipei Story*, however, does not follow this tendency. The film not only devotes a significant portion of its running time to documenting cityscapes that symbolize urbanization in general, as in Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961), but also develops a unique image of Taiwan's capital, which will be further expanded in *The Terrorizers* (1986) and Yang's other films. From this perspective, *Taipei Story* reminds us of a particular genre that reached its peak in the first half of the 20th century—city symphonies—in which the

life of a metropolis emerged as the focal point of cinematic thought. Many city symphonies, such as *Manhatta* (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1921), *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927), and *The Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), are poetic documentations that revel in new visual forms and rhythms generated by the convergence of human masses, tall buildings, and machines. Similarly, Yang's work does not fully avoid aestheticizing the city, meticulously portraying its neon nightlife, yet it shifts its focus towards investigating the interaction between the city and individuals, demonstrating that the former subordinates the latter.

The English title also includes the “story” part. Edward Yang is once again playing with irony, subverting viewers' expectations: the film's narrative is intentionally de-dramatized, and the story can be described as tedious and even ordinary. The only dramatically charged fragment of the film, Lung's death, is followed by a cheerful conversation between an ambulance worker and police officers standing next to the corpse, thus illuminating the cruelty of life. *Taipei Story* is just *a* story, not *the* story, hence explaining Edward Yang's choice of actors: Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢), another key figure of the Taiwan New Wave, and Tsai Chin (蔡琴), a pop singer and Yang's future wife. “Non-actors unfold a non-story about non-love” is, perhaps, the prism through which Yang observes the city and modernity in *Taipei Story*.

In addition to general associations linked to the title, it has a specific predecessor—*Tokyo Story* (Yasujirō Ozu, 1953). *Taipei Story* generally continues the main discussion of Ozu's film, i.e., family relations in the age of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and, some might say, Westernization. *Tokyo Story*'s original Japanese title *Tokyo Monogatari* (東京物語) is somewhat of an oxymoron, invented by Ozu. *Monogatari* (物語) is a traditional epic literary genre, whose roots go back to oral stories about heroic figures, e.g., the son of an emperor (*Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語) or members of a noble clan claiming central power (*Heike Monogatari*

平家物語).²⁴ Later, this genre lost its popularity, only to be reborn in a more “profane” way as a collection of stories usually about ghosts—for example, *Ugetsu Monogatari* (雨月物語).²⁵ In cinema, prior to *Tokyo Monogatari*, the term *monogatari* was used only for adaptations of literary works, so Ozu’s choice of words is indeed radical and innovative. Ozu’s film significantly departs from both manifestations of the *monogatari* genre, instead offering an ironic statement on the inexorability of time, the profanation of past values, and the pervasiveness of progress. Edward Yang continues these experiments by distributing the game of irony into two different titles.

Many narrative and thematic developments in *Taipei Story* parallel those of *Tokyo Story*. Both films inherit the visual aesthetic of city symphonies, enriching it with a critical dimension, delving into the profound influence of urbanisation on the human psyche and interpersonal relations. Ozu’s film explores the disintegration of family relations brought about by the modernization of large cities, the outflow of population from rural areas, and shifts in people’s worldviews, shaped by Japan’s defeat in World War II and the importation of American culture in the Pacific region. *Taipei Story* takes a step further by examining the situation when the gap between family members becomes irreparable. In contrast to *Tokyo Story* where the changes are observed and experienced primarily through the perspective of an older generation (Shukichi and Tomi Hirayama), *Taipei Story* presents the perspective of a younger generation (Lung and Chin). In the two films, both generations are tested, in some cases leading to sacrifices (Tomi Hirayama in *Tokyo Story* and Lung in *Taipei Story*).

The understanding of a parallel between Yang’s film and the work of a Japanese director further prompts reconsideration of Japan’s influence on Taiwan as presented in *Taipei Story* and the

24. Louis-Frédéric, *Japan Encyclopedia* (Harvard University Press, 2002), 660.

25. Waldemiro Francisco Sorte Junior, “Shifting Values Toward Profit-Making in Edo Japan: Insights from the Book *Ugetsu Monogatari*,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 18, no. 3 (2016): 325–42, <https://doi.org/10.5325/intelitestud.18.3.0325>.

dichotomic structure discussed earlier. As shown in Table 1, the elements of Japanese culture appear on both sides of the opposition. To begin with, Lung—presumably a “paragon of tradition”—is obsessed with baseball, a game that may seem to non-Taiwanese viewers to have been introduced with the wave of American cultural influence but in fact was popularized on the island during Japanese rule.²⁶ Throughout the film, Lung quite often interacts with Japanese heritage, e.g., he frequents a Japanese karaoke bar where he listens to “retro” Enka motifs, a music genre that appeared in the 1950s, i.e., contemporaneous with the events of *Tokyo Story* (!). The film also demonstrates how contemporary (at the time the film was shot) Japanese culture penetrated Taiwanese society by showcasing giant billboards for Japanese companies Fujifilm and NEC, and Japanese media consumed by the youngest generation (Ling). The Japanese language here functions as a link between generations. Ling uses it to explain popular Japanese destinations to a woman who appears to be her grandmother, who presumably studied it during the colonial period, and Mr. Lai, the trainer, speaks in Japanese with his grandson whose father is Japanese.

These examples challenge the workability of the binary scheme proposed by Huang that divides between “Old Culture” (舊文化) and “New and Foreign Culture” (新文化及外來文化), and attributes Japanese culture to the latter category.²⁷ Based on the discussion above, I argue that this framework reflects the author’s ideology rather than the reality as shown in the film. Contrary to the proposed dichotomy, Japanese culture in the film serves as a buffer between the past and the modernizing present. The homage to *Tokyo Story*, in which events unfold exactly after Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan but before those of *Taipei Story*, supports this idea.

Conclusion

26. Zhang, “*Taipei Story* (1985) Floundering in the City of Stone and Glass,” 166–68.

27. Yang Dechang *Dianying Yanjiu: Taiwan Xin Dianying de Zhixing Siban Jia* 楊德昌電影研究：台灣新電影的知性思辨家 [Edward Yang: *Taiwan New Cinema's Speculative Intellectual*], 111.

Analyzing Edward Yang's second feature film through a close reading of its two distinctive titles reveals different interpretive lenses. The Chinese title draws on a literary reference, guiding the audience into the genre of melodrama: a story of a young lady with high hopes for the future, which are then destroyed by the gradual distancing of her loved one. The English one, on the other hand, alludes to the genre of city symphonies, an early form of cinematic storytelling whose authors were fascinated with the rapidly changing urban landscapes. Those who watch the film entitled *Taipei Story* presumably expect to see a drama about the lives of people in Taiwan's capital, with an abundance of shots featuring Taipei's architecture and street life. While being clearly influenced by these narrative and stylistic forms, Edward Yang significantly departs from them, defying such expectations. He de-dramatizes the romantic drama between the main characters and reduces the audiovisual pathos when depicting the city, drawing on Ozu's works, particularly *Tokyo Story*. As a result, a complete reading of this text is only possible when superimposing one title over another: it is a love story (*Qingmei zhuma*) in the city (*Taipei Story*). Interestingly, the English title assumes a more authoritative position, given that it is the city that has led to the "erasure" of puppy love, essentially trivializing their separation, transforming it into just a story. In this case, especially considering Yang's filmography is primarily preoccupied with life in modern Taipei, I tend to agree with Hsu Yenmei (許硯美) to designate this film as "Taipei Story: Qing Mei Zhu Ma" (台北故事之青梅竹馬)²⁸, where Taipei Story(ies) functions as the name of a cycle, similar to Émile Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart*.

Comparing Chinese and English titles, it is clear that both of them engage with intertextuality and the game of irony. Irony is

28. "Yang Dechang de Taipei mei you shiqu, hai zai guodu—er nimen que haoxiang wangji le 楊德昌的台北沒有逝去，還在過渡—而你們卻好像忘記了" [Edward Yang's Taipei has not disappeared, it is still in transition—but you seem to have forgotten that], *Niang Dianying* 釀電影, September 11, 2023, <https://filmaholic.tw/films/64fe9fb3fd89780001c84974/>. It should be noted, however, that this English translation will leave the viewer in confusion since it does not provide an explanation for the *chengyu*.

the key method in Yang's later films, *A Confucian Confusion*²⁹ and *Mahjong* (1996), but it emerges primarily in the titles, while the film's flow and atmosphere remain restrained and "realistic." Without going into further discussion, it can be stated that irony emerges in Yang's filmography as a reaction against (and an inseparable element of) aggressive modernity, as it exhibits the rupture between existing cultural norms and the new ways of living which are being introduced together with the inflow of capital and the rapidly changing urban landscape. Intertextuality and intermediality, on the other hand, are the central techniques throughout his entire filmography. Through direct and indirect references, the director significantly expands his scope of inquiry, sometimes crossing the boundary of the film medium to bring literature (*Taipei Story*, *A Confucian Confusion*), photography (*Terrorizers*, *Yi Yi*), and theatre (*A Confucian Confusion*, *Mahjong*) into play, apparently using it in the similar way as irony (see above).³⁰

Ultimately, the essay demonstrates the value of examining the tension between two titles in Sinophone (and, possibly, of other linguistic contexts) cinema as a method, as it reveals hidden associations and intertextual homages, thereby considerably deepening one's understanding of a film and its significance. Two titles that co-exist beyond translation should be investigated first in their own right as separate entities within the paratext, then compared with each other. In the case of *Taipei Story*, this method challenges the interpretation of the film's structure as symmetrical based on a tradition/modernity (or local/foreign) opposition, offering instead a more nuanced reading. However, to address the phenomenon of title discrepancy in Chinese-language films in

29. On satire in *A Confucian Confusion*, refer to Ivy I-chu Chang, "The Visible and the Invisible: Edward Yang's Taipei Trilogy," in *Taiwan Cinema, Memory, and Modernity*, ed. Ivy I-chu Chang (Springer, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3567-9_2.

30. For a more nuanced analysis of Edward Yang's cinema (through a case study of his *Terrorizers*) as a reflection of modernity and postmodernity (where irony and intertextuality play a key role), see Fredric Jameson, "Remapping Taipei," in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

general, further inquiry is needed, especially from a comparative perspective.

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Student Journal of Asian Studies



| ARTICLES |

Relocation and Rhetoric

Chinese Nationals in Japan and Disparities in Surrounding National Security Concerns

ABSTRACT Japan's immigration policy—often characterized by scholars as restrictive—has changed drastically despite its relative obscurity over the last few decades. These changes, however, have seldom been examined within the context of political and social rhetoric. Such rhetoric surrounding not only broad policies but also concerns over national security in relation to foreign nationals living in Japan is generated constantly by politicians and social commentators alike, bearing significant outcomes for foreign workers. I argue that this political rhetoric has recently grown to specifically target Chinese foreign nationals in Japan at disproportionately negative levels despite their relatively small population. Conversely, Vietnamese foreign nationals, despite making up the largest population of immigrant workers in Japan, present a key point of comparison to their Chinese counterparts for the neutral and positive rhetoric they receive. I point to these disparities with regards to rhetoric concerning national security issues regarding violent incidents, purchasing of Japanese land, and fears of infiltration into Japanese businesses. Specific figures discussed include newly appointed Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, whose rhetoric and policies have been especially impactful. I conclude by asserting that this ramping up of rhetoric is not only an indication of worsening Japan-China bilateral relations but also constitutes a potential growth point for the future of Japan-Vietnam bilateral relations.

KEYWORDS Japan, immigration, Takaichi Sanae, China, TITP, national security, Xi Jinping, political rhetoric

Introduction

Japan's immigration policy has experienced major changes since the adoption of controversial migrant training programs in 1990 and the proposed abolition of these programs in recent amendments made to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 2024.¹ Despite being described as having “extremely restrictive, ethno-nationalist policies,” Japan has recently illustrated a potential propensity for change as it attempts to navigate delicate new policy territory and address growing labor shortages amid an accelerating population decline.² The impact of these changes on the foreign nationals that seek work in Japan year by year and the state of Japan's immigration policy are however invariably affected by Japan's foreign policy landscape. This brings up a few key questions: In what geopolitical contexts have these recent changes occurred? How have Japan's relationships with these nations impacted its policy decisions? Finally, given its undeniable importance in both Japanese foreign and domestic policy, how is Chinese immigration to Japan specifically viewed in comparison to immigration from other countries?

I argue that political rhetoric surrounding violent incidents by Chinese nationals and immigrant workers, Chinese nationals' purchasing of Japanese land, and fears of CCP infiltration in Japanese businesses geared against Chinese immigration specifically (both

1. Naoto Higuchi et. al, “Japan's Paradoxical Migration Policy,” *East Asia Forum*, August 16, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/08/16/japans-paradoxical-migration-policy/>; Kimiko Kuga, “Japan's Incremental Change in a De Facto Immigration Policy,” *The Diplomat*, August 22, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/japans-incremental-change-in-a-de-facto-immigration-policy/>.

2. Yunchen Tian, “Workers by any other name: comparing co-ethnics and ‘interns’ as labour migrants to Japan,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* vol. 45, no. 9 (2019): 1496; Becca Faber, “Improved Immigration: Japan's Solution to Its Population Crisis,” *Harvard International Review*, October 30, 2024, <https://hir.harvard.edu/improved-immigration-japan/#:~:text=The%20SSW%20program%2C%20created%20in,%2C%20nursing%2C%20and%20food%20service.>

that of low-skill workers and wealthy Chinese immigrants) have grown significantly in the last decade. Furthermore, I show that there is a marked disparity within the rhetoric against Chinese migration when compared with political rhetoric on Vietnamese migration—Vietnam notably also being a Communist country—which, despite overtaking China as the highest percentage of foreign residents in 2016, faces comparatively little focus or backlash by Japanese politicians.³ It is precisely because Vietnam has overtaken China regarding foreign labor populations in Japan that it is relevant to Japanese foreign policy calculations vis-à-vis China. Furthermore, Vietnam currently leads the world in GDP per capita growth—with China notably following it—demonstrating the nations’ potential for investment from Japan, especially in the case it wanted to further diversify and divest away from China in the future.⁴ The framing of and rhetoric surrounding both Chinese and Vietnamese migrants, however, are by no means equal. In some cases, conversations surrounding Vietnamese migration are even framed positively as politicians have recently focused on how to make Japan a more suitable choice for Vietnamese migrants specifically.⁵ I further argue that this disproportionate ramping up of rhetoric on national security concerns regarding Chinese workers and immigration, starkly contrasting the content of rhetoric surrounding Vietnamese workers and immigration, is not only a result and symptom of worsening Japan-China bilateral relations, but also marks potential

3. Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, “Gaikokujin ginōjisshūseido no genjō, kadai nado ni tsuite” [The present condition of the Technical Intern Training Program, regarding themes, etc.], *MHLW*, March 23, 2018, https://www.meti.go.jp/policy/mono_info_service/mono/fiber/ginoujisshukyougikai/180323/3_mhlw-genjyoukadai.pdf, 3.

4. Chuck McKenney, “Vietnam and China poised to lead global growth in new Growth Lab projections,” *The Harvard Gazette*, February 11, 2026, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/newsplus/vietnam-and-china-poised-to-lead-global-growth-in-new-growth-lab-projections/>.

5. The House of Representatives, “Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai san bunkakai dai ni gō (reiwa roku nen ni gatsu nijūhachinichi (suiyōbi))” [The 213th National Diet Budget Committee Meeting, Third Subcommittee No. 2 (February 28, 2024 (Wednesday))], *The House of Representatives*, February 28, 2024, https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_kaigiroku.nsf/html/kaigiroku/003321320240228002.htm.

growth points towards the strengthening of bilateral relations with Vietnam.

Historical Background: 1990 Immigration Law and The Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)

Compared to other developed nations, Japan is known for its relatively restrictive immigration policy, especially for low-skill migrant workers.⁶ This is most notably a product of Japan's adoption and continual upholding of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act of 1951, in which "no visa categories exist to allow for the admission of unskilled labourers into Japan."⁷ However, Japan's rapid economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s also inevitably led to a stark rise in the demand for labor.⁸ As both the economy and demand for labor grew in tandem, Japan sought to implement alternative means through which unskilled migrant labor might be extracted. This culminated in an amendment to the Immigration Act in 1990 which granted "special permanent residence status" to individuals of Japanese descent known as *Nikkeijin* (日系人)—especially those of Korean and Chinese ethnic backgrounds—and the establishment of the Technical Intern Training Program in 1993.⁹

These specific allocations for preferential visas to both *Nikkeijin* and TITP workers have often been referred to as "back-door" or "side-door" policies that effectively bypass the 1951 act under the objectives of repatriation and the diffusion of technical skills (e.g. assembly and welding, construction) to developing countries because, despite being low-skilled workers, their respective statuses

6. Tian, "Workers by any other name," 1496; Yunchen Tian, "Workers, Neighbours, or Something Else? Local Policies and Policy Narratives of Technical Intern Training Program Participants," *Social Science Japan Journal* vol. 26 (2022): 77, 88.

7. Tian, "Workers by any other name," 1496.

8. Tian, "Workers by any other name," 1496.

9. Naoto Higuchi et. al, "Japan's Paradoxical Migration Policy"; Saito Jun, "Historical Background of the Japanese Restrictive Immigration Policy," *Japan Center for Economic Research*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.jcer.or.jp/english/historical-background-of-the-japanese-restrictive-immigration-policy>

as either *Nikkeijin* or TITP workers did not constitute them as immigrants in the technical sense.¹⁰ Despite facing criticism for effectively bypassing traditional immigration application systems, these policies have successfully aided and facilitated the growth of Japan's low-skilled labor force since their introduction in 1990 and 1993. The number of unskilled *Nikkeijin* laborers was steadily maintained at over 100,000 from 2008 to 2016.¹¹ By comparison, the population of TITP workers grew by over 128% between 2007 and 2019, reaching its peak of about 410,972 workers in 2019, whereafter it saw a sharp decline to about 276,123 workers in 2021 as a result of Japan's closing due to COVID-19.¹² The most recent data from the Japanese Ministry of Justice shows a slight increase since then, reaching around 324,940 TITP workers in 2022.¹³ The unique prerequisites of these visa categories—namely existing Japanese lineage and eligibility under TITP belonging to a developing nation that could adopt technical skills—particularly intersect in the cases of countries such as China, Vietnam, Republic of Korea (ROK), Indonesia, and Brazil.¹⁴ Of these nations, China was the highest-TITP worker sending country until 2016 (overtaken

10. Global Skill Partnerships, "Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)," *Center for Global Development*, accessed on December 10, 2024, <https://gsp.cgdev.org/legalpathway/technical-intern-training-program-titp/>; See references to these channels as "back" and "side" doors in Tian, "Workers by any other name," 1496; Higuchi et. al, "Japan's Paradoxical Migration Policy"; Faber, "Improved Immigration".

11. Ministry of Justice, Immigration Bureau, *Gaikokujin no ginōjishshū no tekisei na jishshi oyobi ginōjishshūsei no hogo ni kansuru hōritsu* [Law on suitable implementation of the Technical Internship Training of foreign nationals and their protection] (Tokyo: Hōmushō, kōseirōdōshō, 2016), 89.

12. Natalie Garcia Diaz, "Foreign Workers in Japan: A Look at Japanese Cultural Perspectives Regarding Nikkeijin," *Florida International University Japan Studies Review* vol. 10 (2006): 118; Ministry of Justice Immigration Services Agency, "Ginōjishshu seido no genjō ni tsuite" [On the present state of the Technical Intern Training Program], *MOJ*, accessed on December 20, 2024, <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001397708.pdf>, 15.

13. Ministry of Justice Immigration Services Agency, "Ginōjishshu seido no genjō ni tsuite," 15.

14. Tian, "Workers by any other name," 1497-8; Yuri Okina, "Japan's foreign worker program is ripe for reform," *East Asia Forum*, June 10, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/06/10/japans-foreign-worker-program-is-ripe-for-reform/>.

by Vietnamese TITP workers), remaining steadfastly as the 2nd highest from 2016-2021 before falling to become the fourth most represented nation behind Indonesia and the Philippines in 2022, making up just 28,802 of TITP workers.¹⁵ Despite this recent decline, Chinese workers remain an incredibly important part of the Japanese low-skill workforce. Furthermore, because of both China's rapid development to become a major world power since the 1990s and its distinction as perhaps "the greatest foreign policy challenge" to Japan, China particularly stands out among this list of worker-sending nations.¹⁶

National Security Concerns

As the landscape of Japan's immigration policy has changed regarding Chinese immigrant workers, so too has the rhetoric surrounding them. The following section will provide and analyze three distinctive forms of rhetoric Japanese politicians have geared against Chinese migrants specifically. These examples will also be juxtaposed with an evident lack of equivalent rhetoric by the same politicians and even examples of positive rhetoric by others surrounding Vietnamese immigration to Japan to show an inconsistency within the rhetoric based on foreign policy interests, asserting that these statements are ultimately symptomatic of worsening Japan-China bilateral relations.

Crime Incidents: Comparing Chinese and Vietnamese Nationals

Key among national security concerns are crime and violent incidents involving immigrant workers—especially those employed in the controversial Technical Intern Training Program—and the rhetoric surrounding these incidents specific to Chinese nationals. As of 2023 reported by the National Police Agency of Japan's

15. Ministry of Justice Immigration Services Agency, "Ginōjishshu seido no genjō ni tsuite," 15.

16. Hitoshi Tanaka, "The China Challenge and US-Japan Relations under Fumio Kishida," *Japan Center for International Exchange*, December 2021, <https://jcie.org/analysis/east-asia-insights/eai202112/>.

Organized Crime Department, some 18,088 crimes had been committed by foreign nationals living in Japan.¹⁷ Within the last 10 years, a shift in the majority of total arrests by nationality is visibly correlated with previously mentioned TITP worker statistics as Vietnamese overtook Chinese nationals in late 2016 to become the most represented group within the number of total arrests by nationality (see Figure 1).

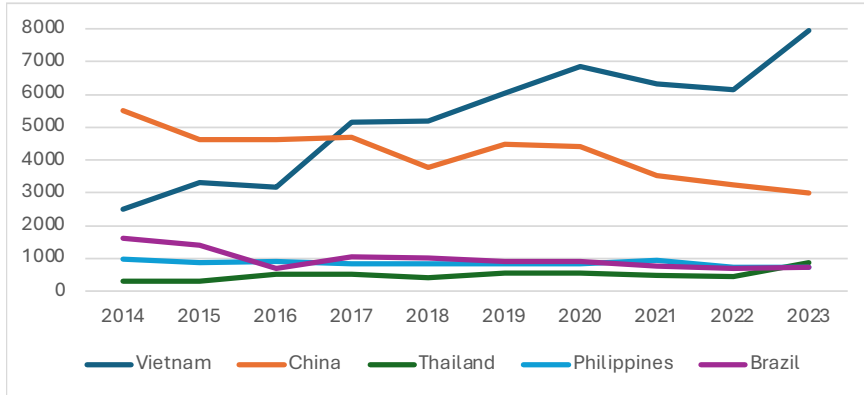


Figure 1. Total Arrests by Nationality, 2014-2023 (source: National Police Agency).¹⁸

Of the 18,088 crimes committed by foreign nationals in 2023, around 1,371 were violent crimes, making up the second largest type of crime behind theft. Of crimes committed by Chinese nationals, 15.8% were violent crimes (306 cases) while of crimes committed by Vietnamese nationals, only 4.6% were violent crimes (188 cases).¹⁹ These statistical differences illustrate that, although the actual number of cases are relatively low, there is relevant data that may not only confirm anti-immigrant bias and sentiments but may also

17. National Police Agency of Japan, Organized Crime Department, *Reiwa go nen ni okeru soshikihanzai no jōsei* [Regarding the state of affairs of organized crime, 2023], March, 2024, <https://www.npa.go.jp/publications/statistics/kikakubunseki/r5jousei20240408.pdf>, 75-79.

18. National Police Agency of Japan, Organized Crime Department, *Reiwa go nen ni okeru soshikihanzai no jōsei*, 75.

19. National Police Agency of Japan, Organized Crime Department, *Reiwa go nen ni okeru soshikihanzai no jōsei*, 94, 96.

constitute a national security concern if deemed useful by Japanese policy makers as Japan-China bilateral tensions increase.

How then have some of these incidents been viewed within Japanese media and political rhetoric? One widely covered case of violence committed by a Chinese national includes the random stabbing of a Japanese woman in Yoyogi, Shibuya on September 5, 2024. In this case, news outlets such as the Yomiuri Shimbun and Fuji News Network (FNN) focused on the assailant's Chinese nationality alongside his purported year-long desire to kill a person.²⁰ News coverage of incidents such as this can ultimately turn isolated instances into larger narratives primed against Chinese nationals and thereby can create further distance between Japanese nationals and foreign residents living in Japan. Future news reports should exercise caution to not place an emphasis on the dynamic of foreign assailant versus Japanese victims. If issues surrounding immigrant crime worsen, coverage such as this not only acts as a tool that confirms any existing anti-Chinese sentiment held among Japanese nationals but also has the potential to further fuel political rhetoric against Chinese immigration in the future.

Though these violent incidents have not been highly-sensationalized within Japanese media or political rhetoric to the same degree that immigrant-related violence can be in countries such as the United States, these fears around the potential of attacks on Japanese soil by Chinese immigrants have undoubtedly increased within the context of recent violent incidents that

20. Yomiuri Shimbun, "Shibuyaku yoyogi no rojō de nijū dai josei kirareru, jūkyū sai no chūgokujin otoko wo genkōhantaiho 'hito wo koroshitakuteyatta'" [Woman in her 20s stabbed on the street in Yoyogi, Shibuya Ward; 19-year-old Chinese man arrested on the spot, "I did it because I wanted to kill someone."], *Yomiuri Shimbun*, September 6, 2024, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/20240906-OYT1T50070/>; Fuji News Network, "toorimaka 'ichi nen mae kara hitogoroshi shitai to omotteita' gojū byōkan nandomo kyōki wo furioroshi...hankōgo ni ha tabako ippuku 'jishōkōkōsei' no jūkyū sai chūgokujin ga nijū dai josei osoi taiho" [Random Attack? "I've wanted to kill someone for a year now" 19 year old Chinese man and self-proclaimed high school student who brought down a lethal weapon many times in 50 seconds and smoked a cigarette after the crime arrested for attacking a woman in her 20s], *FNN*, September 6, 2024, <https://www.fnn.jp/articles/-/755238>.

occurred on Chinese soil in 2024.²¹ Two widely covered fatal stabbings—one of a Japanese mother and child in Suzhou in June and another of a 10 year old Japanese school boy in Shenzhen in September—grasped the attention of Japanese public and further negatively polarized Chinese and Japanese nationals against one another.²² A joint opinion poll conducted by Genron NPO and China International Communications Group in October 2024 corroborates this assessment as it found that over 87% of Chinese hold negative views of Japan, jumping by almost 25 points since 2023.²³ In this poll, some Chinese respondents pointed to the stabbing incidents as wider indication of this measured growing anti-Japanese sentiment, illustrating that these incidents have wider foreign policy implications from the public’s perspective.²⁴ In response to these incidents, politicians such as Takaichi Sanae have expressed frustration with both the incident itself and dissatisfaction in the responses and cooperation of Chinese officials. In an X post (formerly Twitter) on September 19, 2024, Takaichi stated that the incident was “incredibly bitter and painful,” specifically citing that “the Chinese authorities have made nothing clear on either the perpetrators motive or the background of the incident.”²⁵ The frustrations surrounding these incidents are extended beyond the immediately impacted communities to be felt by the broader populations of both countries, reaching politician and non-politician alike. Growing tensions surrounding anti-Japanese sentiment held by Chinese nationals coupled with political rhetoric expressed by

21. Jiji Press Staff Report, “Nearly 90% in Japan and China have negative views of other,” *The Japan Times*, December 3, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/12/03/japan/society/japan-china-negative-views/>.

22. Jiji Press Staff Report, “Nearly 90% in Japan and China have negative views of other”.

23. Jiji Press Staff Report, “Nearly 90% in Japan and China have negative views of other”; NHK World Japan “Joint poll: Negative views among Chinese toward Japan jump to 87.7%”, *NHK*, published on December 2, 2024, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20241202_19/.

24. Jiji Press Staff Report, “Nearly 90% in Japan and China have negative views of other”.

25. Sanae Takaichi, X post, September 19, 2024, 10:30 PM, https://x.com/takaichi_sanae/status/1836623778396410305.

Japanese politicians will continue to be a point of stress for Japan-China bilateral relations and may worsen significantly if future rhetoric utilizes crime statistics to justify anti-Chinese sentiment unless proactive measures are taken. Although greater outcomes of narratives and public opinion surrounding violent incidents committed by Chinese nationals both in and out of Japan on Japan-China relations and wider security concerns have yet to be seen, future developments may have a marked impact on Tokyo's calculations in restricting Chinese immigration.

Political Rhetoric: Disparities in National Security Concerns?

Kitagami Keiro: Land and Property Purchases by Chinese Migrants

Political rhetoric regarding national security concerns surrounding Chinese immigrants also permeates outside of crime and violent incidents. Another point of concern regarding national security visible within recent Japanese political rhetoric includes the purchasing of Japanese housing and land by Chinese immigrants and nationals. At the 213th Diet Budget Committee Meeting on February 6th, 2024, former vice minister of economy and current National Diet lower house member Kitagami Keiro emphasized his concerns of national security surrounding Chinese nationals, warning former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio that “Chinese forces are quietly encroaching on the territory of our country.”²⁶ As one of if not the most vocal political figures on this issue, Kitagami has emphasized the importance of preventing any further concessions of land or housing to Chinese nationals, even urging Kishida to

26. The House of Representatives, “Dai nihyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai yon gō (reiwa roku nen ni gatsu muika (kaiyōbi))” [The 213th National Diet Budget Committee Meeting, No. 4 (February 6, 2024 (Tuesday))], *The House of Representatives*, February 6, 2024, https://www.shugiin.go.jp/Internet/itdb_kaigiroku.nsf/html/kaigiroku%20/001821320240206004.htm.

add restrictions on foreign land acquisition.²⁷ Kitagami goes on to reiterate his concern and specifically frame Chinese encroachment on Japanese land as a national security concern, stating:

I do not particularly think that each and every Chinese person holds bad intentions. I don't think so, but under a dictatorship, the Chinese Communist Party can make pawns out of even private citizens at any time. I would like to ask whether it is okay for such people to buy a large amount of both land and condominiums in our country in terms of national security.²⁸

Kitagami's use of words such as *shinshoku* (侵食), meaning encroachment (noticeably also translatable to mean erosion), and stressing that Chinese nationals are buying "a large amount of land" creates a narrative of urgency geared directly against what he frames as a quiet invasion, and by extension, the existence of Chinese nationals on Japanese soil.²⁹ In actuality, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) reported that in 2023, a total of 219 foreigners believed to have a place of residence in Japan purchased 60 hectares of land.³⁰ Although the MAFF does not disclose the breakdown of these foreign purchases by nationality, these reports indicate that the acquisition of land by foreign nationals in general is not particularly large. Indeed, when compared against Japan's total land area of about 38 million hectares, the amount purchased in 2023 by all foreign nationals amounts to

27. The House of Representatives, "Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai yon gō," February 6, 2024.

28. The House of Representatives, "Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai yon gō," February 6, 2024.

29. The House of Representatives, "Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai yon gō," February 6, 2024.

30. Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, "Gaikokuhōjin nado ni yoru nōchi shutoku ni kan suru chōsa no kekka ni tsuite" [Survey results on land acquisition by foreign corporations], *MAFF*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.maff.go.jp/j/press/keiei/seisaku/240719.html>.

only about 0.000158%.³¹ As for the purchasing of condominiums by Chinese nationals, Kitagami proposes that an investigation should be launched to understand if prices are increasing due to Chinese nationals in particular, though he reiterates that his assessment is a “guess.”³² Kitagami’s ramping up of rhetoric and sense of urgency against the purchasing of land and real estate by Chinese immigrants to Japan despite conflicting facts therefore constitute another inconsistency within Japan’s political rhetoric on the threat that Chinese immigrants to Japan pose to its national security.

Kitagami’s concerns of national security and rhetoric also demonstrates a marked focus on Chinese immigrants to/residents in Japan over other foreign nationals. In a later Diet Budget Committee Meeting on February 28th, 2024, Kitagami once again raises concerns over Chinese nationals within the context of an increasingly foreigner-populated Japan more generally, stating:

There are various things that we as a nation need to consider as the number of foreigners increases. My greatest worry is, still, the issue of public safety. Above all, as I have said clearly, it is still Chinese people.³³

Kitagami thereby demonstrates a continual and focused targeting of Chinese immigrants in Japan, singling them out among all other foreign residents. Although he frames his concern for public safety and national security within the context of an increasing population of foreigners in Japan, Kitagami does not mention the potential security threat posed by any other specific foreign nationals outside of Chinese people. Namely, Kitagami does not mention the largest population of foreign immigrants in Japan:

31. Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, “Gaikokuhōjin nado ni yoru nōchi shutoku”; Convention on Biological Diversity, “Japan - Country Profile,” *Convention on Biological Diversity* accessed on December 13, 2024, <https://www.cbd.int/countries/profile?country=jp#:~:text=Japan%2C%20with%20a%20small%20land,and%203%2C700%20marine%20fish%20species>.

32. The House of Representatives, “Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai yon gō,” February 6, 2024.

33. The House of Representatives, “Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai san bunkakai dai ni gō,” February 28, 2024.

Vietnamese nationals. In stark contrast to Kitagami's rhetoric against Chinese nationals, then Minister of Justice (2023-2024) Koizumi Ryuji at the same series of meetings focused on how Japan might "become a country that Vietnamese people will choose [to work in]," expressing concerns that "Japan's rival neighbors such as Taiwan and the ROK have recently expanded their intake of foreign workers."³⁴ The dissonance present in this meeting around simultaneously seeking the restriction of Chinese actions within and invitation of Vietnamese labor to Japan, respectively, presents a wider indication of not only the willingness of Japanese politicians to improve Japan-Vietnam relations, but also an anxious sense of urgency to combat Chinese regional dominance through their rhetoric. The difference with which these Japanese political figures deal with immigration-centered issues related to China and Vietnam can be seen as a reflection of Japan's regional aspirations: firstly, to gain independence and agency from the potential threat posed by China's economic coercion and regional dominance, and secondly to bolster its economy with strategic trade partners such as Vietnam in competition with its regional rivals (i.e. ROK and Taiwan as expressed by Koizumi).

Takaichi Sanae: Economic Security Concerns

Another example of national security concerns brought against Chinese migrant workers is visible in Takaichi Sanae's economic policy written in 2021: "Towards strengthening economic security: concerns surrounding the possibility of Chinese Communist Party Organizations also being established within Japanese companies."³⁵ In this outline, Takaichi emphasizes the potential security and

34. The House of Representatives, "Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai san bunkakai dai ni gō," February 28, 2024.

35. Sanae Takaichi, "Keizai anzenhoshō no kyōka ni mukete (4): Nihon kigyōnai ni mo secchi kanō na 'Chūgoku kyōsantō soshiki' he no kenēn" [Towards strengthening economic security: concerns surrounding the possibility of Chinese Communist Party Organizations also being established within Japanese companies], *Sanae.gr.jp*, last updated on June 10, 2021, https://www.sanae.gr.jp/column_detail1326.html.

economic threat posed by article 29 of the constitution of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which states that “Primary Party organizations” are to be formed in enterprises “where there are at least three full Party members.”³⁶ She specifically argues—in a similar fashion to Kitagami—that Chinese nationals working in Japan may be used to act according to China’s international strategy. Takaichi also expresses concern regarding the influence of the CCP in “foreign affiliated companies in China,” ultimately asserting that “the Japanese government must immediately implement risk management” in relation to Japanese acquisition of Chinese companies and the establishment of party organizations in Japanese countries.³⁷ In this sense, Chinese migrant workers take on a role as an extension of the Chinese state and the CCP in Japanese political rhetoric.

One clear disparity within Takaichi’s assessment of CCP corporate law, however, is that Takaichi neither criticizes nor mentions the corporate law of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) as a threat to Japan’s economic or national security. Article 4 of Decree 98/2014/ND-CP implemented in 2014 by the CPV stipulates that “enterprises with 3 or more employees who are official Party members are eligible to establish a Party organization,” with article 2 specifying that this includes “enterprises with capital invested by foreign investors.”³⁸ This CPV decree thereby encompasses a similar corporate law as China’s, yet Takaichi’s policy website and public statements are devoid of the same concerns

36. Takaichi, “Keizai anzenhoshō no kyōka ni mukete (4)”; International Department, Central Committee of the CPC, “Constitution of the Communist Party of China,” *IDCPC*, November 27, 2014, https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/tjzl/cpcjj/PartyConstitution/202307/t20230727_157811.html.

37. Takaichi, “Keizai anzenhoshō no kyōka ni mukete (4)”.

38. LawNet, “Types of Enterprises Eligible to Establish Communist Party Organizations, Socio-Political Organizations,” *LawNet*, October 7, 2014, <https://lawnet.vn/thong-tin-phap-luat/en/chinh-sach-moi/types-of-enterprises-eligible-to-establish-communist-party-organizations-socio-political-organizations-152048.html>; Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Decree 98/2014/ND-CP on the establishment of political organizations and socio-political organizations in enterprises of all economic sectors,” *LawNet*, October 24, 2014, <https://lawnet.vn/vb/Nghi-dinh-98-2014-ND-CP-thanh-lap-to-chuc-chinh-tri-xa-hoi-doanh-nghiep-thuoc-moi-thanh-phan-kinh-te-3E242.html>.

surrounding the national economic and security implications that employing Vietnamese immigrants and investing in Vietnamese corporations similarly poses. Conversely, Takaichi visited Vietnam in 2020 where she demonstrated a higher degree of willingness to cooperate with Vietnamese businesses as she emphasized her success in “achieving results that will also help promote the overseas expansion of Japanese companies” through her talks with then Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc.³⁹ Despite now making up the largest number of migrant workers in Japan, rhetoric surrounding the same potential security risks posed by Vietnamese immigrants as Chinese immigrants are ultimately not held to the same scrutiny. Instead, they are disproportionately criticized as pawns of the CCP without individual agency. Now within her new position as Prime Minister, Takaichi has continued this trend by promising to “deepen the comprehensive strategic partnership” with Vietnam while simultaneously undermining Japan-China relations with rhetoric on contingencies surrounding Taiwan.⁴⁰ Takaichi and Kitagami’s disproportionate targeting of Chinese immigrant residents and laws therefore centers the CCP’s perceived ability to utilize Chinese nationals in furthering Beijing’s foreign policy interests within their rhetoric. Although one could attribute this disproportionate, targeted rhetoric against Chinese nationals and the CCP to a variety of factors —e.g. China being a larger foreign adversary than Vietnam, China having more potential economic coercive power, etc.—it is important to point to the inconsistencies of when and where these criticisms are applied and recognize their implications in foreign policy narratives. As Chinese nationals in Japan continually face scrutiny in lieu of their Vietnamese counterparts, Japan-China bilateral relations continually show signs of strain while Japan-

39. Sanae Takaichi, “Reiwa ni nen shōgatsu jūyōnnichi kishakaiken” [January 14, 2020 Press Conference], *Sanae.gr.jp*, January 14, 2020, https://www.sanae.gr.jp/kaiken_detail37.html.

40. The Japan Times, “Japan and Vietnam agree to promote exchanges” *Japan Times*, October 28, 2025, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/10/28/japan/politics/vietnam-japan-cooperation/>; Jeff Kingston, “How Japan’s Sanae Takaichi Torpedoed Ties With China,” *Time*, November 30, 2025, <https://time.com/7337322/japan-china-takaichi-spat-taiwan/>.

Vietnam bilateral relations show signs of potential growth.

Former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio

In response to concerns posed by politicians such as Kitagami Keiro and newly appointed PM Takaichi Sanae, former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio had adopted relatively moderate positions. For example, Kishida held a moderate position in response to Kitagami's concerns around land and housing purchases by Chinese residents, affirming that the rise of condominium prices was due to "various factors such as the sharply rising cost of construction materials and labor" rather than squarely placing the blame at the feet of Chinese nationals.⁴¹ Though, ultimately Kishida has done little to offset these price increases through opening greater channels for foreign immigration. Regarding Takaichi's economic security concerns surrounding the CCP Constitution article, she raised the argument at the 208th National Diet Budget Committee on January 24th, 2022, though Kishida made no comments on the issue throughout the meeting, her questions instead being answered by Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry Hagiuda Kōichi who only emphasized the importance for "Japanese companies to ensure sound management, confidentiality, and protection, both domestic and foreign."⁴² At this meeting, too, the Vietnamese law with the same stipulations was not mentioned. Kishida's responses to disparate national security rhetoric against China have therefore been relatively deflective and non-committal. This behavior is also consistent with his immigration policy more holistically, as publications such as the East Asia Forum have reiterated that Kishida's policy focused on economic development while notably neglecting to establish any formal immigration policy and has

41. The House of Representatives, "Dai niyakujūsan kai kokkai yosaniinkai dai yon gō," February 6, 2024.

42. The House of Representatives, "dai niyakuhaikai kokka yosaniinkai da ni gō (reiwa yo nen shōgatsu nijūyōnnichi (getsuyōbi))" [The 208th National Diet Budget Committee no. 2 (January 24, 2022 (Monday))], *The House of Representatives*, January 24, 2022, https://www.shugiin.go.jp/internet/itdb_kaigiroku.nsf/html/kaigiroku/001820820220124002.htm.

“generally avoided the topic in major policy speeches.”⁴³ Kishida’s lack of willingness to engage further with immigration policy and better contextualize rhetoric will likely cause further issues in the future if more formal policies are not adopted to create a greater supply of foreign labor.

Despite her changes in policy regarding strategic ambiguity surrounding Taiwan, Sanae Takaichi’s recent position as Prime Minister has not significantly deviated from the example set by her predecessor Kishida regarding relative silence on Japan’s immigration policy. However, her commitment to promoting Japan-Vietnam bilateral relations does signal for the potential of a forward-looking drive for an increase in immigration to Japan. Whether or not Takaichi might diverge from the status-quo in the near future to adopt a more hardline approach against Chinese immigration in the interest of national security would have a markedly negative impact on the state of already declining Japan-China relations.

Foreign Reactions

The following section will outline the reactions to Japan’s discrepant rhetoric surrounding immigration and of the two most important nations in Japan’s foreign (and arguably domestic) policy making: China and the United States.

China. Reactions to Japan’s ramping up of rhetoric against Chinese nationals and immigration and its impact on Japan-China relations has not been a focus of Beijing’s foreign policy. CCP general secretary Xi Jinping has been relatively silent as he has launched no criticism regarding political rhetoric surrounding Chinese residents of Japan. Possible explanations for this relative silence are twofold: Japan-China relations reaching a low point in recent years and issues surrounding immigration to Japan are relatively low-priority in comparison to China’s more pressing foreign policy

43. Maximilien Xavier Rehm, “Why won’t Kishida adopt a formal immigration policy?,” *East Asia Forum*, November 23, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/11/23/why-wont-kishida-adopt-a-formal-immigration-policy/>.

goals vis-à-vis Japan. Japan-China relations continue to sour as Xi has maintained advisement of Chinese citizens to avoid traveling to Japan for vacation in reaction to Takaichi's remarks on Taiwan.⁴⁴ Other pressing issues faced by Xi include, for example, territorial disputes, the Taiwan contingency, economic sanctions, and Japan's tendency to follow the United States' foreign policy decisions.⁴⁵ Indeed, Japan-China relations have been continually strained over the last few decades by factors such as—but not limited to—the COVID-19 pandemic that have only exacerbated tensions in surrounding Japan-China security and economic concerns on both sides.⁴⁶ These issues have therefore seemingly taken priority over the described disparity within the treatment of Chinese nationals in Japan, evidenced by the recent Japan-China summit between Xi Jinping and Ishiba Shigeru during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum summit in Lima, Peru in which any mention of immigration-centered issues, the CCP's corporate law, or the purchasing of land and real estate was noticeably absent.⁴⁷ Instead, both parties focused on strengthening communication at all levels and green economic policies with Japan also discussing concerns about the East China Sea situation and recent violent incidents on Chinese soil (citing the fatal stabbing of a Japanese student in Shenzhen in September 2024).⁴⁸ As tensions remain within Japan-China relations, it will be critical to pay attention to

44. Reuters, "China warns citizens against Japan visits during longest annual holiday," *Reuters*, January 26, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-airlines-extend-free-cancellations-japan-related-flights-october-2026-01-26/>.

45. Aparna Divya, "China-Japan Relations at a Crossroads Amid Strategic Challenges," *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/08/china-japan-relations-at-a-crossroads-amid-strategic-challenges/>; Asei Ito, "Japan's Economic Pragmatism: Cooperating and Competing with China," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (2021): 7-8.

46. Ito, "Japan's Economic Pragmatism," 1.

47. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-China Summit Meeting," MOFA, November 15, 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_m1/cn/pageite_000001_00003.html; Reuters, "Xi tells Ishiba China hopes Japan will 'properly handle' history, Taiwan issues," *Reuters*, November 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/xi-tells-ishiba-china-hopes-japan-will-properly-handle-history-taiwan-issues-2024-11-16/>.

48. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Japan-China Summit Meeting".

what Beijing continues to prioritize in its foreign policy goals and if it plans to leverage its economic position through Chinese nationals as feared by Japanese politicians in the near future.

United States of America. Diverging from Beijing's position, Washington has directly criticized Japan's restrictive immigration policy as not only being an impediment to its economic development, but also a direct cause of its economic decline in recent years. At a campaign fundraising event in May of 2024, former President Joe Biden emphasized that the US economy was growing because it welcomes immigrants, juxtaposing this success by asking "Why is Japan having [economic] trouble? ...Because they're xenophobic. They don't want immigrants."⁴⁹ Although Biden has not made comments regarding the disparities of rhetoric surrounding immigrants and Chinese nationals in Japan, these statements illustrate the former president's willingness to criticize Japan's domestic policies to project his own domestic successes even at the expense of hurting US-Japan bilateral relations. In response, politicians such as Kitagami Keiro in a National Diet meeting for judicial, welfare, and labor affairs deflected Biden's remarks in stating that "it is not just Japan that does xenophobic things as Vietnam and China are also xenophobic in their dealings with Japanese workers."⁵⁰ Though these rhetorical developments do not likely pose any serious threat to the status quo of US-Japan bilateral relations, any continual criticisms of Japan's immigration policies from Washington may add a noticeable strain. However, this is

49. Seung Min Kim, "President Joe Biden calls Japan and India 'xenophobic' nations that do not welcome immigrants," *AP News*, May 2, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-india-japan-china-russia-immigration-economy-74a50301fac4f48fd5e5a4cc9b1bb3ff>; Jennifer Jett, "Biden calls U.S. ally Japan 'xenophobic,' along with China and Russia," *NBC News*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/biden-japan-xenophobic-rcna150332>.

50. The House of Representatives, "dai niyakujūsankai kokkai shūgiin hōmuiinkai kōsei rōdōiinkai rengō shinsakai da ichi gō reiwa roku nen gogatsu tōka" [213th National Diet House of Representatives joint committee on judicial, welfare, and labor affairs review meeting no. 1 May 10, 2024], *The House of Representatives*, May 10, 2024, <https://kokkai.ndl.go.jp/simple/txt/121305222X00120240510/156>, 156.

unlikely to continue with the advent of Donald Trump's reelection as the central issues that face US-Japan relations will likely hinge on trade (e.g. tariffs) and security alliances rather than on immigration.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

As this paper demonstrates, disproportionately negative political rhetoric and attitudes towards Chinese immigration and foreign residents as threats to national security in Japan has increased within recent years while Japan has simultaneously focused more effort on bolstering Vietnamese immigration to Japan. The juxtaposition of rhetoric on preserving national security from important political figures such as Kitagami Keiro and Takaichi Sanae (especially in her new capacity as Prime Minister)—as well as the relative lack of formal policy adoptions by former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio—sets the stage for important policy decisions that will impact Japan-China relations in the near future: will Japan adopt more hardline policies against Chinese immigration specifically along the narratives of negative political rhetoric and in reaction to recent the chilling of relations? If so, will Japan thereafter seek more aggressive policies to promote the immigration of Vietnamese workers to Japan?

As Vietnam is an incredibly important member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—an increasingly important economic union for Japan's regional trade goals—and the primary supplier of foreign labor to Japan, it is in Japan's best interest not only maintain its positive bilateral relationship with Vietnam, but also to invite further opportunities for economic and social cooperation with Vietnam in the near future. Despite the sizeable difference in the economic power of Vietnam and China, the unmistakable disconnect in Japanese rhetoric regarding immigrants from either nation warrants analysis. This comparison is especially relevant within the wider context of Vietnam's new status as the greatest supplier of labor and the renewed energy displayed by Takaichi to improve Japan-Vietnam ties compared with the simultaneous decline of Chinese immigration to Japan and worsening Japan-China ties. As Japan continues to grapple with issues such as its

declining birth rate, it remains imperative for Tokyo to continually pursue more open immigration policies in attempts to dissuade the loss of Vietnamese labor, as some reports state that Vietnamese immigration to Japan is beginning to decrease, citing issues such as the weak Yen and high cost of migration.⁵¹ Japan should prioritize pursuing policies to invite further migration and strengthening its worker population through implementing mechanisms like one proposed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which will help ease the cost of Vietnamese trainees migration fees by requiring employers to share over half of the financial burden.⁵² However, while pursuing these foreign policy interests—especially those specific to Vietnamese migrant workers over those of other nationalities—Tokyo must be careful to not overstep in its domestic decisions and political rhetoric against Chinese immigration so as to not vilify China and add further strain to the already tense state of Japan-China relations.

Finally, one means through which Japan might diffuse tensions with China is both by adding similar incentives for Chinese workers as they are posturing to do for Vietnamese workers and by easing rhetoric against Chinese nationals as security threats. Tokyo reciprocating on Beijing's recent decision to allow Japanese tourists short-term travel to China without a visa by permitting the same policy to Chinese nationals is another potential avenue that might foster future growth in this sphere and improve anti-Japanese sentiment among Chinese people.⁵³ In light of the aforementioned

51. Atsushi Tomiyama, "Resuscitating Vietnamese worker dreams in Japan," *East Asia Forum*, December 5, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/12/05/resuscitating-vietnamese-worker-dreams-in-japan/>; Yuji Nitta, "Japan to ease financial burden on Vietnamese migrant workers," *Nikkei Asia*, June 19, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Japan-immigration/Japan-to-ease-financial-burden-on-Vietnamese-migrant-workers>.

52. Nitta, "Japan to ease financial burden on Vietnamese migrant workers".

53. Qian Zhou, "China Expands Unilateral Visa-Free Policy to 9 Additional Countries Including Japan, Extends Stay to 30 Days," *China Briefing*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-unilateral-visa-free-entry-38-countries/#:~:text=China%20has%20expanded%20its%20unilateral,and%20extend%20the%20stay%20duration.&text=On%20November%2022%2C%202024%2C%20the,DEPTH%20INVESTMENT%20AND%20BUSINESS%20GUIDES>.

moves by China to caution its citizens against visiting or living in Japan and worsening Japan-China relations, Takaichi must weigh the economic impact that a sharp decline in Chinese immigration and tourism to Japan might yield in the near future. Tokyo's calculations must also consider if such a decrease should apply across the board for immigrants and tourists of all foreign nations, or if bolstering Japan-Vietnam strategic relations proposes a viable alternative for the island nation.

Further Research

Potential avenues for further research may lie in answering questions such as “to what extent do Japanese politicians criticize other policy decisions disproportionately against China as its regional rival?,” “How might Takaichi and her new cabinet diverge from Kishida’s lack of a formal immigration policy?,” “How does the wider Japanese public perceive Chinese and Vietnamese foreign residents in Japan differently?,” and “To what extent can and should the agency of Chinese nationals (namely outside the reach of the CCP) be recognized within Japanese political rhetoric?” Further case studies regarding Japanese rhetoric on other regions and countries, for example the US, Europe, the Middle East, and its implications for Japanese foreign policy would also make valuable additions to the existing scholarship.

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“We Will Not ‘Play the Jackal to the Tiger’”

Micro-Mobilization and Affective Communication

Mechanisms in Chinese Podcasting—A Case Study of
Bomi’s “The End at the Beginning” Trilogy

ABSTRACT In inter- and post-pandemic China, political speech is often less a matter of “having opinions” than of negotiating exhaustion—a widely shared sense that everyday striving no longer translates into historical efficacy. This article examines how such moral fatigue is articulated and circulated through “The End at the Beginning,” a three-part episode series produced by the film commentator Bomi and distributed across platform-fragmented, censorship-prone audio infrastructures. Bringing podcast studies’ concerns with listening publics, intimacy, and participation into conversation with theories of affective publics and micromobilization, the article argues that reception under digital authoritarianism is frequently organized through low-visibility participation rather than overt voice. Methodologically, it combines close listening to the trilogy with analysis of a Weibo corpus compiled via Python keyword scraping. The article identifies four recurrent reception mechanisms: (1) affective resonance and emotional vocabulary that consolidate a shared mood of moral depletion; (2) ethical self-positioning that frames listening as refusal and non-complicity; (3) metaphoric compression that renders critique portable through condensed figures; and (4) archival redistribution

and stealth signaling that sustain circulation through informal backups and coded routes. Taken together, these practices show how podcast listening can operate as ethical alignment and community-driven continuity work when public voice is unevenly available. The article contributes a reception-centered account of Chinese podcasting that reconceptualizes participation as infrastructural, affective, and tactical, extending podcast studies beyond liberal-public assumptions toward the politics of constrained listening.

KEYWORDS podcast studies, China, censorship, listening publics, micro-mobilization

Introduction

In recent years, as public discourse in China has become increasingly constrained, former media professionals have turned to podcasting as an alternative platform for content creation and public expression. Since 2019, the Chinese podcasting industry has witnessed significant expansion, with platforms like Himalaya.FM, Xiaoyuzhou, and Apple Podcasts hosting an increasing number of independently produced shows. This growth is closely tied to the shrinking space of legacy journalism: many early podcasters were veteran reporters, editors, or cultural critics who sought to preserve long-form content and critical discussion in a media environment increasingly governed by algorithmic visibility and political red lines. As “A Single Article to Understand the Past and Present of Chinese Podcasts” notes, “podcasting became the last fortress for those fleeing from the journalism industry.”¹

A representative case of this transformation is the film commentary podcast channel *Bomi and His Friends* 波米和他的朋友們, founded by *Bomi* 波米, a former senior reporter and film

1. Guaizi Lang, “Yi pian wenzhang, dudong Zhongwen boke qianshi jinsheng 一篇文章, 讀懂中國博客前世今生 [A Single Article to Understand the Past and Present of Chinese Podcasts],” *Shaoshu pai* (SSPai), August 5, 2022, <https://sspai.com/post/74874>.

critic at Phoenix New Media.² The podcast operates under multiple names, including *Villain Film Commentary* 反派影評 and *Four Seasons Office* 四季辦公室,³ reflecting a broader strategy common among Chinese podcasts to decentralize their presence and maintain continuity across censorship events.⁴ Despite some criticism of his sharp tone and subjective style, Bomi is widely regarded as one of the few remaining Chinese film commentators who consistently deliver informed and analytically rigorous content. In November 2022, the channel released a three-part series titled *The End at the Beginning* 開局的終局 across both domestic and overseas platforms. Emerging during the final stage of COVID-19 lockdowns, the series employed an emotionally charged narrative style and the symbolic phrase *We Will Not Play the Jackal to the Tiger* 我們不做倭鬼, to elicit strong affective resonance and subtle political expression among listeners.⁵

This study examines how “The End at the Beginning” trilogy mobilizes affect and community under conditions of censorship. Drawing on the concepts of affective mobilization and micro-mobilization, it argues that through affective rhetoric, strategic platform navigation, and peer-to-peer circulation, the podcast enacted a form of mediated resistance. This resistance is not

2. “Introduction of the Phoenix Entertainment Delegation to the 65th Berlin International Film Festival,” *Phoenix Entertainment*, February 5, 2015, https://ent.ifeng.com/a/20150205/42237869_0.shtml. All the translations given in this paper are my own.

3. For consistency, this paper will refer to Bomi’s channel as “Villain Film Commentary,” as the trilogy *The End at the Beginning*—the primary focus of this analysis—is most widely associated with this name.

4. For instance, the popular podcast *Shengyu jiazhi* (剩餘價值, “Surplus Value”)—which was banned on the Chinese app Xiaoyuzhou in February 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic—later rebranded as *Suiji bodong* (隨機波動, “Random Fluctuation”) to continue its distribution through alternative channels.

5. *Changgui* 倭鬼 refers to a figure in Chinese folklore: when a person is devoured by a tiger, their soul becomes a “*chang* ghost” forced to serve the beast, running ahead of it to clear the way and lure new victims. A well-known early source is Li Fang 李昉, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記, 430: 1b-4a [“Ma Zheng” 馬拯]. On this basis, the later idiom *wei hu zuo chang* 為虎作倭 (“to act as a *chang* for the tiger”) came to mean “to act as an evildoer’s accomplice” or “to abet oppressive power.” I therefore translate the phrase *Women buzuo changgui* 我們不做倭鬼 as “We Will Not Play the Jackal to the Tiger,” drawing on the English idiom of “playing the jackal” to someone in order to highlight the refusal to serve as a subordinate enabler of predatory authority.

characterized by overt confrontation, but by distributed affective labor and intimate solidarity practices that bypass direct censorship while fostering political resonance.

The theoretical framework guiding this analysis integrates two interconnected concepts. First, micro-mobilization contexts refer to “small group settings in which processes of collective attribution are combined with rudimentary forms of organization to produce mobilization for collective action.”⁶ These spaces—such as peer groups, informal media communities, or affinity-based circles—serve as essential infrastructures for cultivating potential activist engagement. In authoritarian environments, where public assembly is often curtailed, such decentralized and socially embedded contexts enable the circulation of critical discourse and the formation of collective identities without triggering immediate suppression. Second, affective mobilization concerns the circulation of emotions as a connective force within networked publics. As Zizi Papacharissi defines it, affective publics are “networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment.”⁷ These publics are shaped by features of digital platforms such as persistence, transmissibility, and searchability, allowing sentiments to become organizing forces in the absence of formal political structures.

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the possibilities and limitations of podcasting within China’s digital authoritarian landscape. Xu and Morris analyze how the mobile audio app Ximalaya.FM reconfigures “audible publics” by privatizing listening and embedding state and corporate power into the app’s interface, recommendation systems, and content moderation, ultimately offering the false promise of political participation

6. Doug McAdam, “Micromobilization Contexts and Recruitment to Activism,” in *From Structure to Action: Comparing Social Movement Research Across Cultures*, ed. Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Sidney Tarrow (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1988), 134–135.

7. Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 125–126.

while reconsolidating media control.⁸ More recently, Zhu and Yang chart the so-called “Renaissance” of auditory media by examining Chinese podcast users’ motivations and the development strategies of podcast platforms, while Jinghong Xu and colleagues show how Chinese news podcasts on Himalaya balance intimacy and professionalism through specific vocal, narrative, and interactional strategies.⁹ Yet much of this work foregrounds platform architecture, institutional regulation, and industry logics; even when intimacy and affect are addressed, they are usually treated as strategies for news production or platform growth rather than as contested sites of political feeling. Moreover, the circulation of political podcast content under conditions of censorship remains underexplored.

Podcast studies, more broadly, have, however, shifted from defining the medium to theorizing how listening organizes publics, intimacy, and participation. Sharon argues that analyses must attend to how infrastructures and vernacular practices co-produce sociality, making participation legible even when it is not expressed through overt interaction.¹⁰ Euritt, Korfmacher, and Llinares similarly theorize “listening publics,” while Berry clarifies why podcast listening is often routine-based, companionate, and affectively intimate.¹¹ Taking China as a critical site where “voice” is unevenly available, this article aims to show how post-pandemic

8. Yizhou Xu and Jeremy Wade Morris, “App Radio: The Reconfiguration of Audible Publics in China through Ximalaya.FM,” in *Engaging Social Media in China: Platforms, Publics, and Production*, ed. Guobin Yang and Wei Wang (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2021), 4.

9. Ying Zhu and Yali Yang, “The ‘Renaissance’ of Auditory Medium in China: A Study on the Motives of Chinese Podcasting Users and Corresponding Development Strategies of Chinese Podcasting,” *Media International Australia* (2025): 1, 12–13; Jinghong Xu et al., “Strategic Choices for Balancing Intimacy and Professionalism: Content Analysis of Chinese Podcasts on Himalaya,” *Media and Communication* 13 (2025): 1–2.

10. Tzili Sharon, “Peeling the Pod: Towards a Research Agenda for Podcast Studies,” *Annals of the International Communication Association* 47, no. 3 (December 2023): 327–329.

11. Alyn Euritt, Anne Korfmacher, and Dario Llinares, “Introduction: Podcasting’s Listening Publics,” *Participations* 18, no. 1 (May 2021): 317–19; Richard Berry, “Podcasting: Considering the Evolution of the Medium and Its Association with the Word ‘Radio’,” *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 14, no. 1 (2016): 12–13.

moral exhaustion conditions listeners' ethical alignments and the covert circulation of political affect.

To understand how affective and discursive strategies operate in practice, it is essential to examine the podcast's concrete tactics for navigating censorship and sustaining circulation. From its inception, "Villain Film Commentary" has adopted a multi-channel dissemination strategy, distributing content across both domestic and international platforms. During the launch of "The End at the Beginning," this strategy proved especially crucial, enabling the trilogy to evade takedown while maintaining wide accessibility in a politically sensitive moment. The podcast maintains an international presence via RSS syndication, alongside distribution on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Everand, and YouTube. In mainland China, it has maintained a presence through WeChat public accounts, NetEase Cloud Radio, and formerly the content platform *Xiaoe Tong* 小鵝通. The podcast faced closure on November 2, 2022, due to alleged "violations."¹² In response, the team shifted its monetization and distribution to Afdian, an international crowdfunding site. This diversified platform architecture mitigates the risk of complete deplatforming and enables the podcast to sustain communication through strategic fragmentation.

Additionally, the podcast employs differentiated content strategies across various platforms. For instance, its WeChat public account adopts more cautious language to ensure content approval, contrasting sharply with more explicit discussions allowed by overseas platforms. This dual-track strategy exemplifies careful balancing between maintaining content integrity and complying with censorship norms, aligning with what Guobin Yang describes as the "creative means of negotiation and improvisation" that characterize media practices under "fluid and porous (political)

12. "Guanyu xiaoe tong dianpu zao guanbi de shiyi 關於小鵝通店鋪遭關閉的事宜 [Statement on the Closure of the Xiaoe-Tong Store]," *Fanpai Yingping WeChat official account*, November 3, 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/JWvBnX7LDNUQe45UT4bKXQ>.

boundaries.”¹³

Furthermore, the very branding of the podcast as *fanpai* 反派, which translates literally as “villain,” functions as a deliberate rhetorical device symbolizing resistance to the perceived neutrality of mainstream media. In the Chinese political discourse, the term *fanpai* does not merely denote an antagonist in fictional narratives, as understood unequivocally in the Western discourse. Instead, it often connotes political deviance or subversion, reminiscent of expressions such as *fan le ni le* 反了你了 (you’re rebelling!) or accusations of being *fandong* 反動 (counterrevolutionary) during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. This symbolic meaning gives the podcast’s title an undercurrent of provocation and defiance; the branding thus constitutes an explicit rejection of the balanced, moderate discourse associated with conventional journalism. Audience interactions on social media platforms further amplify this oppositional stance, transforming listeners into active participants in constructing a shared identity in an alternative sphere that resists dominant narratives.

The three-part podcast series “The End at the Beginning” critically examines the dilemmas and strategies of Chinese-language filmmakers facing political censorship and industry constraints. Released in November 2022, at the tail end of China’s prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns and tightening cultural regulation and just weeks before the “White Paper Movement,” the series spoke into a climate of pandemic fatigue, pervasive information control, and widespread precarity in the film industry. The three episodes, *Zhuangding* 壯丁 (“Conscripts”), *Yami* 啞謎 (“Charade”), and *Changgui* 僥鬼 (“Jackal to the Tiger”), focus on different facets of this challenge: from the initial confrontation with institutional pressures, to the cultural and market negotiations involved in film importation and adaptation, and finally to the choices between

13. Guobin Yang and Wei Wang, *Engaging Social Media in China: Platforms, Publics, and Production* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2021), xix.

leaving or staying in a fraught creative environment.¹⁴ The series explores how creators navigate between compromise and integrity, exile and rootedness, highlighting both the emotional costs and pragmatic realities of sustaining Chinese-language cinema today. Its circulation across domestic and overseas platforms turned these debates into a shared vocabulary through which listeners could process their own anxieties, anger, and ethical dilemmas in that moment.

To understand how mediated dissent circulates across digital publics, this study analyzes a dataset of Weibo posts responding to “The End at the Beginning.” Among the platforms surveyed—including Weibo, Douban, RedNote, and X (formerly Twitter)—Weibo proved the most active and generative in user engagement. Often regarded as “the Chinese Twitter” with over 605 million monthly active users as of 2023 Quarter 3,¹⁵ it has functioned as a relatively open platform within China’s digital landscape, enabling effective expression, slogan reproduction, and grassroots archiving, despite operating under state-imposed censorship.

Audience reception was examined through a Weibo corpus compiled via a Python-based crawler using the keyword query “开局的终局” (the trilogy’s title). The crawler retrieved only the main text of top-level posts containing the keyword that remained accessible at the time of collection; it did not capture comment threads, repost chains, or embedded interaction metadata. No engagement thresholds (e.g., minimum likes or reposts) were applied, since highly circulated posts are plausibly more likely to be removed in China’s platform environment. The dataset should accordingly be

14. See “Di yi zhang, Zhuangding [Chapter 1, ‘Conscripts’],” Bomi and Friends, November 14, 2022, <https://siji.typlog.io/episodes/zhuangding>; “Di er zhang, Yami [Chapter 2, ‘Charade’],” Bomi and Friends, November 14, 2022, <https://siji.typlog.io/episodes/yami>; and “Di san zhang, Changgui [Chapter 3, ‘Jackal to the Tiger’],” Bomi and Friends, November 16, 2022, <https://siji.typlog.io/episodes/changgui>.

15. See Weibo Data Center, “2023 Weibo nianqing yonghu fazhan baogao” 2023 微博年輕用戶發展報告 [2023 Weibo Youth User Development Report], March 12, 2024, 4, <https://data.weibo.com/report/reportDetail?id=471> and “Twitter User Numbers Overtaken by China’s Sina Weibo.” BBC News, May 17, 2017. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-39947442>.

understood as a survivor sample rather than a complete record of reception, a limitation that is analytically salient given the article's focus on indirect and low-visibility circulation under censorship. User-generated content was handled according to a harm-minimization approach: posts containing personal identifiers unrelated to the analysis were excluded, and quoted material was presented in their English translations to reduce traceability. In notes, user posts are cited using anonymized identifiers (WB01–WBxx) and dates rather than URLs.

These posts provide insight into the podcast's extended life beyond its audio format. To unpack the mechanisms by which “The End at the Beginning” circulates emotionally and politically within digital publics, the following sections trace four interrelated yet analytically distinct modes of response: (1) affective resonance and emotional vocabulary, (2) ethical self-positioning and identity claims, (3) metaphoric compression and symbolic condensation, and (4) archival practices, redistribution, and stealth signaling.

Affective Resonance and Emotional Vocabulary

Firstly, these posts are primarily characterized by direct expressions of emotion and affect. Such language not only externalizes individual reactions but also functions as the connective tissue that binds listeners into what Papacharissi terms an “affective public.” This public is not formed through formal organization but through shared sentiment, mobilized and sustained by the emotional force of the podcast. This resonance is amplified by both the podcast's affectively charged language and Bomi's distinctive vocal performance. His delivery—impassioned, rhythmically varied, and marked by a recognizable Beijing accent—embodies what “A Brief History of Chinese Podcasts” describes as *Beijing-style* 京派, a mode of podcasting oriented toward emotional satisfaction rather than mere information transfer.¹⁶ This affective style culminates in the final chapter “*Changgui*,” where Bomi likens himself to

16. Guaizi Lang, “Yi pian wenzhang, dudong Zhongwen boke qianshi jinsheng.”

a violinist on the deck of a sinking ship: aware of the futility yet committed to bearing witness through sound.¹⁷ The episode closes with the iconic violin piece from *Titanic*, deepening the sense of tragic perseverance.¹⁸ Listeners wrote:

“After finishing ‘The End at the Beginning,’ the violin started, and my goosebumps erupted. [听完开局的终局提琴声传来鸡皮疙瘩暴起]¹⁹

Bomi’s views aren’t something I agree with completely, but he really is an incredibly compelling speaker. By the end, I couldn’t help getting a bit teary-eyed too. [波米的观点我也不是完全赞同 但他实在是个很有感染力的播讲者 听到最后我也忍不住有点泪目]”²⁰

These responses reveal how the podcast’s soundscape embeds affective experience not just in language, but in the listener’s embodied response. Beyond sound, emotional vocabulary such as “night without sleep” 夜不能眠, “emotionally numbed” 心冷, and “cried” 哭了 frequently appear in Weibo posts. One user remarked, “These three episodes should be recorded in history” 这三期节目真应该载入史册, positioning the podcast as a document of moral and emotional significance.²¹ The repetition of such affective language—mixing despair, awe, and historical consciousness—demonstrates how *The End at the Beginning* catalyzes a shared emotional grammar. In a media environment constrained by censorship, these emotionally saturated expressions circulate more freely than direct political critique.

Ethical Self-Positioning and Identity Claims

Beyond emotional expression, many listeners wrote in an explicitly ethical register. Posts repeatedly shift from reaction to

17. Bomi and Friends, “Di san zhang, Changgui,” 28:49–28:58.

18. Bomi and Friends, “Di san zhang, Changgui,” 35:34–38:22.

19. Weibo post (author anonymized; WBo1), November 30, 2022.

20. Weibo post (author anonymized; WBo2), January 25, 2023.

21. Weibo post (author anonymized; WBo3), November 17, 2022.

responsibility: listening is framed as a moral stance rather than a moment of consumption. Responses to “The End at the Beginning” therefore take the form of refusal—symbolic withdrawals from dominant narratives and from an ideological system listeners no longer wish to support. This discursive mode often centers around the decision to “vote with their feet” by boycotting propaganda films or renouncing participation in state-aligned cultural production. Users declared:

“I will no longer spend a penny on domestic film releases.
[以后不会再为国产院线片多花一分钱]²²

Even as non-filmmakers, after listening to Bomi’s “The End at the Beginning,” I believe the very least we can do is refuse to contribute to the box office of “key projects” and stop adding bricks to the high wall that stands against freedom.²³ [非电影人听完波米的《开局的终局》，我想我们最起码能够做到不为“重点项目”贡献票房，不为自由的高墙添砖加瓦。]²⁴

Such statements articulate a form of political agency enacted through cultural disengagement. Meanwhile, these identity claims are not always tied to overt resistance but often register as disillusioned clarity. These expressions reflect a transition from disappointed spectatorship to ethical non-participation. In doing so, listeners reclaim a form of moral coherence in a landscape marked by aesthetic disintegration and ideological fatigue. Users remarked:

“Cinema—or more precisely, the life of ‘Chinese cinema’

22. Weibo post (author anonymized; WBo4), January 29, 2023.

23. Weibo post (author anonymized; WBo5), November 19, 2022. “Key projects” refers to state-sanctioned film productions planned under the 2021–2025 “14th Five-Year Plan for Chinese Film Development,” which mandates the annual release of ten ideologically themed films. See “Shisiwu Zhongguo dianying fazhan guihua 十四五中國電影發展規劃 [14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Chinese Film],” China Film Administration, 2021, <https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/xxgk/gztz/202111/P020211114397635298463.pdf>.

24. Tranquillity_21, post on Weibo, November 19, 2022, 2:41 p.m., <https://weibo.com/5614378614/MfKhGl3Sy>.

as cinema—seems to have come to a standstill for me. What is there to do? Almost nothing. After these years of the pandemic, it feels as if I've already grown used to being slowly brought to the boil in lukewarm water. [电影,确切说是“中国电影”作为‘cinema’的生命,似乎在这里停滞了。能做什么呢?几乎什么都不能。疫情几年,似乎已经接受温水逐渐煮沸了。]²⁵

Everyone's been talking about “The End at the Beginning” lately; cinema is like this, music may have reached this point even earlier, and other industries are hardly different. There used to be hope—now I don't know what is left. We used to say that fish cannot understand birds; now even the fish no longer know what will become of the river they live in. [最近都在说《开局的终局》,电影如此,音乐可能更早一点,其他行业又何尝不是如此呢。以前还有希望,现在还剩下什么?不知道。以前说鱼不知道飞鸟,现在鱼连身处的河流都不知道会变成怎样。]^{26”}

Such posts also suggest a redefinition of audiencehood. No longer positioned merely as consumers or critics, listeners articulate themselves as ethically aware individuals choosing non-complicity. The role of the podcast here is not only informational but transformative: by framing cinematic decay as a moral crisis, it prompts listeners to recast their cultural participation as a political stance. One user poignantly summarized this shift:

“Every additional person who listens to ‘The End at the Beginning’ adds another layer of protection for cinematic freedom.”²⁷

25. Weibo post (author anonymized; WBo6), November 18, 2022.

26. Kuanfulisi, post on Weibo, November 21, 2022, 9:31 a.m., <https://weibo.com/1800355654/4838175183477610>.

27. Weibo post (author anonymized; WBo8), November 2, 2022. The phrasing adapts a promotional tagline for the Chinese edition of George Orwell's 1984: “Every additional person who reads 1984 adds one more safeguard for freedom” (多一個人讀《一九八四》,就多一份自由的保障), cited in Emma Larkin, *Zai Miandian xunzhao Qiaozhi Owei'er 在緬甸尋找喬治·奧威爾* [Finding George Orwell in Burma], trans. Wang Xiaoyu (Beijing: Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe, 2016), 267.

[多一个人听《开局的终局》，就多一份对电影自由的保障]²⁸

This form of ethical positioning reflects non-confrontational yet politically charged actions that affirm individual autonomy within constricted discursive spaces. By refusing to “buy in,” both literally and metaphorically, listeners engage in a politics of non-cooperation. These acts may not amount to collective mobilization, but they signal the reconstitution of subjectivity through refusal. In this way, ethical language becomes a tool of micro-mobilization, enabling dissent to take root in everyday choices and utterances under censorship.

Metaphoric Compression and Symbolic Condensation

If ethical self-positioning marks a shift from affect to judgment, then metaphor offers the linguistic economy to express both at once. Listeners often adopted condensed metaphors to articulate dissent with minimal language. Among these, *changgui* 佞鬼 emerged as a recurring emblem. Such phrases exemplify “symbolic condensation”, where political emotion and critique are compressed into resonant, easily circulated forms. Introduced in the third episode, Bomi uses the metaphor to symbolize complicity under authoritarian structures. The phrase *buzuo changgui* (不做佞鬼, “Do Not Play the Jackal to the Tiger”) quickly migrated from the podcast into Weibo posts, where it was frequently repeated without elaboration—for example, in verbatim or emotionally charged comments such as political stance:

“I’m grateful that in this world there are still people willing and even eager to speak out; there will always be some who refuse to ‘play the jackal to the tiger.’ [感谢这个世界还有人愿意表达并乐于表达, 总有人不做佞鬼。]²⁹”

What distinguishes this metaphor is not only its emotional

28. Zai Gelunbiya mai yan de bu lu, post on Weibo, November 2, 2022, 3:02 a.m., <https://weibo.com/3826743983/Md5rrncSA>.

29. Weibo post (author anonymized; WB09), December 2, 2022.

and moral clarity, but its adaptability and intertextuality. A notable case involves a widely reposted quote—a line from the 2011 South Korean film *Silenced*:

“We fought all the way not to change the world, but to keep it from changing us. [我们一路奋战到最后, 并不能改变世界, 而是不想被这个世界所改变。]³⁰”

This quote, when reposted alongside “Do Not Play the Jackal to the Tiger,” links Bomi’s metaphor to a broader regional imaginary of artistic struggle and ethical endurance: in the episode, Bomi directly references Korean creators and their “multi-generational fight” for the freedom of expression.³¹ This alignment deepens the political charge of the phrase by situating it within an East Asian genealogy of cultural resistance.

Through reposts and recontextualizations, listeners construct an intertextual web that embeds the podcast within a shared archive of moral language and affective memory. These symbolic gestures do not rely on argumentation or elaboration; rather, they signal collective recognition through fragmentary, referential forms. The transformation of the podcast’s internal language into broader socio-political symbols further illustrates the dynamics of micro-mobilization. The line *buzuo changgui* 不做倭鬼, after the release of the third episode, was quickly adopted by listeners as an apt expression. *China Digital Times* (aka *Zhongguo shuzi shidai* 中國數字時代), an independent bilingual outlet covering uncensored China news, notes that this context-stripped yet metaphor-rich phrase was repeatedly cited during the late-2022 White Paper Movement (see Figure 1). Its migration from a media criticism to a protest idiom signals the latent capacity of affective language to mobilize across contexts, not through overtly directive slogans but through moral resonance and cultural imagination.

30. Weibo post (author anonymized; WB03), November 17, 2022.

31. Bomi and Friends, “Di san zhang, Changgui,” 11:54–11:58.



Figure 1. A protest slogan image compiled by *China Digital Times* during the “White Paper Movement” in China, featuring bold statements collected from demonstrators nationwide.³² Among them, *buzuo changgui* 不做侏鬼 (in the first line) stands out as a potent metaphor of moral refusal.

Archival, Redistribution, and Stealth Signaling

Where metaphor condensed dissent into portable form, the removal of “The End at the Beginning” trilogy from major platforms in mainland China prompted listeners to develop preservation-oriented responses. These included transcription, file backups, discreet link-sharing (often framed as *zhi lu* 指路, “signposting”), and coordinated reposting—actions that together formed a dispersed counter-archive against what Louisa Lim describes as state-driven “historical amnesia.”³³ Beyond logistical redistribution, many listeners treated repeated listening itself as an emotional and political ritual. This insistence on memory transforms listening into

32. “Yanlun ziyou” [Freedom of Speech], *China Digital Times*, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/言论自由>.

33. Lim uses it to describe how state power produces collective forgetting through censorship and propaganda. See Louisa Lim, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105–6.

an act of archival defiance, preserving not only the content but the affective force of the moment. One user commented:

“Listened to “The End at the Beginning” again. Must not forget. Will not forget. [又点开听了一遍开局的终局。不能忘, 不会忘。]³⁴”

Others engaged in redistributing access, using coded cues and informal sharing networks to route one another around censorship. These posts do more than register frustration: they function as practical signposts, directing listeners to off-platform mirrors, downloads, or re-uploads. The podcast’s disappearance, then, did not produce silence so much as a shift in activity from listening to preservation. What emerges is a form of community-driven continuity work—users learning tactics, adapting quickly, and sustaining circulation through grassroots archiving and re-upload efforts:

“The first chapter of Bomi’s *The End at the Beginning* got “clipped” [censored]. I can’t send it via private message, so here’s a backup link. [波米开局的终局第一章被夹了, 私信发不过来了, 补个档]³⁵”

Some even undertook full transcription for public access, underlining the urgency of inscription in volatile media environments:

“[Archive] *Fanpai* Film Commentary — The End at the Beginning: Chapter 1: Zhuangding; Chapter 2: Yami; Chapter 3: Changgui. Original audio by Bomi, transcript by ‘The One Who No Longer Chases Kites’. Text is too long—saving it first to read later. Original link in comments. [【存档】反沚影评-开局的终局•国产电影 第一章:壮丁•引进片 第二章:哑谜•我们 第三章:侏鬼原音by波米文字记录 by不再追风筝的人(原文太长先存了慢慢看, 原文链接放评

34. Weibo post (author anonymized; WB12), date unknown; post has been invalidated by Weibo and is no longer retrievable.

35. Weibo post (author anonymized; WB10), November 19, 2022.

Here, in the original Chinese post, villain 反派 is deliberately rendered as 反㐁 㐁, splitting the character into a visually similar but non-standard form. These kinds of graphic distortion—alongside misspelling, *pinyin* substitution, and the use of emojis such as the PRC flag in place of the word “China”—are common tactics for evading keyword-based censorship. These practices expose a media ecology where disappearance is expected, and contingency becomes a core skill. The archival impulse is an active resistance to erasure and a form of decentralized memory work. Redistribution, whether via external links or oral recommendation, turns each listener into a node in the informal network, while “stealth signaling”—sharing under the guise of casual commentary—preserves circulation without triggering censorship algorithms. As one user remarked, “It might be gone by the time we wake up,” encapsulating the ambient fragility of expression and the urgency of action.³⁷

The reception of Bomi’s trilogy is shaped by a post-pandemic generational discourse in which everyday striving is widely felt to be historically inelastic. Recent scholarship reads *neijuan* 內卷 (“involution”) as a vernacular diagnosis of intensified competition under diminishing returns, especially among younger cohorts facing constrained mobility and opportunity.³⁸ In this discursive field, *tangping* 躺平 (“lying flat”) emerges as a counter-ethic: a quiet withdrawal from self-optimization and performative striving, often framed as an affective response to exhaustion rather than a programmatic politics.³⁹ The newer metaphor of *lishi de laji shijian* 歷史的垃圾時間 (“garbage time of history”) extends this sensibility

36. Weibo post (author anonymized; WB13), date unknown; post has been invalidated by Weibo and is no longer retrievable.

37. Weibo post (author anonymized; WB11), November 17, 2022.

38. Bonnie H. Y. Chen, Yuchen Zhou, and Liu Yang, “The Role of Involution on Chinese Youth Pursuit of Postgraduate Education Abroad: Examine through the Lens of Normative Social Behaviour,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* (2024): 2.

39. Wendy Su, “‘Lie Flat’: Chinese Youth Subculture in the Context of the Pandemic and National Rejuvenation,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 37, no. 1 (2023): 128–29.

by casting the present as a period in which the macro-direction of events appears fixed and individual effort lacks historical efficacy.

Notably, state-affiliated commentary has dismissed the phrase as a “pseudo-academic” fabrication, frequently centering its (mis) attribution to Ludwig von Mises; this move relocates pessimistic historical feeling from the register of lived experience to that of conceptual illegitimacy.⁴⁰ For cultural commentators, the condition is legible through Albert O. Hirschman’s distinction between “voice” and “exit”: when voice is anticipated to be futile, “exit” can become a practical ethics of refusal—popularly recast as *tangping*—and, in Wenhui Hu’s formulation, a redeployment of attention toward a “cultural long vacation.”⁴¹ This article treats such vernacular temporalities as enabling conditions for listeners’ ethical self-positioning and for the circulation of dissent through indirect, low-visibility forms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined how the podcast *The End at the Beginning* by Bomi mobilizes affective language, sonic performance, and discursive strategies to cultivate an ethically charged listening public within China’s constrained media environment. Drawing on a mixed dataset of Weibo posts, it outlined four key mechanisms of micro-mobilization: emotional resonance, moral positioning, metaphorical compression, and archival redistribution. Notably, these practices largely evaded direct censorship (except for a few

40. See Yuan Yuan, “*Lishi helai lajishijian* 歷史何來垃圾時間” [How Can History Have a “Garbage Time”?], Xinhua Daily Media, July 17, 2024, <https://www.xhby.net/content/s66972be3e4bo19ce5659549d.html>; and “*Zhongguo wangluo pinxian lishi de lajishijian lundiao, guanmei fanbo: weixueshu gainian* 中国网络频现‘历史的垃圾时间’论调, 官媒反驳: 伪学术概念” [“Garbage Time of History” Claims Spread Across China’s Internet; State Media Rebuts Them as a “Pseudo-Academic” Concept], *Lianhe Zaobao* 聯合早報, July 13, 2024, <https://www.zaobao.com.sg/news/china/story20240713-4254420>.

41. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 30; Hu Wenhui 胡文輝, “lishi de laji shijian, wenhua de youchang jiaqi 历史的垃圾时间, 文化的悠长假期 [The Garbage Time of History, The Long Vacation of Culture]”, China Digital Times, July 31, 2024, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/710179.html>.

ones that “archived” the podcasts’ contents), consistent with Jakhar’s point that audio content in China is typically tolerated unless it provokes significant public attention or social media debate.⁴² The findings highlight how podcasting, despite its niche circulation, can serve as a site where political affect is organized through low-visibility participation. Nevertheless, the dataset focuses exclusively on Weibo and captures only a slice of listener response, excluding private or cross-platform interactions. Future research could incorporate interviews, long-form listener feedback, or inter-platform analysis to better understand the full spectrum of podcast-mediated mobilization. If “garbage time” names a stalled horizon, these listening publics mark another measure of history: not the dramatic progression of events, but the small continuities that sustain interpersonal bonds when guarantees collapse.

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42. Pratik Jakhar, “Beating Beijing’s Censors,” *The World Today* 77, no. 2 (April & May 2021): 39.

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Marriage under Commercial Logic in Late-Ming China

The Case of *Jin Ping Mei*

ABSTRACT This paper highlights how sexual and marital relations in *Jin Ping Mei* are embedded within systems of material exchange. Situating the novel within the economic context of the late Ming dynasty, this paper argues that as silver circulation intensified and market values penetrated everyday life, traditional Confucian norms—especially those governing family, marriage, and sexuality—were progressively destabilized. Through close textual analysis, this study demonstrates that the novel not only depicts the pervasive influence of money but also reveals a contradictory moral logic: although the narrative repeatedly emphasizes the punishment of immoral behavior, it simultaneously shows that those who adapt to profit-oriented values are better able to survive and even achieve social advancement. This paradox is particularly evident in the representation of women engaged in non-normative sexual relationships.

KEYWORDS polyandry, sexual exchange, commercialization, Confucian ethics, fiction

Introduction

Since its emergence, *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 (*The Plum in the Golden Vase*) has generated sustained controversy and attention for its transgressive erotic descriptions. Nevertheless, it has become

an important text for the study of Ming-dynasty society and has exerted a profound influence on the development of Chinese literature. In the novel, money—particularly silver—appears with striking frequency and functions as a powerful force that continually shapes characters' decisions and destinies. Faced with a similar situation, these couples make different choices, which in turn lead to different outcomes and reveal varying modes of morality and survival. At the time, wealthy men were often able to command greater access to sexual resources, while women from lower social strata frequently resorted to selling their bodies as a means of supplementing household income. Their husbands responded to these practices in markedly different ways: some maintained an ambiguous attitude, some rejected such arrangements, while others actively facilitated them. By conducting a close reading of three representative couples: Pan Jinlian and Wu the Elder (潘金蓮和武大郎), Song Huilian and Laiwang'er (宋惠蓮和來旺兒), Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo (王六兒和韓道國), my paper aims to uncover how commercial values alter the marital relationships.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the historical background of the late-Ming dynasty and the setting of *Jin Ping Mei*. The growing monetization of society, driven by an expanding silver economy, blurred social boundaries and challenged the authority of Confucian ethics. The second part focuses on the marriage between Pan Jinlian and Wu the Elder. Their marriage was purely nominal. By marrying Pan, Wu gained lots of benefits, and Pan was able to maintain illicit relationships with other men. Wu Song 武松, Wu the Elder's younger brother, unable to tolerate Pan's behavior, threatened her, which in turn contributed to Pan and her lover Ximen Qing's 西門慶 eventual murder of Wu the Elder. The third section analyzes the marriage between Song Huilian and Laiwang'er. Their relationship deteriorates due to Song's desire for material gain, culminating in her suicide. Despite Song's moral imperfections, she still remains bound—psychologically and socially—by moral expectations. The fourth section explores

the more enduring union of Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo. This couple embraces commercial logic wholeheartedly. Wang Liuer's extramarital relationship with Ximen Qing becomes a source of material advantage that stabilizes her marriage. Here, economic benefit supersedes moral power, suggesting that commercial values provide a new mode of legitimacy within intimate relationships.

This paper argues that in the world of *Jin Ping Mei*, the rise of commercial logic does not simply dismantle Confucian sexual ethics but reshapes relationships by introducing additional factors. Marriage is no longer grounded solely in emotional bonds or moral obligations; it is also inflected by economic interests and survival strategies. Although the author's narrative repeatedly insists that violations of moral principles will bring severe punishment, it simultaneously presents cases that complicate this didactic stance: figures such as Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo, who actively navigate these added dimensions, are often more likely to endure and even thrive. Such controversial narratives suggest the entanglement of ethical norms and material logics.

Silver Expansion and Intimate Erosion

“Family and friends, honesty and integrity, are often
forfeited for gain;
Even the feelings that bind father and son are sometimes
sacrificed for profit.

[親朋道義因財失，父子懷情為利休。]¹”

There are four poems in the preface of *Jin Ping Mei*, and each poem represents one vice. The line quoted above comes from the poem titled “Avarice” (cai, 財) and the rest of them are “Drunkenness” (jiu, 酒), “Lust” (se, 色), and “Anger” (qi, 氣). In general, these poems are believed to serve as moral admonitions, warning readers about the consequences of such vices and urging them to practice virtue and

1. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 1, the Gathering*, trans. David Tod Roy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 11.

accumulate good deeds.

This “Avarice” poem offers a direct portrayal of how money corrodes familial ethics and traditional moral bonds. Such concerns were not merely literary exaggerations but reflected broader anxieties about the social transformations occurring in late-Ming China. During the time in which *Jin Ping Mei* was written, the late-Ming dynasty was marked by unprecedented commercial economy dynamism, driven in part by the influx of American silver through global trade and the intensification of commodity exchange within China itself.

In addition, fiscal reforms in this period, most notably the “Single Whip Law (一條鞭法),” in-kind taxes and corvée labor into silver payments, further entrenched the centrality of money in both governance and daily life.² *Jin Ping Mei* offers a richly detailed portrayal of the pervasive role silver played in the everyday life of the Ming dynasty. Monetary exchange is depicted as central to nearly every aspect of daily experience—from food, clothing, and household goods to weddings, funerals, fortune-telling rituals, and birthday celebrations. Zheng Tiesheng conducted a preliminary accounting of money transactions in *Jin Ping Mei*, finding a total of 456 instances of money exchange. Among these, 430 involved tales of silver (yin, 銀) and 26 involved cash (qian, 錢), amounting to approximately 180,000 taels of silver in total.³ Therefore, Wang

2. Richard Von Glahn, “The Changing Significance of Latin American Silver in the Chinese Economy, 16th–19th Centuries.” *Revista de Historia Económica / Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History* 38, no. 3 (2019): 554–555, <https://doi:10.1017/S0212610919000193>.

3. Zheng Tiesheng 鄭鐵生, “*Jin Ping Mei* yu baiyin huobihua”《金瓶梅》與白銀貨幣化 [Jin Ping Mei the Monetization of Silver], *The Journal of Ming-Qing Fiction Studies* 明清小說研究, no. 4 (2007): 269, <https://doi:10.13674/j.cnki.32-1017/i.2007.04.030>.

Meng believes that *Jin Ping Mei* is, at its core, a novel about money.⁴

The surge in silver circulation and commercial activities not only restructured the foundations of the economy but also profoundly destabilized existing social hierarchies and moral frameworks. As monetary exchange became central to everyday life, traditional values rooted in kinship and ethical obligation began to erode. In *The Confusions of Pleasure, Commerce and Culture in Ming China*, by deeply investigating a local gazetteer by a county magistrate, Zhang Tao 張濤 (1560-1618), Timothy Brook reveals the deep anxiety and unease experienced by Ming literati in response to the profound social structural changes brought about by the expansion of commercial activity. Zhang Tao believed “Commerce-personified in the evil figure of the lord of silver- is fingered as the culprit that reduced a once settled China to a world of anarchic motion where commerce set people traveling, imaginations soaring, and taboos tumbling.”⁵ Similarly, from a legal point of view, lots of historians, such as Robert E. Hegel and Maram Epstein, also prove the collapse of Confucian values at the time by analyzing a large number of criminal cases.⁶

As a result, human relationships—be they romantic and familial—were no longer based purely on ethical commitment or personal loyalty. The human body, marriage, and interpersonal affection increasingly took on the characteristics of commodities—objects to be bought, sold, or leveraged. The logic of bodily commodification gave rise to a range of unconventional sexual and marital arrangements, particularly in impoverished regions

4. Wang Meng 王猛, “*Jin Ping Mei* yu Mingdai shehui de jinqianguannian”《金瓶梅》與明代社會的金錢觀念 [Jin Ping Mei and the concept of Money in Ming society], *Journal of China University of Mining and Technology(Social Science)* 中國礦業大學學報 社會科學版 no. 4 (2000): 148, https://oversea.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=EojayBZol1mI1HKKIksy4Y0tv3novKeoNar_2opbv6RtY7tfkJI2BXzoBiulsNEOmbm5Um5Qnb-Rv4XsQqn39G1HvvaDN56HefvJSBhAJlqOFQk6PznriggIxGI5DIK-R_lkOO19pQu258WLethTl9chaHWOSZkZyMCDjkMSboLrqm4rsOUoBvrqhaQtyGr&uniplatform=OVERSEA&language=EN.

5. Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure Commerce and Culture in Ming China* Timothy Brook, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 8.

6. Robert E. Hegel et al., *True Crimes in Eighteenth-Century China Twenty Case Histories*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 122-146.

and among marginalized social groups. During the Ming and Qing periods, the government became increasingly aware of the widespread emergence of non-normative sexual behaviors and began to implement complex and stringent laws to suppress them.

However, these efforts often proved ineffective or fell short of their intended goals.⁷ Practices such as prostitution and polyandry (a woman having multiple husbands or sexual partners) became common strategies for economic survival. In many cases, husbands would allow—or even encourage—their wives to engage in sexual relations with other men in exchange for financial compensation, thereby securing an additional source of income for the household. Importantly, women often exercised significant agency in these arrangements. From their perspective, providing sexual services to men other than their husbands was not fundamentally different from other forms of labor, such as weaving or textile work. For many women at the bottom of the social hierarchy, sex work functioned as a supplementary occupation—one that did not necessarily undermine the marital relationship, but rather contributed meaningfully to the family's economic well-being. Ironically, generating additional income often granted women greater authority and influence within the household.⁸ Therefore, we can observe that some women and their husbands took an active role in organizing sexual transactions.

Sexual Transactions in *Jin Ping Mei*

I've heard it said of the Jetavana Park, in the western realm of the Buddhist patriarch himself, that it was only acquired after: The grounds were paved with gold; and that even in the Ten Courts of the Underworld, something in the way of paper money is required if one is to survive. As long as I expend this property of mine in the doing

7. Matthew Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 8-15.

8. Matthew Sommer, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 3-4.

of extensive good works, even if I were to rape Ch'ango, fornicate with the Weaving Maid, kidnap Hsü Fei-ch'ung, or abduct the daughter of the Queen Mother of the West, it would do nothing to diminish the Heaven-splashing wealth and distinction that I now possess.

[咱聞那佛祖西天，也只不過要黃金鋪地；陰司十殿，也要些楮鏹營求。咱只消盡這家私廣為善事，就使強姦了嫦娥，和奸了織女，拐了許飛瓊，盜了西王母的女兒，也不減我潑天富貴！]⁹

The economic vitality of the time elevated the social status of merchants, challenging the Confucian order that traditionally placed them at the bottom of the hierarchy. With wealth came influence, and with influence came the power to reconfigure relationships once governed by ritual propriety. The corruption that Brook describes comes real in *Jin Ping Mei*. Figures like Ximen Qing exemplify this shift: through his riches, he builds intricate networks of social and political capital. He spent large sums of money to purchase an official position, despite lacking any scholarly credentials. His wealth further enabled him to manipulate the local judicial system, allowing him to neglect his official duties and arbitrarily intimidate those who opposed him. At the same time, he used money to engage in sexual relationships with all the women he desired. When Ximen Qing's primary wife, *Yueniang* 月娘, urged him to refrain from immoral behavior for the sake of his son, *Guange* 官哥, he dismissed her concerns. He believed that as long as he possessed enough money, he could overturn all rules and norms without facing any consequences.

In his hyperbolic expression, he even claims that he would not face punishment even if he were to rape celestial maidens. This reflects his belief that the rules governing not only the heavenly realm but the entire world are ultimately structured by money.

9. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 3, the Aphrodisiac*, 488-489.

Such absolute logic of commercialism runs throughout the entire world of *Jin Ping Mei*. For the wealthy, like Ximen Qing, immoral behavior could be neutralized through money; for the poor, moral principles—and even their own bodies—could be sacrificed in pursuit of financial gain.

The novel is saturated with scenes of transactional relationships involving both money and sex. Notably, nearly all the women who become sexually involved with Ximen Qing are already married and fond of doing that. Most of them were already well accustomed to engaging in sex work. Ximen Qing was neither their first client nor their last. Figures such as Pan Jinlian, Song Huilian, Wang Luer, Ruyier 如意兒, Bensi's wife 賁四嫂, and Huiyuan 惠元, all enter into extramarital relationships with him, often in exchange for material benefits (they would always assert their own demands during sexual encounters). Many times, their husband either tacitly accept their wives' extramarital relationships from the outset, or—although some husbands initially resist strongly—ultimately come to support them once their wives are able to bring in sufficiently substantial benefits.

For example, Wu the Elder tacitly permitted Pan Jinlian's relationship with Mr. Zhang, and in return, he obtained startup capital for his small business, free housing, as well as a marital relationship with Pan Jinlian. In addition, Pan Jinlian's illicit affair with Ximen Qing ultimately secures her entry into the Ximen household, where she becomes his fifth concubine. This transition marks a significant elevation in her social status—one that stands in stark contrast to her previous position as the wife of Wu the Elder, a lowly and physically unattractive vendor; Ximen Qing's seduction of Song Huilian begins with a piece of fine blue cloth—an object that, for a woman of her social standing, is both rare and aspirational.

What's more, Song Huilian experiences a notable transformation in social status after becoming involved with Ximen Qing. Originally a low-ranking maid assigned to hard labor, she is soon elevated to the position of a personal attendant to the primary

wife, Yueniang. This role not only allows her to wear finer clothing and enjoy better food, but also spares her from the most physically demanding tasks, placing her above other servants within the household hierarchy. After Wang Liuer formally becomes Ximen Qing's lover, she quickly receives tangible material rewards. Ximen spends 120 taels of silver to purchase for her a property with a "twelve-foot-wide frontage and four interior courtyards, receding along a vertical axis."¹⁰ He also brings her husband, Han Daoguo, into his business network. He displays an unusual level of enthusiasm and treats his wife's extramarital affair as a kind of family enterprise to be actively managed, thus making a large amount of money.

In conclusion, the non-normative behaviors of women and men depicted in the novel should not be understood solely through a moral lens. Rather, they must be situated within a broader framework of economic strategy and survival.

Pan Jinlian and Wu the Elder

At first glance, Pan Jinlian's story appears to follow a familiar narrative pattern: an adulterous woman who poisons her husband. Over time, "Pan Jinlian" ceased to function merely as a literary character and instead became a derogatory cultural label, used to describe women who are beautiful yet sexually promiscuous and morally vicious—a usage that persists to this day. For women, few accusations are more damaging than being compared to Pan Jinlian. However, a closer reading of *Jin Ping Mei* reveals that Pan Jinlian, much like the novel itself, is among the most misunderstood figures in Chinese literary history. Within her marriage to Wu the Elder, she experiences neither emotional fulfillment nor sexual satisfaction. Their union represents a fundamental mismatch: an attractive woman bound to an ugly, vulgar, and sexually unappealing man.

From the outset, this marriage is structurally doomed to tragedy. She repeatedly seeks sexual relationships with men she desires, thereby violating the social ideal of the virtuous, restrained

10. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 2, the Rivals*, 456.

woman. In fact, she is consistently drawn to men who embody strong masculine qualities, and Wu the Elder's lack of such attributes leaves her desires entirely unfulfilled. This failure lies at the core of her resentment toward him. Given Wu the Elder's social standing and personal qualities, it would have been nearly impossible for him to marry Pan Jinlian, nor did Pan Jinlian ever genuinely desire him. How, then, did their marriage come into being?

The servants in the household reminded him what an honorable man Wu the Elder was and pointed out that he was not only currently unmarried but also resided on the premises, which would make him a convenient choice. Mr. Chang had hopes of being able to continue his liaison with the young woman, and so, without demanding a candareen from Wu the Elder, he made him a present of her as his wife. After Chin-lien and Wu the Elder were married, Mr. Chang made it a point to look after him. If he were short of capital for his trade in steamed wheat cake, she would slip him five taels of silver to make up the deficiency. While Wu the Elder was out peddling his wares, Mr. Chang would wait until there was no one about and then steal into their room for an assignation with Chin-lien. Although Wu the Elder occasionally happened upon them in compromising circumstances, he did not dare to make a fuss about it.

[大戶家下人，都說武大忠厚，現無妻小，又住著宅內房兒，堪可與他。這大戶早晚還要看覷此女，因此不要武大一文錢，白白的嫁與他為妻。這武大自從娶的金蓮來家，大戶甚是看顧他。若武大沒本錢做炊餅，大戶私與他銀兩；與他做本錢。武大若挑擔兒出去，大戶候無人，便潛入房中與金蓮廝會。武大雖一時撞見，亦不敢聲言。]¹¹

Pan Jinlian was originally a maid in the household of a local

11. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Vol. 1, *the Gathering*, 27.

wealthy merchant, Mr. Zhang 張大戶. Struck by her beauty, Mr. Zhang wished to take her as a concubine, but his wife firmly opposed the idea. Seeking to maintain his relationship with Pan Jinlian while avoiding domestic conflict, Mr. Zhang arranged for her to marry Wu the Elder at no cost and allowed the couple to live in his household rent-free, thereby facilitating their continued illicit relationship. In other words, although Wu Dalang and Pan Jinlian were husband and wife in name only, Wu Dalang gained substantial benefits through this marriage—or, more precisely, through consenting to the commodification of his wife. He acquired a beautiful spouse, stable housing, and financial support from Mr. Zhang, including capital to start a small business.

After Mr. Zhang's death, Pan Jinlian pawned her jewelry to obtain silver, and Wu the Elder used to rent a new house. This episode suggests that Mr. Zhang had indeed provided Pan Jinlian with money, which she did not hoard but used to support the household. Wu the Elder, therefore, though weak in character, was by no means foolish. He fully understood the nature of this arrangement and chose to tolerate it. This explains why, even when he caught Pan Jinlian and Mr. Zhang in the act, he refrained from public accusation. The marriage provided him with material security, and under this logic of exchange, the relationship remained relatively stable.

One day as he was going along the street he heard the din of gongs and drums and noticed several contingents of soldiers with tasseled spears escorting a man in a gaily decorated sedan chair. Who should this turn out to be but his own younger brother, Wu Sung. Because Wu Sung had killed the tiger on Ching-yang Ridge the district magistrate had elevated him to the position of police captain, and the community elders were participating in the celebration of this event by accompanying him on the way to his lodgings.

[武大自從搬到縣西街上來，照舊賣炊餅。一日，街上所過，見數隊纓槍，鑼鼓喧天，花紅軟轎，簇擁著一個人，卻是他嫡親兄弟武松。因在景陽崗打死了大蟲，知縣相公擡舉他，新陞做了巡捕都頭。街上里老人等作賀他，送他下處去。]¹²

To make a long story short, after moving into his brother's home Wu Song took out some silver and gave it to Wu the Elder in order to buy pastries, tea, and fruit to entertain the neighbors on either side. The neighbors, on their part, clubbed together to return the treat, and Wu the Elder, in due course, reciprocated.

[話休絮煩。自從武松搬來哥家裏住，取些銀子出來與武大，教買餅釀茶菓，請那兩邊鄰舍。眾鄰舍都鬪分子，來與武松人情。武大又安排了囿席，都不在話下。]¹³

Wu Song's presence fundamentally altered the situation. Wu Song not only lent his brother social authority, such as hosting lavish banquets and giving money to the neighbor, but also promised to offer economic support, freeing Wu the Elder from dependence on his wife's sexual exchanges for survival. Yet the most important thing was that Wu Song was praised by the local government and gained an official position. It was only under the protection and support of his brother that Wu the Elder attempted to discipline his wife. Without Wu Song, he might well have reached an arrangement with Ximen Qing similar to his earlier tacit agreement with Mr. Zhang.

As a powerful local figure, Ximen Qing was not someone Wu the Elder could realistically confront. Wu the Elder threatens Pan Jinlian several times, warning that his brother would not let her off. His threat instilled deep fear in Pan Jinlian and ultimately drove her to conspire with Ximen Qing to murder Wu the Elder. While Pan

12. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Vol. 1, the Gathering, 30.

13. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Vol. 1, the Gathering, 36.

Jinlian's cruelty is undeniable, Wu the Elder and Wu Song also bear responsibility. If Wu Dalang had been able to end his marriage with Pan in a timely manner and refrain from involving his brother in their relationship, Pan Jinlian might not have developed the intent to kill. Had Wu Song sought separation rather than intimidation, Wu the Elder's death might have been avoided.

As Tian Xiaofei has observed, "terrifying outcomes do not arise solely from transgressive acts of incest, but also from moral actions that refuse such transgression."¹⁴ Wu Song's rigid moral defense of his brother failed to recognize the incompatibility at the heart of the marriage. Although morally justified, his refusal to allow Pan Jinlian any alternative was deeply insensitive to lived realities and, in this sense, contributed to the tragedy.

The tragedy of Wu the Elder and Pan Jinlian, therefore, cannot be attributed simply to Pan Jinlian's alleged depravity. It emerged from a convergence of factors. When Wu the Elder agreed to this marital transaction, the seeds of tragedy were already sown: unsupported, he chose to commodify his wife; once support became available, he chose to withdraw his consent to that very exchange. Wu Song consistently upholds a rigid and unyielding moral code, which somehow causes the tragedy.

Song Huilian and Laiwang'er

Later on, after she had been there a month or more, she began to notice the way in which Yü-lou, Chin-lien, and the others were tricked out, and responded accordingly. She built up the chignon under her fret until it became higher and higher, affected a bouffant hairdo, and adorned her temples with two long spit curls. As a result, when she: Served tea or water to her employers, she began to catch Hsi-men Ch'ing's eye.

14. Tian Xiaofei 田曉菲, *Qiushuitang lun Jin Ping Mei* 秋水堂論金瓶梅 [On The Plum in the Golden Vase] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2019), 3. Original Text: 可怕的结果不必一定来自乱伦的恶行,也来自不肯乱伦的道德行为。

[初來時，同眾家人媳婦上竈，還沒甚麼妝飾，猶不作為在意裏。後過了一個月有餘，看了玉樓金蓮眾人打扮，他把髻髻墊的高高的，梳的虛籠籠的頭髮，把水髻描的長長的，在上邊遞茶遞水，被西門慶睨在眼裏。]¹⁵

In Jin Ping Mei, the story of Song Huilian and Lai Wang'er stands as one of the most complex portrayals of how desire, money, and morality intertwine. On the one hand, Song Huilian trades her body for access to Ximen Qing, hoping to secure wealth and social advancement. On the other hand, after her husband was framed by Ximen Qing and imprisoned, she repeatedly pleaded on his behalf and, on multiple occasions, asked Ximen Qing to grant him a better position. Laiwang'er also exhibits controversial behaviors. He feels ashamed and cannot fully accept his wife as a tradable asset. While he tolerates his own affair with Sun Xueer 孫雪娥, one of Ximen Qing's concubines, he finds it unbearable that his own wife has been sexually claimed by his master. Song Huilian begins her life in the Ximen household as a low-ranking maid, tasked with hard labor.

But Song Huilian was not someone content with living the life of a lowly servant. Her downfall began with her vanity—she longed for a more respectable and comfortable existence. After observing the luxurious lifestyles of Ximen Qing's wives and concubines, she began imitating their style of dress and appearance (This indirectly reflects how hedonism, to some extent, can erode a person's inner world). This desire for money did not go unnoticed by Ximen Qing. It was precisely this vanity that he exploited when he initiated their affair with the gift of a bolt of blue cloth—an object unattainable to someone of Song's status, yet deeply desired by her.

From the commencement of Hui-lien's affair with Hsi-men Ch'ing, quite aside from the clothing, handkerchiefs, jewelry, breath-sweetening lozenges, and the like, with which he kept her supplied on the sly, she was observed to have ready money by the tael at her disposal, with which

15. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 2, the Rivals*, 95.

she bought ornamental trinkets and cosmetics at the front gate of the compound. Gradually it became apparent that she was no longer dressing the way she used to do.

[惠蓮自從和西門慶私通之後，背地不算與他衣服、汗巾、首飾、香茶之類，只銀子成兩家帶在身邊，在門首買花翠胭脂粉，漸漸顯露，打扮的比往日不同。]¹⁶

Song Huilian's desire for a better life manifests most clearly in her consumption practices: she begins to wear luxurious clothing, adorn herself with expensive jewelry, and indulge in various daily expenditures. These visible signs of wealth mark not only her access to Ximen Qing's favor, but also her internalization of commodity logic—she comes to equate value, identity, and power with what she can wear, possess, and display. In this sense, consumption becomes her way of performing status and claiming proximity to elite womanhood.

After this, Sung Hui-lien's conduct became more outrageous than ever. Relying on her clandestine affair with Hsi-men Ch'ing, she: Took no further account, of anyone in the household, high or low. Every day she could be found hobnobbing with Yü-lou, Chin-lien, Li P'ing-erh, Hsi-men Ta-chieh, and Ch'un-mei in their daily pastimes.

[後次這宋惠蓮越發猖狂起來。仗西門慶背地和他勾搭，把家中大小都看不到眼裏。逐日與玉樓、金蓮、李瓶兒、西門大姐、春梅，在一處頑耍。]¹⁷

Once favored by Ximen Qing, Song Huilian began frequently asking him for money and gradually adorned herself with finer jewelry. What's more, she is soon promoted and gains access to the inner quarters. She no longer saw herself as a servant. Instead, she spent her days in the company of Meng Yulou (孟玉樓), Pan Jinlian, and Li Ping'er (李瓶兒), who are all Ximeng Qing's concubines,

16. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 2, the Rivals*, 99.

17. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 2, the Rivals*, 140.

behaving as if she were their equal in status and identity.

However, her rapid ascent, unaccompanied by formal recognition or social legitimacy, triggers anxiety and hostility among both the servants and the official wives and concubines. From their perspective, her behavior is not only presumptuous but threatening—it destabilizes the existing hierarchy.

Without more ado she went up to him and proceeded to park her posterior in his lap, whereupon the two of them fell to kissing and sucking each other's tongues. While, down below, the woman grasped his organ in her hand, up above, she took a sip of wine and transferred it into the mouth of her companion. "Father," the woman said to him, "if you've got any breath-sweetening lozenges give me a few more. The ones you gave me the other day are all gone." "I also owe several mace to Auntie Hsüeh for trinkets," she went on to say. "If you've got any money handy give me a little so I can pay her." "There ought to be a tael or two left in my wallet," said Hsi-men Ch'ing. "Go ahead and take it."

[老婆一面用手揩著他那話，一面在上嚙酒哺與他吃。老婆便道：「爹，你有香茶再與我些，前日你與的那香茶都沒了。」又道：「我少薛嫂兒幾錢花兒錢，你有銀子與我些兒，我還他。」西門慶道：「我茄袋內還有一二兩，你拏去。」說著，西門慶要解老婆褲子。]¹⁸

Almost every time Song Huilian makes a request—for money, better clothes, or other material benefits—it occurs during or immediately after a sexual encounter. The pattern is telling: intimacy becomes the context in which economic demands are made and fulfilled, reducing sex to a transactional act with clear terms of return. From beginning to end, Song treats her relationship with Ximen Qing as a highly profitable side occupation—an informal but rewarding extension of her labor within the household economy.

18. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Vol. 2, *the Rivals*, 111.

Her sexual availability is strategically deployed to generate material gain.

Ximen Qing understands the terms of this unspoken contract and plays along. As long as Song Huilian provides pleasure and causes no disruption, he meets her demands without resistance. Their relationship thus becomes a pure expression of commodity logic. Because it lacks the stabilizing fictions of love, loyalty, or moral restraint, it cannot withstand conflict or competition. Once her presence threatens Ximen Qing's interests, she is quickly cast aside. In a world where bodies are currency, Song's value is always conditional and expendable.

"That's not it at all," said Hsi-men Ch'ing with a laugh. "If it hadn't been for one thing, I would have sent him; but I was afraid he wasn't quite as familiar with the household of Grand Preceptor Ts'ai in the Eastern Capital, so I sent Lai-pao instead. I'll keep him here and find something for him to do on the street front of the property."

[西門慶笑道：「倒不是此說。我不是也教他去，恐怕他東京蔡太師府中不熟，所以教來保去了。留下他，家門首尋個買賣與他做罷。」婦人道：「你對我說，尋個甚麼買賣與他做？」西門慶道：「我教他搭個主管，在家門首開酒店。」婦人聽言，滿心歡喜。走到屋裏，一五一十對來旺兒說了。單等西門慶示下。]¹⁹

"Father, do as I say. Don't keep my husband around at home any more. When he's here he only gets into trouble. Give him a few taels of silver as capital and send him out to engage in trade somewhere where he can be: Free as he pleases, Far away from home. Don't keep him around here where he's got time on his hands. It has always been true that: A full stomach and warm body give rise to disorder; Hunger and cold conduce to thoughts of thievery. How could he not get up to mischief? If he were not around, but out on the road somewhere, it would be a lot more

19. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 2, the Rivals*, 162.

convenient whenever you had anything to say to me.”

[惠蓮道：「來興兒因爹叫俺這一個買辦，說俺們奪了他的，不得賺些錢使，挾下這仇恨兒，平空做作出來，拏這血口噴他。爹就信他了？有這個欺心的事，我也不饒他。爹，你依我，不要教他在家裏，在家裏和他合氣。與他幾兩銀子本錢，教他信信脫脫，遠離他鄉做買賣去。休要放他在家裏，曠了他身子。自古道：飽暖生閒事，饑寒發盜心。他怎麼不胡生事兒？這裏無人，他出去了，早晚爹和我說句話兒也方便些。」]²⁰

The author devotes considerable narrative space to constructing Song's moral decline and vanity, leading readers to view her as a woman beyond redemption. However, at the very moment when she is about to become Ximen's concubine, the narrative introduces a dramatic reversal: she goes on a hunger strike, refuses Ximen, and attempts to save her husband. (Emboldened by alcohol, Laiwang'er speaks harshly, threatening to punish Song and Ximen. Then, Ximen Qing subsequently frames Laiwang'er and has him imprisoned.)

This sudden shift is highly charged with tension. It disrupts the reader's stabilized judgment and forces a reconsideration of her character. As noted, this turn not only complicates a purely utilitarian reading of her actions but also foregrounds the tension between material calculation and ethical attachment. Song's actions demonstrate a persistent effort to mediate between her own advancement and her husband's survival. What, then, is Song Huilian's true feeling toward Laiwanger?

On the surface, their relationship appears fragile, marked by mutual betrayal. Yet throughout their marriage, Song Huilian never severed the tie. She consistently pleads with Ximen Qing to promote Laiwanger. She does not view her affair as a reason to abandon her husband. Her concern is not romantic in nature; it is rooted in a practical understanding of mutual survival. This pragmatism is not new. In her first marriage, Song Huilian also showed a similar

20. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 2, the Rivals*, 157.

sense of responsibility after the death of her first husband, Jiang Cong 蔣聰; she appealed for justice on his behalf. This suggests that she holds a certain belief in the necessity of marriage, which is a relationship built on duty and long-term interdependence.

Laiwang'er's reaction is equally worth examining. He is clearly not deeply attached to Song, as he is already engaged in an extramarital relationship with Sun Xueer. Moreover, Song's illicit relationship with Ximen Qing has the potential to bring him considerable material benefits; in principle, he could have capitalized on this situation by effectively "trading" his wife for economic gain, like what Wu the Elder did. Song Huilian and Laiwang'er's marriage is perhaps best understood as *yi* (義)—a Confucian-inflected ethic of responsibility and moral duty that endures even when intimacy and trust have eroded.

Yet ironically, it is precisely this lingering sense of *yi* that becomes her fatal weakness. In all, their tragic end serves a meaningful warning: in a fully commodified world, those caught between moral obligation and transactional logic will ultimately be consumed by the game itself. In contrast stands the successful transactional marriage of Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo, which will be examined in the following chapter.

Wang Liuer' and Han Daoguo

"Now that we've already got this fifty taels of silver in hand," the woman said, "in the future he's sure to add a few taels in addition and find a decent house for us. It's allowing to my willingness to surrender my body to him. We might as well take advantage of the opportunity to get what we can out of him and improve our life-style." "After I've gone to the shop tomorrow," Han Tao-kuo said, "if he should show up, pretend that I don't know anything about it. Don't be remiss in your treatment of him, but cater to his every whim. It's not all that easy to make money these days. How did you ever happen on this way of doing it?" "You lousy ru an!" his wife laughed. "You'll drop

dead in your tracks someday. You're certainly proficient enough at: Eating the bread of idleness. You don't have any idea what your old lady has had to put up with." The two of them laughed about it a while longer, after which she fed him his supper, and husband and wife prepared themselves to rest.

[婦人道：「這不是有了五十兩銀子？他到明日，一定與咱多添幾兩銀子，看所好房兒。也是我輸了身一場，且落他些好供給穿戴！」韓道國道：「等我明日往鋪子裏去了，他若來時，你只推我不知道。休要怠慢了他，凡事奉承他些兒！如今好容易賺錢，怎麼趕的這個道路！」老婆笑道：「賊強人，倒路死的！你倒會吃自在飯兒，你還不知老娘怎生受苦哩！」兩個又笑了一回，打發他吃了晚飯，夫婦收拾歇下。」]²¹

Wang and Han's conversations about the affair with Ximen Qing are not tense or accusatory, but often light-hearted—businesslike, even. This points to a shared understanding of their marital goals: to leverage sexual relationships for upward mobility and financial security. Their ideas, while morally transgressive, are functionally harmonious. They are partners not in love, but in strategy. Their views on marriage, sex, and survival are aligned, however distorted they may appear.

In addition, when Han Daoguo learns that Wang Liuer has been having an affair with his younger brother, Han Er, he shows no sign of anger. When Wang Liuer and Han Er are caught in an illicit affair and brought before the authorities, Han Daoguo immediately seeks help to secure their release, which strongly suggests prior knowledge and tacit approval. Han Daoguo and Han Er effectively share Wang Liuer. Such arrangements, in which brothers in impoverished households share a wife due to economic constraints, were very common among lower social strata.

To resume our story, no sooner had Wang Liu-erh obtained the hundred taels of silver and four outfits of clothing for

21. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. Vol. 2, *the Rivals*, 443.

intervening on Miao Ch'ing's behalf, than she consulted with her husband, Han Tao-kuo, that very night and then busied herself all day and remained sleepless the following night, planning to have head ornaments, hairpins, and bracelets fashioned for herself, calling in a tailor to design clothes for her, and ordering the manufacture of a new fret of silver filigree. She also expended sixteen taels of silver to purchase an additional maidservant, named Ch'un-hsiang, to wait upon her, and, sooner or later, also serve the sexual needs of Han Tao-kuo.

[話分兩頭，卻表王六兒自從得了苗青幹事的那一百兩銀子、四套衣服，與他漢子韓道國就白日不閒，一夜沒的睡，計較著要打頭面，治簪環，喚裁縫來裁衣服，從新抽銀絲髻髻。用十六兩銀子又買了個丫頭，名喚春香使喚，早晚教韓道國收用，不題。]²²

This passage offers a vivid illustration of the economic partnership between Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo, highlighting how their marital relationship is structured around mutual financial benefit. In the novel, it is repeatedly depicted that they always discuss with each other after major events—such as receiving a large sum of money or engaging in an illicit relationship with Ximen Qing for the first time—to discuss strategies and next steps. They always cooperate with each other's actions as much as possible.

For example, when Wang meets with Ximen, Han, he always leaves the house so as not to disturb them, and urges his wife to do her best to satisfy Ximen. Notably, there is no sign of moral reproach or discomfort from Han Daoguo regarding the source of the money. Instead, he participates in the material gains without hesitation. Wang Liuer, for her part, does not hoard her profits for personal use. Rather, she reinvests her earnings into the household, ensuring that Han Daoguo benefits directly. She even purchases a young maid to serve Han Daoguo, which, in some sense, serves as

22. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 3, the Aphrodisiac*, 223.

compensation for her own inability to remain faithful.

This passage simultaneously presents a paradoxical and ironic relationship. On the one hand, both of them maintain extramarital relationships and, at the level of the body, completely betray one another. On the other hand, at the economic and emotional levels, they remain tightly bound, cooperating with remarkable tacit understanding. Strikingly, this dynamic produces a peculiar form of “loyalty” and “harmony”.

“It has always been the case that: To abide by Heavenly principle is to face starvation,” responded his wife. “Given the way he has taken advantage of me in the past, for us to make use of these few taels of his silver is hardly wrong.

[老婆道：「自古有天理倒沒飯吃哩！他佔用著老娘，使他這幾兩銀子不差甚麼。」]²³

After Ximen Qing died, Han Daoguo secretly took the money for the goods—one thousand taels—back home and discussed with his wife Wang Liuer how they should handle it. Han Daoguo hesitated, feeling it might be improper to embezzle Ximen Qing’s money. Wang Liuer, however, believed that since Ximen Qing had always treated her as nothing more than a tool for his own pleasure, taking his silver now was nothing more than rightful compensation. Wang Liuer’s words convey her stark worldview: kindness brings no reward; only ruthless calculation can secure a good life. This couple completely strips the shame from sexual transactions and replaces it with a managerial mindset, handling the business details of their intimate arrangements, effectively transforming the household into a platform where the body is the primary capital.

By contrast, husbands like Laiwanger, who refuse to accept their wives’ involvement with other men, are ultimately destroyed for their rejection of this transactional logic. Wu Song, to some extent, caused the death of his brother. The ending of Wang also

23. Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng, *The Plum in the Golden Vase. Vol. 5, the Dissolution*, 7.

supported this logic: After Ximen Qing's death, the couple not only escapes retribution but also secures a portion of his business assets and flees. Wang Liu'er later resumes sex work with her daughter in tow and attracts the attention of a wealthy merchant, Mr. He 何官人. Mr. He subsequently brings both Wang Liu'er and Han Daoguo back to his hometown, where Wang Liu'er effectively becomes his concubine. Following the deaths of both Mr. He and Han Daoguo, Wang Liu'er inherits Mr. He's property and continues living with Han Er, her late husband's younger brother, ultimately reaching old age without further calamity.

Throughout the novel, the author repeatedly emphasizes a moral logic of retribution, namely that good deeds are rewarded and evil deeds punished. However, in Wang's ending, the novel thus presents an unstable and inconsistent logic of retribution—one that, to some extent, borders on a mockery of moral causality itself.

Undoubtedly, Song Huilian and Laiwang'er, as well as Wang Liu'er and Han Daoguo, their marital relationship are heavily shaped by calculations of material benefit. Yet at the same time, they are sustained by forms of mutual attachment that are difficult to articulate and do not neatly align with modern notions of romantic intimacy. How should we understand the emotional bonds between them? How can one remain committed to a marriage while simultaneously engaging in repeated sexual transgressions? How could one repeatedly tolerate a spouse's sexual involvement with others without developing resentment toward that spouse?

To address this question, it is necessary to briefly reconsider the concept of “love 愛” itself. In fact, “love” as a framework for understanding intimate relationships is largely a modern, Western concept that entered China after the May Fourth Movement, fundamentally reshaping how romantic relationships came to be understood. Therefore, applying this concept (love) retroactively to the marital relationships depicted in *Jin Ping Mei* risks imposing an anachronistic interpretive framework on a premodern social world.

In premodern China, the bond between husband and wife

was more commonly articulated in terms of righteousness (*yi* 義), a concept encompassing moral obligation and reciprocal responsibility—rather than emotional intimacy or romantic affection. This distinction is clearly reflected in Ming and Qing legal discourse, where divorce was described as *yijue* 義絕, literally meaning the severance of moral duty rather than the dissolution of love. This conceptual framework helps explain why marital relationships could persist despite sexual betrayal: the endurance of marriage rested not on physical and emotional exclusivity, but on the maintenance of social and moral obligations.

Conclusion

By examining the three marital relationships—Pan Jinlian and Wu the Elder, Song Huilian and Laiwanger, Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo—*Jin Ping Mei* reveals with sharp precision how the burgeoning commodity economy of the late Ming period deeply transformed interpersonal dynamics. Marriage, rather than being anchored solely in emotional attachment or moral obligation, is infused with a new organizing principle: the pursuit of material gain, which at times proves more enduring than physical fidelity or affective commitment.

Xiang Yurong believes that the intrusion of monetary thinking has fragmented the family structure.²⁴ However, I find this view inaccurate—Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo offer a compelling counterexample. Their relationship, rather than falling apart, becomes more stable precisely because of shared material interests. Matthew Sommer's book also confirms this point through its analysis of numerous legal cases involving polyandrous marriages. The tragedy of Song Huilian and Laiwanger stems from their

24. Xiang Yurong 項裕榮, “*Jin Ping Mei* ‘Caihuo’ xushi yu ‘Pojia’ muti jiedu——shilun mingdai shiqing xiaoshuozhong jingji yinsu dui hunyin lunli de jiegou yu chongji”《金瓶梅》‘財貨’敘事與‘破家’母題解讀——試論明代世情小說中經濟因素對婚姻倫理的結構與衝擊 [Interpreting the “wealth and commodities” narrative and the motif of “family ruin” in *Jin Ping Mei*: economic factors and their structural impact on marital ethics in Ming-Dynasty fiction], *Beifang luncong* 北方論叢 no. 3 (2016): 31, <https://doi.org/10.13761/j.cnki.bflc.2016.03.006>.

ambivalent resistance to this logic, while the success of Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo lies in their cool, calculated embrace of it.

The marriage between Pan Jinlian and Wu the Elder initially maintained a relative equilibrium grounded in mutual interests; However, the moment such actions are exposed—especially to figures like Wu Song, who embody an uncompromising moral and patriarchal authority—the consequences fall on Pan Jinlian. She becomes the primary bearer of blame, punishment, or social censure, highlighting the gendered asymmetry embedded in marital and social structures.

Wang Liuer and Han Daoguo, unlike many other characters in *Jin Ping Mei*, are granted a relatively favorable ending. This outcome stands in stark contrast to the fates of many other women in the novel. Wang Liuer's survival and prosperity clearly deviate from the novel's ostensible moral framework, which is grounded in the rhetoric of karmic retribution. This dissonance is intentional, producing an effect of irony and narrative suspension. Such dissonance also reveals the underlying instability and fragility of the novel's moral logic.

Importantly, this instability is not only a feature of the narrative but may also be linked to the material conditions of the text's production and circulation. As Shang Wei has shown, *Jin Ping Mei* emerged within the highly commercialized print culture of the late Ming, where fiction was shaped by processes of editing, reproduction, and market-oriented consumption. The novel incorporates a wide range of heterogeneous textual forms—including jokes, popular songs, and theatrical elements—which further contribute to its formal and ideological multiplicity. These diverse materials bring with them different narrative conventions and value systems, resulting in a text that is not only stylistically hybrid but also morally and ideologically uneven, even contradictory at times.²⁵

25. Wei Shang, "Jin Ping Mei and Late Ming Print Culture," in *Writing and Materiality in China*, ed. Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center Press, 2003), 196-197.

Seen in this light, the novel's shifting moral stance—at times didactic, at times permissive or even ironic—can be understood as a product of overlapping narrative logics. In other words, the same market forces that, within the story, reorganize marriage around material interests may also, at the level of textual form, generate a fragmented and unstable moral discourse. This formal instability, in turn, shapes how the narrative distributes judgment and outcome among its characters.

Rather than endorsing Wang Liuer's actions, the text seems to offer a darker, more ironic observation: in a world governed by money and manipulation, those who most effectively embrace commodified thinking may ultimately survive, while those who waver between morality and survival are punished. It is not virtue, but adaptability and calculation, that ensure success. What is interesting is that, when we examine the reception of *Jin Ping Mei* since its emergence, we find a pattern strikingly similar to that embodied by Wang Liuer: despite its extensive depiction of vulgar and sensational material, the novel nevertheless achieved remarkable success within literary history.

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Atmospheric Aesthetics of Memory in Wang Anyi's *And the Rain Patters On*

ABSTRACT In *And the Rain Patters On* (1980), Wang Anyi explores the interplay between memory and atmosphere, framing it through the experiences of the protagonist, Wenwen. Aleida Assmann's typology of memory, encompassing writing, image, body and place, is challenged as Wenwen's recollections invoke nostalgia and reflect political resistance. The narrative emphasizes how atmospheres, particularly rain and lamplight, serve as catalysts for memory, underscoring the subjective experience of time. Through her retrospective journey, Wenwen emerges as a flâneur, navigating between past and present. The sensory elements of rain and light evoke vivid memories while highlighting the tension between individual perception and external influence, illustrated by the interactions with her brother and societal expectations. Such atmospheric layers create a unique space where personal memories resist the dominant collectivist narratives emerging in post-socialist China. Furthermore, the essay argues that atmospheres are not merely backgrounds but active agents in shaping memory, allowing individuals to reclaim personal narratives amid collective ideologies. Wang's portrayal of atmospheric dynamics reveals how memory persists, transforms, and resists within human consciousness, offering a nuanced reflection on the interplay of history and identity.

KEYWORDS affective atmosphere, cultural memory, post-socialist China, Wang Anyi, *And the Rain Patters On*

Introduction

Aleida Assmann identifies four primary forms of media through which memory is preserved: writing, image, body, and place.¹ While this typology effectively describes many existing modes of recollection, it still contains limitations, since some forms of memory preservation operate through the interplay of multiple media among the four forms, and therefore cannot be adequately captured by such a neatly divided system. For example, Stephen Cluck attempts to bridge memory and atmosphere, arguing that many memories themselves take an atmospheric form and shift between subject and object, past and future.² As “atmosphere” is originally defined in such an “in-between” of both the perceiver and the perceived by Gernot Bohme, it provides a new framework for understanding memory.³

The novel *And the Rain Patters On* (雨, 沙沙沙, 1988) written by Chinese writer Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954-) offers a distinctive mode for thinking about atmosphere’s function in memory. As an intellectual youth born in Shanghai, Wang experienced “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside” (“上山下乡”, a historical period from 1968 to 1978), and lived in rural China for twelve years. After the end of Cultural Revolution, she was sent back to urban places. The protagonist, Wenwen, in *And the Rain Patters On* functions as a projection of her personal story after returning to Shanghai and reflects a sense of nostalgia towards the bygone “red era”.

In this novel, the continuity of the protagonist’s memorial feeling is sustained by the ever-changing atmospheres, from rainy weather, lamplight and even fantastic space in people’s mind. But

1. Aleida Assman, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archive* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 169, 206, 230, 281.

2. Steffen Kluck, “Atmospheres and Memory: A Phenomenological Approach,” in *Atmosphere and Aesthetics: A Plural Perspective*, ed. Tonino Griffero and Marco Tedeschini (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 192.

3. Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmosphere*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.

all the different forms carry similar nostalgic affect and romantic complex of the protagonist. Not only do atmospheres activate memories of place, body, and image in multiple modes, but they also preserve past feelings and allow them to resonate repeatedly in the subject's later life. In a post-revolutionary context, the atmosphere preserves personal ideal of the utopia of the communist past, and serves as a reflection on the reform in the post-socialist China. In this process, atmosphere not merely serves as the bearer or medium of memory, but it ontologically becomes the past feeling per se, or to say, the "spatiality of emotion."⁴

This essay explores how atmospheric agency functions in preserving memory in *And the Rain Patters On*, thus making past and present, space and time, reality and phantasy a unity. For the transtemporal contact of past and present, Cecilia Macón has demonstrated how the sonic archive can preserve and reproduce the affective atmosphere of the past through its material form. She uses the concept of archival agency to describe atmosphere's capacity to act and influence human life.⁵ Building on this framework, I extend atmospheric agency to a psychological dimension: atmospheres can traverse into different forms, both inside humans' mind as private imagination and outside the body as present experience. Through the complex operations, they keep the continuity of one's memory from a long lost past, while also distorts it in its operation. Moreover, as a private experience, atmospheric memory acts as a political resistance to collectivism inherited from Mao-era, but it can also be altered by others who intrude into one's personal psychic space.

The first section of this essay discusses how rain as a weather condition acts decisively to trigger memory, not merely as a *Proustian* moment of recollection, but as an outcome of the competition between atmospheric media within the body. The second part

4. Ling Hon Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China: From Dreamscapes to Theatricality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 4.

5. Cecilia Macón, "Haunting Voices: Affective Atmospheres as Transtemporal Contact," in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 350.

examines how memory itself is preserved as atmosphere, in which sensory environment, memorial space, and fantasy are juxtaposed as distinct atmospheric layers within the subject's consciousness. The third part explores how the intrusion of others disrupts and damages the subject's atmospheric space of memory.

A Flaneur in the Rain: Motivation of Retrospection

"Weather constitutes part of a serially encountered realm, saturated with historical resonances, and contributing to a sense of belonging to place."⁶ As the single observer and bearer of the weather, the individual tends to form a sense of infinity in the face of perpetual movement, unconsciously accepting the permanent existence of weather atmosphere.⁷ Throughout the whole novel, rain persists in both reality and imagination, present and past, which equals the content and method for the protagonist Wenwen to extend her psychological activities. She became a flaneur in the eternal rain, enveloped in the "misting rain" and "soft swishing sound."⁸ The story opens with the protagonist standing on the bus stop with other students, ready to board. After the educated youth experience of "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside", they now face a new reform era that would reshape both of their own destinies and that of the nation.

As Wenwen walks out of bus stop and tries to board, suddenly, "A drop of cold rain splashes against her forehead and she comes to a sudden halt."⁹ The diffuse background rain thus condenses into a single, tangible drop that made direct contact with her skin. Skin serves as a receiver of weather and permeates the feeling into the

6. Kaya Barry, Maria Borovnik, and Tim Edensor, "Placing Weather," in *Weather: Spaces, Mobilities and Affects*, ed. Kaya Barry, Maria Borovnik, and Tim Edensor (London: Routledge, 2021), 1.

7. Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti, "Realism: An Idiosyncratic Origin Story," in *Climate Realism: The Aesthetics of Weather and Atmosphere in the Anthropocene*, ed. Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti (London: Routledge, 2021), 2.

8. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patters On in Lapse of Time*, trans. Michael Day (San Francisco: ChinaBooks, 1988), 26.

9. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 26.

inner space of the human being. As Lynn Badia noted, “Weather gets under the skin of our porous bodies.”¹⁰ This sensory shock serves as a direct trigger for memory, intensifying her physical halt and mental hesitation, and pulling her into a retrospective space separate from objective reality.

Contrary to concluding that Wenwen is immersed in her psychological imagination, the more exact expression is that she inserts herself in another ontological realm, the realm of retrospection. According to Gilles Deleuze, “pure recollection” has no psychological existence.”¹¹ When struck by nostalgia, the subject is always accompanied by a specific object of memory, a process of *leaping into ontology*. For Wenwen, the memory is a night when a good man offers her a ride home as she misses the bus, and it recurs when similar experience occurs. In the instance she is struck by the raindrop, visual and acoustic images in the present are transferred into the scenery at “that night”, due to shared factors including the street, stops and the rain. Two sets of paralleled walking happen in a juxtaposition method. Wenwen is wandering on the street of past and present simultaneously. Therefore, the protagonist automatically uses the memory of “that night” to compensate for the imperfections of the present. This compensatory process, however, is interrupted by the bus conductor’s obstruction, “Well, are you getting on or not”¹². The voice tried to take her back to reality. Despite a short suspension, Wenwen is controlled by the hallucination again when “Another large raindrop splashed against her forehead”, and “runs down the bridge of her nose”, ending up with the comment of “Lunatic” from the conductor.¹³

On a closer observation, the tension between the conductor’s shouting and rain’s touching represents two opposing types of media: the spoken word and the tactile touch of weather on skin. The

10. Tim Edensor, Kaya Barry, and Maria Borovnik, eds., *Weather: Spaces, Mobilities and Affects* (London: Routledge, 2021), 2.

11. Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 55.

12. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 26.

13. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 26.

former commands participation, always associated with necessary actions and a performative demand placed upon the subject.¹⁴ The conductor tries to assimilate Wenwen into her professional logic, letting her to understand if she needed to get to the bus or not due to the demand of business, so she considered Wenwen as “Lunatic” in response to her hesitation. Nevertheless, a stronger strength, the medium of nature itself, wins a vantage position in the battle around Wenwen’s attention. Natural media operate outside the semiological correspondence of language; instead, they trigger pre-linguistic, intuitive, and embodied sensations that directly motivate mind and memory. Consequently, this tension produces a schism within Wenwen, leading her to wonder, “Lunatic! Am I a lunatic?”¹⁵

Furthermore, the interaction between diverse types of atmospheres underscores their agential quality. An atmosphere is not merely a “situated” background that intrudes upon the human mind; instead, it contains its inner operations, competitions, and “situating” process in its interaction with human body.¹⁶ As Derek P. McCormack noted, there are always dynamic relations between a subject’s affect and its surrounding elements.¹⁷ The experience of Wenwen being struck by the raindrop cannot be reduced to a simple *Proustian* recollection; it entails a complex temporal process involving various types of atmospheres. In Gernot Böhme’s framework, atmospheres are neither subjective nor objective, but an “in-between” phenomenon, both the perceived and the perceiving. Thus, the operations of these diverse atmospheres do not merely represent Wenwen’s conflicting and hesitant feelings. They *are* those feelings themselves. Her mood is not a mysterious entity interior to the body, but is fundamentally constituted by the

14. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), 81.

15. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 26.

16. Jean-Paul Thibaud, “The Lesser Existence of Ambiance,” in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 178.

17. Derek P. McCormack, “The Elements of Affect Theories,” in *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, ed. Gregory J. Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 66.

exterior landscape.

Putting the situation into a wider socio-political context, the tension of atmospheres happened on Wenwen's body also mirrors discourse competition of left and right in politics, the economic reform and continued revolution at beginning of 1980s in China. Almost all the people in Wenwen's present life express the invasive voices of positivism and utilitarianism, from the brother's parody of Wenwen's dream to the voices of the mother and her line leader old Ai urging her to get married. Such cacophony of voices coincides with the mainstream ideology at that period, which eagerly embraced the upcoming "Reform and Opening Up" ("改革开放", since 1978). In this discourse, the "Cultural Revolution" ("文化大革命", 1966-1976) was regarded as "a malignant tumor on the healthy body of Chinese society that could be surgically removed."¹⁸ The students hurrying to board the bus and the mother pushing Wenwen to marry both exemplify a commitment to the developmentalist temporality of the reform era, which entailed a negation of the past's validity. However, Wenwen ultimately cultivates a nostalgia for the red era of the past. This stance fundamentally distinguishes her from other characters in the novel. Thus, she preserves individual memory within a collective historical period. In this process, the emergent atmospheres divert her attention away from the demands of others and summon past images, thereby constituting a form of political resistance to the period's futurist discourse.

As a flaneur in the modernizing city, Wenwen acts as a conduit for sounds, images and complexed materials with divergent aims. She's a witness of era and social revolution. Facing the external pressure, a set of images and spaces arises within Wenwen's inner realm, generating a power that resists the homogeneous voices. In the later parts, the story also contains two other prominent atmospheric structures in Wenwen's mind: the glow of the yellow lamplight and the image of the sea, a sail, and the horizon.

18. Guimei He 贺桂梅, *The Archive of the "New Enlightenment": Cultural Studies of 1980s China* "新启蒙"知识档案——80年代中国文化研究 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大学出版社, n.d.), 21-22.

Ideal Image: The Yellow Light and Picture on the Sea

Imaginations will never keep static in the same position, as Gaston Bachelard noticed, “The mobility of images includes the essence of imagination, in which transcendence is added to immanence.”¹⁹ When the surrounding rain endlessly saturated into Wenwen’s skin, the sensory surface, it also transferred the external images into her mood unconsciously, participating in the producing of inner reality and entity. She internalizes the environment. In this process, not merely the same emotion dressed up in various forms of spatiality in the metonymy, but a metaphoric structure eliminates the boundary between emotion and environment, which endows the mood with physical qualities like light, odor, temperature. The background atmosphere resonates with Wenwen’s inner spatial structure. Through the dynamic interplay of exteriorization and internalization, amorphous desire are crystallized into two specific forms” the world with “golden orange in color” composed by the lamps at “that night”, and the visual reverie of “A white cloud floating on the horizon, a red sail gliding on the sea, a mystical prince holding out his hand to you.”²⁰

For further explanation, we shall turn back to the specific situations of “that night”, the locus of the protagonist’s nostalgia. After missing her bus and walking alone on the rainy night, it is under these circumstances that Wenwen meets a young man who offered her a ride home. Despite accepting his help, she still felt vigilant and wary of his motives. This tension, however, begins to dissolve when they ride into a pool of lamplight on the street:

Wenwen opened her eyes. What was happening? The rainy world had turned orange-yellow, the orange-yellow light seeped into her heart, filling her with a gentle warmth. Was she dreaming?... It was the streetlights—the whole street was lined with orange-yellow lamps...In

19. Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 2-3.

20. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patters On*, 31.

such an orange-yellow, tender world, all vigilance became unnecessary.²¹

Without specific items soaked in it, the lamplight wraps Wenwen and the good young man as a pure atmosphere and an absolute color, a quality instead of a complete entity, which devoids of an inner structure. “This light, though, can’t even be touched and no one can get anything from it.”²² However, the seemingly useless visual sensation processing only aesthetic values constitutes the necessary condition of what “the street would be like”²³. Sharing the same landscape before their eye, they participate in a kind of communicative ritual, in which the act of viewing becoming drama rather than the exchange of information.²⁴ Immersed in the visual light and color, surrounding of temperature, the communal viewing serves as a booster of bonding and connecting. Thereafter, the private relationship between the two grows more intimate, leading to an exchange of raincoat and the dissolution of Wenwen’s hesitation. An inner space emerges, distancing them from the outside world temporally and spatially, and endowing “that night” with a particular significance rooted in their personal encounter at the bus stop. They are wrapped together by the raincoat, shining lamp, as well as the shared unconscious without guardedness and caution. This beautiful scenery of lamplight epitomizes Wenwen’s imagination of the past era, mixed with romantic complex and personal feeling.

Beyond the lamplight landscape mentioned above, another form of spatial imagination constantly emerges in the novel, which is a fantastic picture of red sail, representing the romantic love in Wenwen’s mind. “A white cloud floating on the horizon, a red sail gliding on the sea, a mystical prince holding out his hand to you...”²⁵.

21. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patters On*, 26-27.

22. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 31.

23. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patters On*, 31.

24. James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 17.

25. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patters On*, 27.

Contrary to the atmosphere of light, the image of the horizon, the sail, and the prince expresses emotions in a different manner. Though it is also isolated from the objective environment, the hallucination is entirely composed of specific parts with an inner logic and coherence. To illustrate this, we can crudely conclude that the lamplight functions as an adjective, just reflecting part of the abstract qualities of objects, while the latter image is more similar to a series of nouns connected by certain principles. Instead of personally experiencing the atmosphere around her body, Wenwen gains the illusion of the horizon completely within her imagination, a vision that is two layers away from the reader. Thus, the constellation of images transmits the meaning and feeling in a manner comparable to T.S. Eliot's "objective correlative", operating on a more poetic plane.²⁶

No matter the specific expressive strategy of spatiality, we can find theatricality inherited from ancient Chinese literature and culture, with the absolute threshold dividing the spectator and spectated object.²⁷ Though diverse sensory experiences like temperature enrich the single form of vision, Wenwen is merely a receiver of the popping-up hallucination and cannot exert influence on the atmosphere. Facing the sea, the "red sail" and "mystical prince" come to the viewer automatically, while the subject, Wenwen, is actually in the position of waiting and feeling, without active practices or bidirectional interaction. The extension and duration of the sealed off space-time box is limited to the state of the flaneur, inside the protagonist's personal memory and retrospection. The present and past mingle on the contact platform of such mysterious romantic images, which supports the source and motivation of the flashback process.

Thus, the agencies of atmosphere maintain their activity within the subject and functions as the medium of memory. Diverse spaces automatically emerge in Wenwen's mind through occasional

26. T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet," in *Selected Essays*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 145.

27. Lam, *Spatiality of Emotion*, 45.

encounters or phantastic construction, leading to the uncontrollable flash-back of Wenwen's embodied experience in the past. Beyond that, these atmospheres also keep the continuity of past memory through their perpetual repercussion, each one evoking a similar nostalgic feeling and romantic passion in the protagonist's mind. Such an atmosphere may be a slice of specific experience, a remembered scene, or even pure fantasy. In the novel, the author intentionally blurs the boundaries between reality and phantasy. What we can be certain is just the pure appearance of these spaces in Wenwen's thoughts.

The constant shifting between these three spaces, including the rainy day in the first part, enables her romantic attachment to the revolutionary era to endure across time. Although Wenwen's concrete environment and historical context have changed, the continual creation of atmospheric space allows the emotional quality of the past to persist, giving her memory a certain degree of continuity. Naturally, this continuity also carries the risk of distortion.

Dynamic and Rationalized Space

The intrusion of others complicates the private realm of psychological experience. Except for the shared lamplight dream with the good man, Wenwen's atmospheric space is invaded by the heterogeneous sights from the brother's parody. "That's your idea, right?!" "Oh, I know. On the horizon."²⁸ What differs the brother from other characters is his ability to see the picture inside Wenwen's mind and distorts it through deliberate repetition and mockery. Beyond that, the most evident intrusion is the following paragraph: "But don't you see, as soon as the boat comes into port it will be inspected at Wusongkou, and if its origin is not clear, it won't be allowed to dock in Shanghai. If the prince has no residency card, then there won't be any grain or cotton ration coupons, no sugar, no soap, no bean products. Wenwen be realistic!"²⁹

28. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 27.

29. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 27-28.

The brother goes further than Wenwen in interpreting and participating in the illusion, by prolonging the static image to a dynamic process that includes entering into port and being inspected. From this view, seemingly the brother's deduction fits in with "a truly complete psychology", as it involves sequential movement rather than a solitary image. However, the brother's mode of thought follows the logic of secularization and rationalization, lacking the "spiritual mobility of the greatest, liveliest, and most exhilarating kind"³⁰. Schmitz distinguishes the atmospheric memory and situation. The latter refers to "ontologically fundamental entities that can be characterized by the fact that their contents do not yet exist individually within them, but rather are chaotically manifold as well as diffuse."³¹ Rationality occupies the main logic of its movement. Memory can be regarded as a specific constellation of elements exposed to the particular individual, surrounded with aural loop. From that perspective, we can say that the brother's narrative constructs the internal relationships of a particular situation with the ships entering the port, stressing the causative connection between a series of stuffs, while Wenwen is immersed in the aesthetic emotion at the atmosphere. After the intervention of the brother's eye, everything undergoes a complete makeover. The pure image acquires its own geographic space and time in reality, which are separately "Wusongkou" in Shanghai, and the start of China's reform, in which inspection and ratification are necessary business processes.

Their later quarrel illuminates diverse meanings of their separate space. The brother argues that "This is life, life! All you have are daydreams...You must not hold up your life for some romantic fantasy. You've already paid the price."³² In doing so, he tries to distinguish "life" and "dream", which corresponds to the

30. Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, 2.

31. Steffen Kluck, "Atmospheres and Memory: A Phenomenological Approach," in *Atmosphere and Aesthetics: A Plural Perspective*, ed. Tonino Griffero and Marco Tedeschini (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 199.

32. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 36.

“situation” and “memory” mentioned above, thus stressing the boundary between his mind and his sister’s. In fact, the brother aims at keeping the pure “life” in the present, while negating the validity of the past. His dynamic image eliminates the romanticism of haunting past and isolates the present in a futurist reforming era, following the developmentalist thought and pecuniary morality in the new era.

However, Wenwen rebuts him and asserts the continuity between past and present, herself and her brother, “You are the one who should go out to sea...Didn’t you once have dreams too? About the sea? Where are they all now? Where? In your frying pan!”³³ According to her logic, the brother is also not a complete representative of “life”, since he also contains dream in the past. Thus, a continuity exists not only between dream and life, but also between Wenwen and her brother, and between the past and the present. In this way, Wenwen clarifies the transition from the dream-like images of the revolutionary era to the pecuniary period, thus negating the rupture between memory and present. Paradoxically, although she utilizes a relatively static image, Wenwen achieves a higher level of dynamism through the recurring memorial atmosphere, which forms “an intermittent, unpredictable affective form of contact with the past, capable of avoiding both banal continuity and radical disruption.”³⁴

Wenwen’s static present always contain things in the past. By folding the complex temporal sequence into an instant picture, Wenwen creates her “metaphysics of the moment”, where *vertical* images combine poetic elements within a stopped time, whereas her brother’s linear time actually instructs us to follow a physical and mechanical path.³⁵ Like Benjamin’s angel, she is blown backward into an unexpected and realistic future, experiencing the

33. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patterns On*, 36.

34. Cecilia Macón, “Haunting Voices: Affective Atmospheres as Transtemporal Contact,” 348.

35. Gaston Bachelard, *The Right to Dream*, trans. J. A. Underwood (Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 173.

contradictions of past, present, and future, while maintaining a constant retrospection toward an absolute loss buried in the layers of memory.³⁶ It's the irresistible power of rationalization and historic logic that summons the vision and memory of the revolutionary golden era, ending up a comprehensive dialectic of temporality. Finally, Wenwen surpasses the limitation of spectatorship, turning into a relatively active gesture. After quarreling with mother and brother, "She had pressed her face against the French window that opened onto the balcony, her eyes searching in the shadows under the trees below."³⁷

Though still engaged in the act of waiting and watching, the previously passive subject awakens to a consciousness and will to search after encountering the most severe familial contradictions. However, the vision contains the destined vain "searching", expecting the ideal romance and prayer. It's the eye concentrated on forests, personal retrospection and the sweep of history, with the hope of changing and regaining the subjectivity in front of endless time. Thus, Wenwen starts to invert the absoluteness of atmospheric agency, turning towards a subjective agency capable of changing space like her brother. Through the action of facing the street in the window, she attempts to collage the domestic frame with the romantic picture of sea and boat, thus actualizing the phantastic illusion in the reality. She also expects the images to continue in a temporal sequence, but in her own logic instead of her brother's.

Conclusion

In this essay, I reframe atmospheres as an alternative method for preserving memory of the past, which can offer us deeper understandings on memory mechanisms in one's mind with the embodied and comprehensive experience. I do not regard atmosphere as a mere emotional backdrop or a simple trigger for

36. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 392.

37. Anyi Wang, *And the Rain Patters On*, 36.

emotions themselves, but rather emphasize its inherent agency. In other words, atmosphere operates and struggles between physical space and the individual mind as an active force. Its own evolution allows it to constantly shift its manifestations among remembered lamplight, rainy weather, and imaginary reflections, immersing the subject in past emotions and occupying their attention. In this process, atmosphere sustains the continuity of the subject's private memories and feelings. Simultaneously, the protagonist is not merely a passive recipient of environmental influences but retains their own agency, capable of affecting the atmosphere and creating space. As atmosphere itself represents an "in-between" state that transcends the subject-object dichotomy, the subject can juxtapose, distort, and collage the atmospheric perceptions within their mind with spatial structures through acts of imagination. This process enables a dynamic interplay between human subjectivity and atmospheric agency.

Such atmospheric dynamics provide individuals methods to resist collective discourse and keep personal feelings and thoughts, just like the Foucauldian "self-techniques", which can help us answer how private memories can transcend or enrich the homogeneity and dominance created by the official discourse especially in the context of post-socialist China. After the end of "epic era", in David Wang's term, of communist China, the factors of collectivism continue to haunt post-socialist context. The mainstream discourse has not abandoned its grand and sublime mode of expression but merely flipped from "Left" to "Right," replacing the "Cultural Revolution" with "Reform" as the new political correctness. In *And the Rain Patters On*, however, the protagonist maintains the continuity of private memory within the incursion of collectivist discourse through the frequent and unconscious flash-back of atmosphere. By preserving, transforming, and reconstructing atmospheric space, the embodied feelings and romantic sentiments of the revolutionary period are safeguarded within the individual psyche, thereby leading to an alternative possibility to illustrate the images

of the revolutionary era in people's mind right after the reform and opening up.

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The South Korean Democratic Party's Attempts at Interparty Cooperation with the Progressive and Liberal Parties in the Late 1950s

ABSTRACT One important feature of Yi Sŭng-man's presidency is the development of political opposition in South Korea. By the mid-1950s, the Democratic Party had become the principal opposition party in the Republic of Korea. Although opposition politics of this period has received scholarly attention, existing research tends to address discrete aspects of political struggle under Yi's presidency. This study integrates fragmented narratives in order to provide a coherent account of the Democratic Party's interparty cooperation attempts with the Progressive and Liberal Parties during the second half of the 1950s. Although both initiatives eventually failed, they revealed important constraints on opposition coordination in South Korea during this period. By analyzing the political motivations, internal debates, and external influences that shaped these efforts, this study contributes to a fuller understanding of opposition dynamics in the late 1950s Republic of Korea.

KEYWORDS Republic of Korea, Yi Sŭng-man, Democratic Party, Progressive Party, Liberal Party, coalition-building

Introduction

Yi Süng-man's presidency is important not only for the emergence of South Korean statehood, but also for the formation of the political opposition movement. In the mid-1950s, the major opposition forces in the Republic of Korea were the anti-communist Democratic Party, which represented conservative and right-leaning interests, and the center-left Progressive Party. Both parties opposed Yi's political decisions and were formed in the tense political atmosphere produced by the 1954 amendment extending his presidency.¹ As the main opposition during Yi's rule,² the Democratic Party employed a variety of political maneuvers to maintain its leadership and effectively participate in the struggle for power.

Scholarship on South Korea's First Republic has focused largely on Yi's administration, with far less attention paid to the development and strategies of the opposition. Although a number of studies have examined the South Korean opposition during this period, they tend to address aspects of political struggle under Yi

1. According to the 1954 Constitution, the president of the Republic of Korea could serve no more than two terms. Seeking to extend his tenure, Yi Süng-man supported an amendment that required the approval of two-thirds of the National Assembly, 136 of its 203 members. Although the proposal received only 135 votes in favor and therefore failed by ordinary counting, the government nevertheless declared the bill adopted, arguing that two-thirds of the Assembly amounted to 135.33 members and that 135 of the 202 members present constituted the necessary fraction. The controversy around this interpretation intensified dissatisfaction among opposition legislators. In response, leading opposition figures organized the New Party Assistance Committee in 1954 under the leadership of Sin Ik-hŭi, with the aim of forming a unified party to oppose Yi Süng-man's regime. The Committee included Cho Pyöng-ok, Chang Myöŋ, and Cho Pong-am. Despite their shared criticism of Yi's policies and ruling Liberal Party, the committee members were ideologically divided into conservative and progressive blocs. These differences eventually produced an organizational split: in 1955, the conservative wing (Sin Ik-hŭi, Cho Pyöng-ok, Chang Myöŋ) established the Democratic Party, while the progressive wing (Cho Pong-am) formed the Progressive Party. For details on these divisions, see Yu-söŋ Oh, "Yi Süngman tae Cho Pongam, Sin Ik-hŭi" 이승만 대 조봉암 · 신익희 [Yi Süng-man versus Cho Pong-am and Sin Ik-hŭi], *Yöksa Pip'yöŋ* 17 (1992): 147–150.

2. Y. C. Han, "Political Parties and Political Development in South Korea," *Pacific Affairs* 42, no. 4 (1969): 448, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2754127>.

separately.³ In contrast, this study aims to integrate fragmented narratives to construct a coherent picture of opposition parties' activities in the second half of the 1950s. In particular, it analyzes two episodes of the Democratic Party's attempted interparty collaboration: the first with the left-leaning Progressive Party, and the second with the pro-presidential Liberal Party led by Yi. Both attempts reveal a more complex opposition landscape than has typically been acknowledged. By examining these episodes, this study broadens existing understanding of the opposition movement in the late 1950s and highlights the Democratic Party's active role within South Korea's evolving multiparty system.

Pursuing Cooperation with the Progressive Party

In March 1956, the Liberal, Democratic, and Progressive Parties selected their candidates for the upcoming presidential election.⁴ At the same time, the Democratic and Progressive Parties were developing a plan for cooperation. Party representatives conferred on jointly selecting two candidates to oppose Yi in the presidential race. This joint effort aimed to ensure the election of politicians supported by the entire opposition camp. Such cooperation was necessary to unify opposition forces and strengthen the movement.

During the consultations, leader of the Progressive Party Cho Pong-am ceded the presidential nomination to the Democratic Party but stipulated that a member of his own party should receive the vice presidential nomination. The Democratic Party responded reluctantly,⁵ with its far-right wing opposing the collaboration with

3. For instance, Oh Yu-sŏk ("Yi Sŭngman tae Cho Pongam, Sin Ik-hŭi") examines the formation of the Democratic and Progressive Parties in 1955, paying particular attention to the cooperation efforts of Cho Pong-am and Sin Ik-hŭi prior to the 1956 presidential elections. In contrast, Sŏ Hŭi-gyŏng ("1950-yŏndae huban 'p'osŭt'ŭ Yi Sŭngman chŏngch'i' ŭi hŏnjŏngsa") focuses on discussions between the Democratic and Liberal Parties in the second half of the 1950s. Yi Wan-bŏm ("Han'guk chŏnggwŏn kyoch'ae ŭi kukchejŏngch'i"), in turn, centers his research on the influence of the United States on interparty communication.

4. Elections were scheduled for May 1956.

5. Kwang-kyu Nam, "Haebang ihu Sin Ik-hŭi ŭi chŏngch'i hwaltong kwa chŏngch'i nosŏn" 해방 이후 신익희의 정치활동과 정치노선 [The Political Activities and Political Line of Sin Ik-hŭi in the Post Liberation Period], *P'yŏnghwa Yŏn'gu* 18, no. 2 (2010): 99–100.

Cho.⁶ In particular, Chang Myŏn of the Democratic Party strongly resisted Cho's demand, as he himself intended to run for vice president and did not want to cede the nomination to an "unknown member of the Progressive Party."⁷ However, the Democratic Party leader Sin Ik-hŭi continued secret meetings with Cho, hoping to secure the presidential chair if the negotiations were successful. On May 3, Sin delivered a campaign speech in Seoul that drew a large audience and hinted at his success in the upcoming elections. Unfortunately, on May 5, the day before the next round of negotiations with the Progressive Party, Sin passed away unexpectedly.⁸

Following Sin's death, members of the Democratic Party announced it would not support Cho.⁹ By rejecting an alliance with the Progressive Party, the democrats reiterated their conservative, anti-communist stance. This decision clearly shows that the majority of the Democratic Party, apart from Sin, was opposed to partnership with other opposition forces. As a result, the national vote on the candidates took place without any coordinated campaign. Opposition politicians were forced to rely solely on their own supporters rather than mobilizing a unified opposition base. Ultimately, Chang Myŏn won the vice presidential election, allowing the Democratic Party to gain access to the state apparatus. However, due to internal disagreements, the party soon split into a new faction led by Chang and an old faction led by Cho Pyŏng-ok.¹⁰ Despite the party's victory in this election, rivalry between the two factions continued to shape its policies.¹¹

6. Oh, "Yi Sŭngman tae Cho Pongam, Sin Ik-hŭi," 152.

7. The Progressive Party's candidate for vice president was Pak Ki-ch'ul.

8. Nam, "Haebang ihu Sin Ik-hŭi ŭi chŏngch'i hwaltong," 100.

9. Oh, "Yi Sŭngman tae Cho Pongam, Sin Ik-hŭi," 153.

10. The old faction consisted of former landowners, and the new faction consisted of former officials who collaborated with the Japanese administration and the USAMGIK.

11. Hŭi-gyŏng Sŏ, "1950-yŏndae huban 'p'osŭt'ŭ Yi Sŭngman chŏngch'i' ŭi hŏnjŏngsa: 1956-yŏn ihu Chayudang kwa Minjudang ŭi kaehŏn nonŭi rŭl chungsimŭro" 1950년대 후반 '포스트 이승만 정치'의 헌정사: 1956년 이후 자유당과 민주당의 개헌 논의를 중심으로 [The History of Korean Constitution of the "Politics of Post-Yi Sŭng-man" in 1950's: Focusing on the Discussion of Constitutional Amendment in Liberal and Democratic Parties of ROK], *Han'guk Chŏngch'i Hakhoe Po* 50, no. 4 (2016): 89.

Pursuing Cooperation with the Liberal Party

On February 25, 1958, the South Korean government denied the Progressive Party's registration renewal, outlawing its activities.¹² Accordingly, the center-left organization was excluded from the opposition, leaving right-wing parties the only major forces in South Korea. Besides suppressing leftist sentiments, this new political circumstance also aligned with the United States's interest in shaping South Korean politics by installing a two-party system that favored and sustained conservative dominance.¹³

To build a two-party system, the United States had established a dialogue between the ruling and opposition parties. To determine which faction within the Democratic Party was willing to engage in such a dialogue, the U.S. embassy officials held several meetings¹⁴ with Chang Myŏn and Cho Pyŏng-ok. These consultations revealed that Cho Pyŏng-ok's faction was more willing to compromise than Chang Myŏn's,¹⁵ likely due to its more moderate stance that was also entertained by moderate members of the Liberal Party. It was easier for the United States to cooperate with moderates in both parties. Pragmatically, initiating negotiations with Chang Myŏn also required more effort than with Cho Pyŏng-ok. Chang was inflexible and could set his own terms, while Cho was already open for cooperation. Due to Chang's non-cooperative and uncompromising attitude toward the Liberal Party, which could hinder the coalition efforts, his

12. Oh, "Yi Sŭngman tae Cho Pongam, Sin Ikhu," 155.

13. Wan-bŏm Yi, "Han'guk chŏnggwŏn kyoch'ae ŭi kukchejŏngch'i-1950-yŏndae chŏnban'gi Miguk ŭi Yi Sŭngman chegŏ kyehoek, huban'gi Miguk ŭi Yi Sŭngman hugye ch'eje mosaek kwa 1960-yŏn 4-wol Yi Sŭngman t'oejin" 한국 정권교체의 국제정치-1950년대 전반기 미국의 이승만 제거 계획, 후반기 미국의 이승만 후계 체제 모색과 1960년 4월 이승만 퇴진 [The International Politics of Regime Change in Korea: U.S. Plans to Remove Yi Sŭng-man in the Early 1950s, U.S. Search for a Successor System in the Late 1950s, and Yi's Resignation in April 1960], *Segye Chŏngch'i* 8 28, no. 2 (2007): 156.

14. The purpose of the meetings was to change the Democratic Party's position, which was demanding a unilateral apology from the Liberal Party. The United States hoped to smooth over the conflict between the parties and bring them closer together, and began talks with the Democratic Party. For more details, see Yi, "Han'guk chŏnggwŏn kyoch'ae ŭi kukchejŏngch'i," 158.

15. Yi, "Han'guk chŏnggwŏn kyoch'ae ŭi kukchejŏngch'i," 158.

faction was excluded from further interparty interaction.¹⁶

In addition to setting the premise of a two-party system, the U.S. government was also concerned with who would succeed Yi Sŭng-man as the leader of the Republic of Korea.¹⁷ Considering the foreseeable bipartisan cooperation, the U.S. Embassy minister, who was involved in the consultations at the time, suggested to the Secretary of State that the U.S. government should prioritize Yi Ki-bung¹⁸ and Cho Pyŏng-ok¹⁹, with whom they intended to join forces in establishing the new government. The United States believed that after Yi Sŭng-man's resignation, power should be transferred to a new ruling party assembled from the less radical wings of the Democratic Party and the Liberal Party.²⁰ In the lead-up to the presidential election, the United States began to influence South Korean politics by participating in the alliance between the two largest parties, pursuing control of both the form of government and its composition.

With U.S. support, the old faction of the Democratic Party and the moderate faction of the Liberal Party initiated secret negotiations to replace the current presidential system with a parliamentary one.²¹ The old faction participated based on the consensus that Cho Pyŏng-ok could not win the presidential election with Yi Sŭng-man on the ballot. Furthermore, Yi's death would have transferred his power to Vice President Chang Myŏn, who was a political rival of the old faction. To prevent its rival from coming to power, the old faction decided to cooperate with the Liberal Party and push for the

16. Yi, "Han'guk chŏnggwŏn kyoch'ae ŭi kukchejŏngch'i," 159.

17. For the United States, the South Korean government had several functions to fulfill. These included containing communism, maintaining stability in the Republic of Korea, and pursuing pro-American policies. Yi Sŭng-man fulfilled these functions to a certain extent. The United States needed the new South Korean government to fulfill them as well.

18. Leader of the Liberal Party and member of the moderate faction.

19. Leader of the Democratic Party and member of the old faction.

20. Yi, "Han'guk chŏnggwŏn kyoch'ae ŭi kukchejŏngch'i," 159.

21. The talks were attended by Cho Pyŏng-ok of the Democratic Party and Yi Ki-bung of the Liberal Party. The change in the form of government was explained as necessary for a peaceful transition of government from Yi Sŭng-man. The secret nature of the talks stemmed from the negative attitudes of Chang Myŏn (the new faction of the Democratic Party) and the radical faction of the Liberal Party.

introduction of a parliamentary republic system in South Korea.²² This amendment would end the intense struggle for the presidency, as the executive power would be distributed among a cabinet of ministers. By supporting the amendment, representatives of the old faction were planning to secure more cabinet positions and sideline the new faction.

Upon learning of the secret negotiations, on January 5, 1960, Yi Sŭng-man announced that the proposed amendment could not be accepted as the election date was already set and closing in.²³ Moreover, seizing this chance to eliminate the possibility of electing yet another opposition vice president, he insisted on amending the election law to require a single ballot for presidential and vice presidential elections.²⁴ Yi's firm stance then brought an end to the joint discussion between the Democratic and the Liberal Parties on changing the state system.

Subsequently, splits within the Democratic Party deepened. Chang Myŏn condemned Yi Sŭng-man's proposal, claiming that a single-ballot system would restrict voters' rights. The new faction also accused the old faction of supporting Yi Sŭng-man's dictatorship for failing to oppose the amendment's passage.²⁵ The old faction's passivity stemmed from the belief that the single-ballot system would work to its advantage. If adopted, Cho Pyŏng-ok would have had a high chance of winning the election due to the large number of votes for Chang Myŏn.

Meanwhile, the radical faction of the Liberal Party began actively promoting the single ballot amendment among the National Assembly participants.²⁶ They recruited members of the Democratic Party and independent members of the Assembly to

22. Sŏ, "1950-yŏndae huban 'p'osŭt'ŭ Yi Sŭngman chŏngch'i' ŭi hŏnjŏngsa," 95.

23. The elections were scheduled for May 15, 1960.

24. Sŏ, "1950-yŏndae huban 'p'osŭt'ŭ Yi Sŭngman chŏngch'i' ŭi hŏnjŏngsa," 97.

25. Sŏ, "1950-yŏndae huban 'p'osŭt'ŭ Yi Sŭngman chŏngch'i' ŭi hŏnjŏngsa," 97–98.

26. Sŏ, "1950-yŏndae huban 'p'osŭt'ŭ Yi Sŭngman chŏngch'i' ŭi hŏnjŏngsa," 96–

97. The moderate faction of the Liberal Party agreed to the amendment because Yi Sŭng-man's success in the election would mean the election of a Liberal Party member as vice president. In this case, the party would retain its power.

secure mandated votes to pass the amendment.²⁷ The effort proved to be futile. To facilitate the amendment's passage, the Liberal Party's moderate faction proposed to compromise to the Democratic Party old faction's demand to change the electoral law.²⁸ The radical faction, on the other side, categorically refused to cooperate with the opposition, even at the cost of abandoning the single ballot amendment. In the end, Yi Süng-man succeeded in preventing the introduction of a parliamentary republic, but the Liberal Party failed to change the election format.

Conclusion

Overall, during Yi Süng-man's presidency, the Democratic Party engaged in two significant attempts at interparty cooperation, both of which proved unsuccessful. The first initiative was led by the party chairman Sin Ik-hŭi, who sought to coordinate with the Progressive Party in order to consolidate the opposition before the upcoming elections. Such joint efforts could ensure the election of opposition candidates who would satisfy the entire opposition camp. Yet, the plan faced resistance even within the Democratic Party itself. Politicians, such as Chang Myŏn who had his own ambition for the vice presidential office, opposed concessions to the Progressive Party. Following Sin Ik-hŭi's death, the initiative collapsed entirely. This episode demonstrates that the Democratic Party, despite moments of strategic flexibility, largely preferred to act independently, with many of its members prioritizing personal political advancement over substantial cooperative efforts.

27. At the end of November 1959, the Democratic Party held 77 seats, the Liberal Party 143 seats, and there were 12 independent seats. Two members of parliament from the Democratic Party left the party, and the Liberal Party accepted independent members. In early January 1960, the number of members of parliament representing the parties changed again. The Liberal Party's membership dropped to 145, just 10 short of the number needed to pass the amendment. For more details, see Sö, "1950-yöndae huban 'p'osŭt'ü Yi Süngman chöngch'i' üi hönjöngsa," 96–97.

28. The old faction proposed making the elections of the president and vice president indirect and convening an electoral college of members of the provincial councils. For more details, see Kim, "Che 1 konghwaguk sigi Minjudang üi naegak ch'aegimje kaehön chöngch'aek kwa 'minjujuüi chöngdang' wisang üi hoektük," 110.

The second attempt at collaboration emerged from negotiations between the Democratic Party's faction led by Cho Pyŏng-ok and the Liberal Party's moderate group led by Yi Ki-bung, with the facilitation of the U.S. government. The discussions centered on the possibility of transitioning to a parliamentary system, which would redistribute political authority between the two largest parties following Yi Sŭng-man's resignation. For the negotiators, such an arrangement promised a route to political influence; for the U.S. government, it promised political stability in the Republic of Korea. Yet, this initiative, too, was halted, this time by Yi Sŭng-man's firm rejection to compromise. The described Democratic Party's attempts to form a coalition reveal not only the fragmented nature of the opposition in the late 1950s but also the limitations of developing a unified opposition front in the Republic of Korea.

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Paragon Virtues of Korean Women

Representations in Princess Myths

ABSTRACT In this essay, I examine traditional Korean myths featuring three princesses: the fictitious Princess Pari and Princess Pyŏnggang and the historical Queen Sŏndŏk of Silla. In examining these three tales, I aim to analyze what paragon female virtues are presented and what this can tell us about traditional Korean attitudes towards women. Princess Pari exemplifies the virtue of filial piety, Princess Pyŏnggang the idea of the righteous wife, and Queen Sŏndŏk the leadership that was afforded women before the influence of Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon Period.

KEYWORDS Korea, mythology, women, gender, feminism, Neo-Confucianism

Introduction

Traditional folk tales and myths have long given a glimpse into the heart of a people. These tales, passed down from generation to generation, reflect the culture and values that a society holds dear. From Greek mythology to classic fairy tales, these stories not only entertain but also help us see the world through the eyes of the tellers. It stands to reason that studying traditional myths and folktales provides invaluable information about the values of past societies and how these values have translated into modern society.

This paper analyzes three different Korean myths with the intent to better understand the role and status of women in premodern Korea. To do this, I look at three different myths about Korean princesses (both fictional and historical). As princesses, these women were seen as model characters and thus are ideal subjects of analysis in order to understand the most celebrated characteristics and virtues in women at the time.

Let us begin with a quick note on the differences between myths, folktales, and legends. Myths are traditional stories that have been passed down orally throughout the years and often feature supernatural characters and elements. Legends, on the other hand, are often based on actual historical figures. Folktales encompass both legends and myths and are used to describe the more general tradition and culture of a people and include non-literary elements such as song, dance, and rituals.¹ However, for the purposes of this essay, I will be using these terms somewhat interchangeably to reflect modern day vernacular usage.

In this essay, I will be looking at three traditional tales of premodern Korea: the shaman song of Princess Pari, the myth of Princess Pyŏnggang (Ondal's Wife), and the legend of Queen Sŏndŏk. After a short summary of each myth, I will briefly discuss these tales from a modern day perspective to determine whether these tales subvert or support the current ideas of female liberation. However, it should be emphasized that these tales were written in traditional Korea and thus must be examined and understood within their respective contexts. Accordingly, this paper identifies the celebrated traits of an ideal woman in traditional society in relation to today's values to illuminate the role and status of women in pre-modern Korea. By studying these three myths, it concludes that paragon female virtues include filial piety, wifely devotion, and competent leadership.

Princess Pari: Filial Daughter

1. Heinz Insu Fenkl and Bella Myoŋ-Woŋ Dalton-Fenkl *The Korean Myths: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes and Legends* (Thames and Hudson, 2024), 19-21.

There once was a prince who married on an inauspicious day. Each time his wife became pregnant they waited with bated breath for a son. But each time, a daughter was born instead. By the time his seventh daughter was born, the king was furious. He placed her in a chest and sent her down the river to drown, but the chest was miraculously guided to shore. Raised by kind strangers and named Pari (meaning “cast away”), the girl grew up unaware of her true heritage. One day, the king and queen became seriously ill as retribution for their cruel act towards Pari. The only thing that could save them was a special healing water from a far off land, but their six daughters were too afraid to take the journey. In desperation, they sent for Pari.

When Pari learned of her parents’ condition, she set off on her adventure. The journey was long, and Pari had to travel through the underworld, but eventually she arrived at her destination. In exchange for the healing water, Pari married a giant and bore him sons. After seven long years, she awoke in the night after dreaming of her parents. Bidding her husband farewell, she took the water back to her parents where they were miraculously healed. Pari was then accepted into the family, no longer a cast away daughter.²

The shaman myth of Princess Pari is one of the most well-known traditional tales and is sung at many shaman ceremonies (*kut*), as she is seen as the first shaman. The myth of Princess Pari is unique in that her tale is one of the few Korean legends that feature a woman as the main character, thus an ideal tale to study the attitudes towards women. Her role in shamanism also holds particular interest, as shamanism has always been associated with the female domain. In ancient Korea, women were expected to protect the households from superstitious dangers by worshipping house gods or spirits

2. Fenkl and Dalton-Fenkl, *The Korean Myths*, 65-66.

and, when necessary, hiring a shaman to dispel the unquiet dead.³ In a culture and society where women were often confined to domesticity and seen as lesser than their husbands, shamanism was a vehicle through which women could exercise limited power and agency in their lives.

The shaman myth of Princess Pari is often performed during the *chinogwi kut*, a specific ceremony performed to lead the soul of the dead to the Western Pure Land, the land of paradise in Mahayana Buddhism.⁴ In Korea, shamanism and Buddhism have adopted elements of the other, becoming interlinked in ways similar to this shamanic ritual performed with a Buddhist purpose. Pari's journey draws from the journey of the soul to the Western Pure Land, rendering her a more generalized and idealized character. Thus, her story was most likely not about anything specifically related to women, feminist or otherwise. While her story may entertain universal application, the depiction of a main female character as both powerful and virtuous—a somewhat uncommon portrayal as females were often depicted negatively in folktales to justify female subordination⁵—might still bear gender-specific significance, which remains debatable. With few scholarly works specifically addressing the myth of Pari, general retellings often differ in their underlying tones and message, with some arguing that the tale's role in shamanism is feministic and highlights the importance and power of women. Further, Pari is not a supporting character but the main hero of the tale and is the only one able to save her parents. It could also be argued that Pari was only able to succeed because she participated in two households—that of her parents and that of her husband's.⁶ When Neo-Confucianism was adopted in Chosŏn Korea, it became common for a woman to forsake her childhood family for that of her husband's. In this way, Pari and her story could be seen

3. Clark W. Sorensen, "The Myth of Princess Pari and the Self Image of Korean Women," *Anthropos* 83 no. 4/6 (1988): 411, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40463374>.

4. Sorensen, "The Myth of Princess Pari," 404.

5. Sorensen, "The Myth of Princess Pari," 404.

6. Sorensen, "The Myth of Princess Pari," 415.

as subverting traditional Confucian expectations of women.

However, I ultimately argue that the story of Princess Pari does not intrinsically promote female independence and liberation, as in the end, Pari succeeds by conforming to her traditional roles as wife and daughter. While her story clearly problematizes the traditional constraints on women, evidenced by her father casting her into the sea, she doesn't necessarily overcome these issues in her journey. Instead, Pari chooses to obediently serve her parents, marry a man, and bear sons—thus fulfilling traditional expectations of womanhood. She never expresses anger or frustration about her conditions, r, accepting them with patience.

Instead of female liberation, I argue that the moral of the story is filial piety. If the myth were retold through a contemporary lens, Pari would have forsaken her parents when karma besets them, prioritizing justice over mercy. However, despite her parents' cruelty, Pari embodies a core Korean value—filial piety. Even before Neo-Confucianism came to Korea, filial piety was seen as an essential virtue for both men and women. Countless myths and legends feature a filial son or daughter, praising their sacrifice and rewarding them in the end for their devotion. Pari chooses to embark on a long and treacherous journey for parents who abandoned her, and for her piety, she is welcomed back as a princess in the end. When asked why she agreed to the perilous journey, Pari evokes filial piety in her statement, “although I have not received parental grace from the king and bear him no moral debt, since my mother meritoriously carried me in her womb for ten months, I will go.”⁷

Filial piety is still valued in modern Korea. The child is commonly expected to take care of an ailing parent or in-law. One study showed that 66% of these primary caretakers are women, usually daughters-in-law, and as of 1990, 76% of elderly Koreans over the age of 60 lived with their children.⁸ When asked what actions represent filial piety, respect, repayment of debt, sacrifice,

7. Sorensen, “The Myth of Princess Pari,” 413.

8. Kyu-Taik Sung, “An Exploration of Actions of Filial Piety,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 12, no. 4 (1998): 375, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065\(98\)90025-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0890-4065(98)90025-1).

love, fulfilling responsibilities, and maintaining family harmony were often mentioned.⁹ Pari reflects these values—she prioritizes her parents’ health and the harmony of her newfound family over her own desires and potential grudges. Despite being abandoned, she shows her parents the deference and care expected of a virtuous daughter. As one of the most enduring myths in Korea, its continuation underscores the persistence of filial piety at the heart of Korean culture.

Princess Pyŏnggang: Good Wife

Once there was a mischievous and rebellious princess. Whenever the princess would misbehave, her father the king would threaten to marry her off to the town fool, Ondal. When the princess came of age, the king arranged an auspicious marriage. To everyone’s surprise, however, the princess defied her father and refused to accept it. Her father had told her she would marry the town fool, so marry him she would. She would accept no other. The princess and her father fought bitterly until finally she packed up her precious things and ran away from home. Appearing at Ondal’s door, she asked the man to marry her. While he was initially confused and staunchly refused, the wise advice of his mother and the princess’ determination eventually won out. As Ondal’s wife, the princess set to work to reform her husband. Selling her fine jewelry she had brought with her from the palace, she was able to elevate the family from poverty. She then taught her new husband martial arts, strategy, and horseback riding. Ondal went on to become a famous general before dying heroically in a campaign. At the funeral his wife gave him a tender but restrained goodbye, and only then was he laid to rest.¹⁰

9. Sung, “An Exploration of Actions of Filial Piety,” 377.

10. Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, “The Princess and the Idiot: Behind Every Good Man is a Great Woman,” *Korea.net*, accessed April 11, 2025, <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=122048>.

The story of Princess Pyŏnggang offer insights on what paragon female virtues were lauded during the Three Kingdoms period. The oral myth was first recorded in the *Samguk Sagi* (the History of the Three Kingdoms), the first history of Korea written by Confucian scholar Kim Pusik in 1145.¹¹ In contrast to the shaman song of Princess Pari, Princess Pyŏnggang does not conform to filial piety. Defying her father's wishes, she chooses to marry Ondal instead of the nobleman picked out for her. In this way, one might argue that her tale challenges traditional Neo-Confucian values. However, Pyŏnggang still operates within the ruler-subject relationship configured by traditional Confucian ideals. Daughter of the king, she is also his subject. Thus, one moral of the story is that a ruler should never say anything in jest—even to his daughter.

While the tale originated from the Three Kingdoms period, Kim's decision to include it in his dynastic history speaks more to the prevailing sentiments during the Chosŏn Period when the record was compiled. He seems to have interpreted this story from a Confucian standpoint, highlighting Pyŏnggang's integrity and honor in choosing to remain true to the words of her king even over her duty to him as a daughter.¹² After witnessing two different attempted revolts, Kim Pusik's priority in compiling the *Samguk Sagi* was arguably to establish both legitimacy and order, something best accomplished through Neo-Confucianism. Thus, a strong Neo-Confucian current runs through much of the tales included in the *Samguk Sagi*, regardless of their original intent.

But what can be said of Princess Pyŏnggang herself? This fiery princess is a far cry from what many would expect of an ideal, traditional Korean woman. Resourceful, determined, and rebellious, Pyŏnggang is the reason Ondal is able to achieve success. "The Tale of Ondal" seems to highlight the idea that behind every

11. Hai-soon Lee, "Representation of Females in Twelfth-Century Korean Historiography," in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, eds. Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan Piggott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 75.

12. Lee, "Representation of Females in Twelfth-Century Korean Historiography," 84.

good man, there is a great woman.¹³ In this way the myth highlights and celebrates the idea of strong, virtuous women. And yet, the idea might not be so liberating as one might initially think. In the end, the myth is still known as “The Tale of Ondal”—not of Princess Pyŏnggang—for a reason. Although Pyŏnggang plays a vital role in Ondal’s rising, once he achieves a higher status as a general, Pyŏnggang quietly recedes to the background, not mentioned again until Ondal’s funeral. The tale truly revolves around Ondal, not his wife, and as such, Pyŏnggang is relegated to her supporting domestic role. As with Pari, Pyŏnggang’s characteristic and value is defined by her relation to others: in this case, it is her wifely wisdom and loyalty.

The idea that a good wife ensures the success of her husband has existed in Korea since its early days and remains prevalent today. Leaving behind the Chosŏn period, Korea became increasingly exposed to Western views as well as the idea of “modernization,” which introduced shifting ideas on many different subjects, including women’s status and role in modern society. As the political world of Korea rapidly changed, education for women—championed by American Protestant missionaries—was seen as a way to push the country into modernity. Under the Japanese occupation, this idea was soon combined with the Japanese philosophy of *ryōsai kenbo* or “good wife and wise mother.” Facing the similar need to modernize, Japan placed an emphasis on women’s education as a way to create more educated households and therefore, a more educated population. By 1906, the term “wise mother, good wife” had taken off after its first appearance in a Korean newspaper. This philosophy was then further cemented into Korean culture with the Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945.¹⁴

While the idea of “wise mother, good wife” was advertised as liberating, it had its critics. Women had greater access to education

13. Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, “The Princess and the Idiot.”

14. Hyaewol Choi, “‘Wise Mother, Good Wife’: A Transcultural Discursive Construct in Modern Korea,” *The Journal of Korean Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 5-6, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jks.2009.0004>.

than ever before, but their learning revolved around how to raise good children and facilitate their husband's success. Yet again, a woman was expected to prioritize the success and happiness of her husband and children over any personal ambitions. As the years progressed, the idea of "wise mother, good wife" has seen a decline as contemporary Korean women begin to place education over starting a family, but the idea of wifely fidelity and wisdom still remains. While no scholarly work has drawn a direct parallel between this mentality and that of *The Tale of Ondal*, the two have striking similarities. The tale would have taught pre-modern Koreans the Confucian principles of being a wise ruler and a supportive wife, and the importance of a wise and supportive wife persists today through the "wise mother, good wife" slogan. Princess Pyŏnggang demonstrates that women's resourcefulness to wisdom is only valued when directed towards the happiness and success of her husband.

Queen Söndök: Competent Leader

Queen Söndök was a wise and kind ruler. All the people of Silla loved her. One day, when the queen went to visit a Buddhist temple, she passed a sad beggar who sat by the wayside, hoping to see her. If he could but see her noble face, he could die happy. However, the guards pushed him back and he was lost in the crowds. After the Buddhist ceremony, the queen continued on only to see the beggar huddled in a dark corner. Taking pity on him, she knelt down and placed one of her golden rings upon his finger. Waking suddenly, the beggar stared into the beautiful face of the queen. Delighted, he rose up and exclaimed, "I saw the Queen! I can die happy!" And with that shout his great love for the queen overtook him and he became flames, searing a token of his love onto the pagoda.¹⁵

The legends of Queen Söndök are rather different from the two tales

15. Tae Hung Ha, *Folk Tales of Old Korea* (Yonsei University Press, 1958), 66-67.

previously discussed. For one, Queen Söndök was a real historical figure and one of the great rulers of the kingdom of Silla in ancient Korea. When her father passed away without any male heirs, Söndök ascended as queen. Interestingly enough, her succession seemed to have met little opposition. Silla society was deeply enmeshed in lineage and class, structured in a caste system called the bone-rank system. Only the highest rank, the holy bones, was considered eligible to rule. Although Söndök was a woman, her status in the caste system overrode the constraints imposed by her gender.

Although Silla was the most peaceful of the Korean kingdoms at the time, Söndök still faced serious problems which she handled with competence, thereby cementing her power as queen. Throughout her reign, the queen quelled uprisings, facilitated better relations with China, and established a military school called *hwarang-do* for young men. She was also known to be fascinated by astronomy—one legend says that when an ambassador from China refused to teach her astronomy, Söndök set out to teach herself and ended up predicting the date of a lunar eclipse more accurately than the ambassador.¹⁶ During her reign, she also ordered the construction of an observatory tower, thought to be the first space observatory built in Asia and still a popular tourist site today.

Along with her political accomplishments, Söndök was able to gain respect as queen through religion. She was deeply interested in Buddhism, and under her reign, the religion flourished. At the same time, Söndök was also known as a shaman. Legends describe the queen as having prophetic dreams about future events and wars. Throughout history, Korean women have used religion, particularly Shamanism, to exert control or power in ways inaccessible outside of religion. It appears that Söndök used both shamanism and Buddhism to command respect and further legitimize her leadership.

For example, in the above mentioned tale of Queen Söndök and the beggar, Söndök meets the devoted beggar on her way to

16. “Söndök (c. 581-647),” in *Encyclopedia of World Biography* (Gale, 1998), accessed December 16, 2025, <https://link-gale-com.byu.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A148364769/AONE?u=byuprovo&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=9675c619>.

a Buddhist shrine, implying Söndök's religious fervor. Once the beggar's dream is realized, the story takes a fantastical turn as he erupts into flames and becomes a fire demon. Söndök, now more concerned than compassionate, orders a sorcerer to banish the demon. This tale seems to highlight Söndök's commitment to protecting her people using religious and fantastical elements. As with her prophetic dreams, Söndök's patronage of Buddhism and shamanism served to portray her as protecting and caring, qualities easily associated with and accepted in women. It should also be noted that Söndök was praised for both her beauty and compassion in the myth, two virtues that continued to be emphasized as feminine in media throughout Korean history.

Legends of the queen also differ from the previous two myths in that these tales revolve solely around Queen Söndök instead of focusing on her relationship to the men in her life. Despite the relative tolerance towards women in power during the Silla period, there were still people who opposed Söndök because she was a woman. Söndök did her best to quell these uprisings but ultimately died before she was able to fully succeed.¹⁷

These legends of Queen Söndök served to justify her reign and as such, highlight a completely different set of virtues from the other tales of women in ancient Korea. Söndök was afforded more freedom and respect than many women in Korean myths, and she was recognized as a capable and intelligent ruler. However, she also represented classic feminine virtues such as charity and beauty, two virtues seen as more fundamental in a virtuous woman than a virtuous man. This implies that although Söndök had substantially more power than women of later periods in Korea, there remained gendered expectations and limitations.

The rise of Neo-Confucianism brought the end of female rulers in Korea. As more submissive womanhood was highlighted and encouraged, women were excluded from leadership roles. Kim

17. Wikimedia Foundation, "Pidam," last modified December 13, 2025, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pidam>.

Pusik's portrayal of Söndök and other Sillan queens encapsulates this ideological shift. He was clearly uncomfortable with a woman on the throne and attributed disasters and the eventual collapse of Silla to female leadership, warning that the subversion of Neo-Confucian principles would bring calamity. During the later Chosön Period of Korea (1392-1910), women were only able to exert political power indirectly through "behind-the-screen rule": an arrangement through which a woman in court was able to influence the men in her life (her son or husband) to gain political sway. However, her political influence depended heavily on the receptiveness of those men, and in almost all instances a woman would always be relegated to the private sphere where she remained overshadowed by men.

Neo-Confucianism still influences Korean society today. While opinions and attitudes towards women have changed over the century, traditional and often sexist attitudes still persist. In recent decades, there has been an increase of women in leadership positions, still far outnumbered by men. As of 2024, only 7.3% of executives in Korea were female, though the number slowly rises with each passing year.¹⁸ Despite gradual progress, only time will tell the trajectory of women's status in Korea.

Conclusion

The myths, legends, and folk tales of Korea are rich and complex, reflecting the nuanced culture of the day. The women depicted vary from tale to tale and, as it is with any character in a myth, highlight the values and ideas of the time. Women in Korea have generally taken a more submissive role, especially following the rise of Neo-Confucianism, and many women in these tales were oriented in their relationship with the men in their lives. From filial piety (Princess Pari) to wifely devotion (Princess Pyönggang), these women embodied the feminine ideals. And yet, nothing is ever

18. Jae-hyuk Park, "Are Women Represented Fairly in Leadership Roles at Korean Companies?," *The Korea Times*, September 11, 2024, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/business/companies/20240911/are-women-represented-fairly-in-leadership-roles-at-korean-companies>.

black-and-white as it seems. Although most myths portray their female characters in a rather submissive light, legends like those of Queen Söndök remind us that there were women in certain periods of time portrayed with more independence and leadership, like that of a competent ruler. One thing can be said for sure: women occupy a central role in analyzing and understanding the culture, values, and history of Korean society.

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Passing the Baton

K-Pop's Soft Power Playbook and J-Pop's Next Steps to the Global Stage

ABSTRACT Soft power, as defined by Joseph S. Nye, is power by attraction. In the context of Asian pop culture, South Korea is a clear exemplar of what a successful soft power movement looks like. Rather than simply looking at Hallyu within Korean culture, this article aims to understand how other countries can learn from this center of soft power. South Korea has created what I call a “soft power playbook” that other countries can adapt to advance a global process of cultural hybridization—effectively remixing Hallyu. If industries in countries other than Korea, such as Japan, can absorb key mechanisms and characteristics of K-pop while also infusing their own cultural DNA, those countries that adopt these strategies might boost economic growth. In the midst of U.S. tariffs that are economically devastating to countries and the recent immigration issues, the strategic public diplomacy of soft power could be key to sustaining global interconnectedness and cultural exchange, with ripple effects benefiting economic growth, global image, and engagement with international audiences. This article argues that Korean popular culture is less a fixed model of soft power than a movable, remixable framework that other countries can adapt so that they too can rise to the global stage.

KEYWORDS soft power, K-pop, J-pop, Hallyu, and Cool Japan

Introduction

Entering Oakland Arena with twenty thousand fans, each with a lightstick, chanting their favorite band member's name, I was immersed in the vibrant ARMY fan culture. Fans exchanged "freebies," handmade gifts or treats, and waved homemade signs like their country's flags. At the J-Hope concert I attended last year, the diverse crowd, ranging from grandparents to grandchildren, was united by a shared interest in K-pop (Korean pop) and their collective support for BTS. My experience is a microcosm of South Korea's "soft power," a force making waves at the Grammys, on Netflix, and even at the United Nations. It is part of a phenomenon-turned-movement that has captured the attention of millions worldwide and led South Korea to become the twelfth-wealthiest country in the world. But what is soft power, and how did South Korea master it, influencing communities and sparking movements worldwide?

I aim to address the following questions: Why has South Korea succeeded in exporting its culture when other countries have struggled? What can Japan adopt or adapt from South Korea's soft power playbook to combat economic decline and boost its national image? By examining these core questions, this article explores the key factors behind South Korea's success in utilizing soft power. Moreover, I propose ways for Japan, an economically declining country, to counter its stagnation by implementing and innovating soft power strategies, specifically in music industry.

The comparison between K-pop and J-pop is crucial in answering these questions. In the 1980s and through the mid 1990s, Japan was an economic and cultural model for surrounding Asian countries, including Korea. In fact, elements of K-pop, such as the idol system, something I will mention later, were derived from the Japanese music industry. Through what Dal Yong Jin calls cultural hybridization, J-pop and K-pop diverged, but now the two industries' paths can converge again. By centralizing its political and social image through soft power, Korea has used K-pop as a

vehicle to propel this image. Together, the K-pop industry and the Korean government have experienced massive financial success and unprecedented influence in popular culture worldwide, demonstrating that its culturally customized framework can reshape and accelerate a country's global standing.

First, I highlight the progression and culmination of what I refer to as the South Korean music industry's "soft power playbook." From its inception, K-pop was made intentionally to export a part of Korea's culture internationally and exert soft power. Youna Kim writes, "...K-pop music is a much more deliberately planned industry targeting international audiences from its start."¹ Moreover, one of the attributed factors of K-pop's domination in the global music market is what John Lie highlights: "What made K-pop possible as a global phenomenon was the export orientation of the leading K-pop agencies..."² Korea's culture was meant to be as attractive as possible. To do this, a playbook involving different aspects of trends, language, and style was needed to appeal to a global audience while retaining the essence of Korean culture. Through this playbook, K-pop has attracted a global following, changed the South Korean music genre focus, and, according to the International Federation for Phonographic Industry's (IFPI) 2025 report, has risen to become the seventh-largest music market globally.³ K-pop is now onto its next iteration of growth through a new strategy, which packages the K-pop idea and concept, exporting it internationally to develop Korea's music and cultural brand.

Secondly, I propose potential opportunities for Japan to adopt and adapt South Korean soft power strategies. Since the late 1990s, in what has been known as the "Lost Decade in Japan," its economy

1. Youna Kim, "Introduction to Popular Culture and soft power in the social media age," in *The Soft Power of The Korean Wave Parasite, BTS, and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2021), 12.

2. John Lie, "BTS, the Highest Stage of K-pop," in *The Soft Power of The Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS, and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2021), 121.

3. International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), *Global Music Report 2025 State of the Industry* (London: IFPI, 2025), <https://globalmusicreport.ifpi.org>.

has been and continues to be slowing down. It is necessary to embrace these soft power methods to curb the Japanese economic decline and increase its public diplomacy. Takeo Hoshi, economist and professor, also attributes Japan's stagnation to a lack of ingenuity in the Japanese economy—businesses are not growing and are not innovating, combining to worsen the decline.⁴ Moreover, the decreasing population is yet another blow to Japan; by 2029, the IMF projects that Japan will have 120 million citizens, nearly a three million deficit as of 2025.⁵ Programs such as “Cool Japan” (which I will discuss later) lacked the evolution and adaptation of the Korean Wave, highlighting another example of the shortfalls in innovation.

A more significant concern lies in the Japanese music Industry; although it remains the second-largest market in the world according to the International Trade Administration, it is poised to drop.⁶ However, Japan can be positioned for resurgence, and soft power can be a powerful tool to reshape the Japanese image. A clear sign of this is the re-establishment of Cool Japan, demonstrating that Japan will not give up on promoting its soft power. Through cultivating a reciprocal culture where Japanese music companies learn from Korean success, they can follow and create their own playbook. An element that can amplify this growth is to integrate AI technology with Japanese pop; however, the step from this concept to becoming a reality requires a necessary change, as well as the willingness and effective strategy to adapt, a characteristic Japan and its music have not demonstrated. The Japanese music industry is the second-largest in the world because of its internal market focus, but dated industry models. For these reasons, this paper poses another idea of how the Japanese music industry can go deeper in its current path.

4. Jeff Guo, “Japan Had a Vibrant Economy. Then It Fell Into a Slump for 30 Years,” *NPR*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1197958583>.

5. International Monetary Fund (IMF), “Population: Japan” IMF DataMapper, 2025, <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/LP@WEO/JPN>.

6. International Trade Administration (ITA), “Japan Music Market,” Trade.gov, Mar. 31, 2023, <https://www.trade.gov/market-intelligence/japan-music-market>.

By centering its political strategy on soft power, I argue K-pop has reached unprecedented influence through efforts to adapt and absorb various popular trends with a specific focus on exporting Korean music, culminating in the South Korean soft power playbook. This fluidity and extreme cultural absorption are further emphasized with a movement to “Take the K out of K-pop,” ensuring continued growth and sustainability for its position on the global music stage. To address Japan’s continued economic regression and lack of soft power, its government and music industry can adopt a more reciprocal cultural approach to refine the South Korean soft power strategies.

Defining Soft Power

Soft power is real power. As political scientist Joseph Nye explains, soft power uses cultural attraction and persuasion to enact change rather than coercion or force, which are methods of “hard power.”⁷ In this paper, I define soft power as an intentional product of a blending of state strategy through policy, cultural promotion, and industry alignment.

As a strategy, the South Korean government first adopted a soft power strategy after the release of Steven Spielberg’s Jurassic Park in 1993, seeing the political and economic benefits of investing in cultural industries when the movie surpassed the sales of 1.5 million Hyundai cars.⁸ Following this discovery, out of necessity and ingenuity, Korea intentionally packaged its culture and exported its products of influence worldwide in the late 1990s. As Korean cultural industries, like K-pop, have evolved and gained popularity, Korean companies have also exported their industrial frameworks to other countries.

The soft power strategy also aligns with “public diplomacy,” an idea posed by Edmund Gullion, precursor to Joseph Nye’s theory,

7. Joseph S. Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097996>.

8. Rosalie Kim, “Introduction: The Hallyu Origin Story.” in *Hallyu! The Korean Wave*, ed. Rosalie Kim, (London: V&A Publishing, 2022), 27.

but: “It is an effort to appear attractive and to create soft power.”⁹ In effect, public diplomacy enhance and sustain a country’s existing soft power. In Korea’s case, K-pop band members act as ambassadors and project and reinforce the national image. Ultimately, through this cultural process, Korea proved that soft power controls the cultural narrative and public diplomacy reinforces this narrative and expands the audience. Together, Korea proved that, if used effectively, soft power can offer a middle power, the ability to gain global recognition and exert its influence.

The Korean Soft Power Playbook

The key reason why South Korea recovered from the IMF financial crisis was that it opened up its cultural borders. It sought to develop a cultural soft power strategy—eventually, the Korean soft power playbook emerged from this process. Regarding the K-pop Industry, during this growth period, artists and companies looked at successful soft power exporters—specifically Japan, which, in the late 1980s to the mid-1990s was the “King of the Hill” and a model example of an economically powerful country and culture. These same artists and companies adopted or copied some aspects of J-pop; in fact, the current K-pop idol system was initially adapted from the J-pop structure.¹⁰ However, Professor Dal Yong Jin (2020) discusses how, as K-pop and J-pop grew, their approaches to hybridization, the adaptation and blending of foreign cultural influences to their own culture, created a distinction between the two genres:

Most of all, both J-pop and K-pop have developed cultural hybridity in advancing their own local music. J-pop and K-pop have developed their hybrid culture by mixing two or three different music genres, and their approaches to hybridization have some commonalities and differences.

9. Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power and the Public Diplomacy Revisited,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* (April 2019): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14101013>.

10. Dal Yong Jin, “Comparative Discourse on J-Pop and K-Pop: Hybridity in Contemporary Local Music,” *Korea Journal* 60, no. 1 (2020): 47-48, <https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2020.60.1.40>.

In other words, the hybridization of popular music in these two music industries has resulted in different receptions in the global markets.¹¹

K-pop is designed to influence global culture and style; it is not merely entertainment. One of the main differences between K-pop and J-pop lies in K-pop's international market focus, compared to J-pop's domestically oriented approach. As Korea aimed to thrust into the global music market, publishing companies attempted to make K-pop as "trendy" or "marketable" as possible through hybridization, cherry-picking the best aspects of different music styles, and eventually growing into what is now recognized as K-pop. Moreover, companies like SM Entertainment, one of Korea's "Big Four" K-pop powerhouses, use foreign markets to actively support "Hallyu" perceptions, values, and trends internationally. Soo-Man Lee, founder of SM, writes, "...we aimed to create global movements that expanded the stage and boundaries of the *Korean Wave* to Asia, Europe, and the United States."¹² K-pop's "export orientation" has set it apart from genres like J-pop and its desire to create.¹³

There are four critical components of Korea's soft power Playbook that I believe contribute to K-pop's success:

First, K-pop bands leverage technology, specifically seen in social media, to create a feeling of intimacy and a relationship between fans and "idols."¹⁴ This strategic use of technology aligns with Nye's concept of power by attraction rather than coercion, spotlighting the reason why K-pop grows large fan bases—their global influence depends on attracting an audience. However, rather than a promotional tool, social media creates a fan culture, or as Youna Kim calls it, "Digital Fandom," providing a window into members' lives, hence allowing fans to connect and grow with

11. Dal Yong Jin, "Comparative Discourse on J-Pop and K-Pop," 64.

12. Soo Man Lee, "Culture Technology and the Future of Hallyu," in *Hallyu!*, ed. Rosalie Kim (London: V&A Publishing, 2022), 50.

13. Lie, "BTS, the Highest Stage of K-Pop," 121.

14. Kim, "Introduction: Popular Culture and Soft Power," 14-15.

these “idols.”¹⁵ The strong digital presence and interaction serve as a platform for expanding Korea’s global influence.

Second, the distinct K-pop genre is characterized by its dynamic blend of complex choreography, aesthetics, catchy lyrics, and standards of beauty that are central to its international appeal. The beauty standards and curated fashion exemplify Nye’s notion of power by attraction and are seen in a hyper fan culture coined “Oppa Budae,” where stars are treated as older siblings.¹⁶ Oppa Budae is the direct energizer of K-pop’s cultural and commercial domination. Oppa Budae powers a desire for fans to keep up with their favorite bands, and is further accelerated by the social media focus on K-pop bands. This intense culture also creates a hyper demand for concert sales, physical albums, and more opportunities to be connected with groups. Through this unique and dedicated fan-idol relationship, K-pop exemplifies Nye’s soft power strategy and takes it a step further by enacting attraction into revenue.

Third, the global forward focus of K-pop, seen in multilingual lyrics and the diversity in K-pop groups, creates an international appeal and, more importantly, an intentional embrace of diversity. English-specific songs like *Dynamite* pushed the group to be the first-ever nominated K-pop band at the Grammys, a reciprocal acknowledgement of Korean soft power and an acceptance and invitation for American engagement of Hallyu. Moreover, according to *Bloomberg*, as K-pop has matured, its adoption of English lyrics has been correlated to song success, one factor in a more significant movement for taking the “K out of K-pop,” to make K-pop more accessible for other cultures.¹⁷

Finally, not only do K-pop bands have a presence on the stage, but off of it as well, actively shaping Korea’s worldwide

15. Kim, “Introduction: Popular Culture and Soft Power,” 16.

16. Kyun Hyun Kim, “BTS and the World Music Industry,” in *The Soft Power of The Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS, and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2021), 109.

17. Sohee Kim, Jin Wu, Jeremy C.F. Lin, “K-Pop Reimagined,” *Bloomberg*, July 26, 2024. <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2024-kpop-redefine-global-music-industry/?sa=D>.

image. Sarah Keith calls bands like BTS “cultural ambassadors,” sharing Korean culture, traditions, and language with the world, essentially becoming the “face” of Korea in the form of public diplomacy. Because K-pop is one of Korea’s emblems of soft power, ambassadorship provides bands with a platform and audience to make change and influence them through their music. As Keith puts it, “As public figures, cultural ambassadors are agents through which state power is translated and disseminated to the public.”¹⁸ Through activism, inspirational messages, or even political calls-to-action, Korea’s values are translated and spread through these bands, solidifying their role as agents of soft power.

As a result of these factors, we can identify clear points of success and growth areas that J-pop publishing companies can consider when applying these K-pop principles. A practical reason to adopt these strategies is the fact that Korea’s cultural content exports doubled from 5.1 billion (USD) in 2016 to 10.3 billion in 2019, attributed to the rise of Hallyu.¹⁹ It is clear that soft power boosts economic growth—something Japan desperately needs. John Lie writes, “To get a sense of BTS’s commercial impact, it was involved in 10 out of ‘101 times brands went viral,’ in 2019 BTS in other words spells big business.”²⁰ Moreover, tourism has been positively influenced by K-pop bands, “In 2017, 1 out of every 13 tourists who came to South Korea was because of BTS, and in 2018, 7% of foreign visitors, or about 800,000 tourists...”²¹ The economic benefits of soft power are clear, it doesn’t just stop in the music industry, but supports other sectors as well.

18. Sarah Keith, “BTS as Cultural Ambassadors,” in *The Soft Power of The Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS, and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2021), 159.

19. Jimmy Parc, *Measuring the Impact of Hallyu on Korea’s Economy: Setting Off on the Wrong Foot*, (Washington, DC: Korea Economic Institute of America, 2021), 28, https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/KEI_Koreas-Economy_2021_211019_Parc_2.pdf.

20. Lie, “BTS, the Highest Stage of K-Pop,” 119.

21. Britney Nguyen, “South Korea’s Move to Force BTS to Join the Military Will Cause It to Lose out on Billions in Lost Tourism, Merchandise, and Cosmetics,” *Business Insider*, October 19, 2022. <https://www.businessinsider.com/bts-conscription-military-service-south-korea-cost-billions-tourism-goods-2022-10>.

However, one of the consequences of the K-pop system is Oppa Budae. Though Oppa Budae culture can be rooted in a familial relationship between fans and idols, it also indicates the fans' physical attraction by their idols. Because bands rely on their appearance and on youth support, after a successful band hits a specific age, usually thirty, they begin to lose their popularity. In fact, no boy band past thirty has maintained its peak success, highlighting a key flaw in the K-pop industry.²² For each group, no matter the size of their followers, there is a fight against time for publishing companies to find the next big hit before their stars drop out of the limelight. This limits the impact and legacy of any given band's soft power, which could be a problem if Korea wants to maintain its influence. Nevertheless, continuous expansion into countries without the Oppa Budae culture might preserve bands such as BTS, whose diverse listeners might be less drawn by their appearance but more by the messages they convey.

As K-pop enters yet another new era (and maybe a new wave), it looks ahead with more changes to adapt to the current environment. The industry is moving towards a more globalized and customized version of K-pop tailored to specific countries. Although it seems a step away from its branding, the globalization plan bolsters Korean soft power. Rather than diluting its influence by encouraging the combination of Korean and foreign culture, companies will revise their already successful strategy, infusing Korean traditions with local ideas. In this way, by the planned dissemination of K-pop to a broader market, its intellectual property (IP), performance, and album sales are poised for an increase and a larger share of the global consciousness.²³

How J-pop Can Customize the K-pop Playbook

Japan, once Asia's most dominant economic and cultural force during the mid-1980s, has now fallen further from the third-

22. Kim, "BTS and the World Music Industry," 116.

23. Kim, Wu, and Lin, "K-Pop Reimagined."

largest economy to fourth.²⁴ Its lack of central soft power figures and cultural ambassadors points to a deeper-rooted issue: self-imposed cultural isolationism. While Korea has cultivated Hallyu, Japan has faced obstacles in structuring a formidable movement. However, the Japanese government has attempted to attract a global following through the “Cool Japan” initiative, established in 2013. But, unlike the Korean Wave, the Cool Japan movement has had less emphasis on public diplomacy. The *Yokogao* magazine writes, “Thanks to a detailed, coordinated government strategy and acute understanding of global markets, South Korea has managed to transform K-pop into a worldwide sensation. The result was billions of dollars in revenue, establishing South Korea’s status as a cultural powerhouse. In contrast, Cool Japan has struggled to maintain the same level of impact on a worldwide scale.”²⁵ Moreover, while anime is one of Japan’s cultural exports, one might not consider Cool Japan a true soft power movement. Then, what is Cool Japan?

Cool Japan has been a government-driven program with a core focus on industries like Anime and Manga. The program’s focus on creative industries aims to highlight unique Japanese perspectives and aesthetics. Gearoid Reidy writes that, “By 2033, the country wants to quadruple the amount of content it sells in overseas markets each year — primarily anime (animation), manga (comic books) and video games. That would put sales at around ¥20 trillion (\$130 billion USD), almost twice the value of the cars Japan currently ships abroad annually.”²⁶ But, unlike Hallyu, which aims to promote Korean culture and serve as a vessel for national representation, Cool Japan doesn’t necessarily function in the same way. One of the key differences between the Japanese approach to soft power and the Korean strategy resides in the

24. International Trade Administration, “Japan Music Market.”

25. “Cool Japan—The Project That Transformed Japan into a Cultural Powerhouse,” *Yokogao Magazine*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.yokogaomag.com/editorial/project-cool-japan>.

26. Gearoid Reidy, “Anime, Manga Power Japan’s Strategy for Soft Power Influence,” *Bloomberg*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2025-02-21/anime-manga-power-japan-s-strategy-for-soft-power-influence>.

former's centralization in the government, compared to the latter's integration and collaboration between government and private industry. Because of its government-driven nature, the lack of delineation between politics and culture has altered the Cool Japan marketing focus. Benjamin Boas highlights, "The mistake of Cool Japan in the past 10 years is that it's actually been too visible — it's tried to brand itself, when it should be branding Japan."²⁷ This contrasts with the more subtle nature of Hallyu, where industries like K-pop use their bands as a proxy to promote Korean culture rather than the Korean government. Japan's lack of these essential ambassadors necessitates central cultural ambassadors moving forward. Yet, though there are prominent Japanese figures such as baseball player Shohei Ohtani, they are not explicitly part of Japan's soft power plan.

Cool Japan faces a key obstacle in its current strategy: the rise of Artificial Intelligence, which can now recreate anime art, stealing the style of treasures like Studio Ghibli.²⁸ Co-creator of Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki, says that AI is "an insult to life itself."²⁹ Though AI may seem somewhat harmless, its capacity to replicate anime and enable large-scale customization risks diluting the uniqueness and intentionality of the media that the Japanese government and companies produce. AI, in its defense, can be useful, if hybridized, but can and will alter the focus of the audience Cool Japan aims to draw in. While AI poses a threat to Japanese manga and anime industries, it could benefit the J-pop industry, providing a stronger rationale for centering Cool Japan around music. If Japanese companies are skeptical towards the use of AI, they can use K-pop as a blueprint.

Currently, K-pop companies like Pulse9 are experimenting with AI, reshaping the industry and suggesting that it has a place in

27. Reidy, "Anime, Manga Power Japan's Strategy."

28. Madison Malone Kircher, "ChatGPT's Studio Ghibli Style Animations Are Almost Too Good," *The New York Times*, March 27, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/27/style/ai-chatgpt-studio-ghibli.html>.

29. Kircher, "ChatGPT's Studio Ghibli Style Animations."

the future of entertainment. Rather than entirely replacing humans, like how AI is trending toward in anime and manga, Jake Kwon and Ivan Watson from CNN think that K-pop with AI can not only save money for publishers but also work in unison with human bands.³⁰ In these early stages of AI in music, J-pop companies can catch up by taking this step to modernity and becoming more relevant in this global music space. Moreover, the Japanese economy is in the process of digitalization. The International Trade Administration notes that, according to IMD's 2024 "Digital Competitive Ranking" analysis, Japan placed thirty-first out of sixty-four countries; neighboring Korea placed sixth.³¹ This lag in technological innovation has prompted the Japanese government to push for "digital transformation or 'DX' of government, business and society."³² In this fluid state of change, Japan can first bring digital transformation into Cool Japan and also widen the focus of the program to AI-compatible industries, like J-pop. AI combined with J-pop can be crucial to taking Japan's soft power strategy to the next step. If employed tactically, AI can be an amplifier for cultural industries, widening the breadth of Japan's digital soft power entertainment.

Yet, Japan has not explicitly promoted its music industry as part of its soft power efforts, which is surprising, as it is the world's second-largest music market according to the IFPI. However, this position is vulnerable and, like its economy, is projected to decline. The International Trade Administration points out, "If the overall declining trend continues, then Japan is predicted to soon fall to fifth place in the world with the United Kingdom, Germany, and China (which edged into the top five for the first time ever in 2022) moving up in the rankings with their two-digit growth in the music

30. Jake Kwon and Ivan Watson, "The Only Thing We Can't Do Is Sign Autographs': The Rise of Virtual K-Pop Bands," *CNN*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/style/kpop-virtual-bands-ai-intl-hnk>.

31. International Trade Administration, "Japan Country Commercial Guide: Digital Economy," Trade.gov, November 20, 2025, <https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/japan-digital-economy>.

32. International Trade Administration, "Japan Country Commercial Guide."

market.”³³ Three years later, while the J-pop industry has not fully receded, signs of decline reinforce the urgency for change. In their latest report, the IFPI writes, “The world’s second largest market, Japan, was flat year-on-year (-0.2%) [due to decline in physical], whilst China, ranked #5 globally, increased revenues by 9.6%.”³⁴ However, a question that arises is, why is Japan’s music market declining?

Japanese music industry is isolated and declining, due to a unique but dated and unchanging culture of music consumption through physical CD sales, a system that stops the advancement of technology and social media, and draws on a depleted domestic market. First, CD culture has been shaped primarily due to two factors: an exclusively domestically focused music market and a policy called *saihan seido*. Dal Yong Jin writes, “J-pop has attempted to penetrate the global market. However, its efforts were not promising because the J-pop industry was satisfied in the domestic market, while K-pop has vehemently targeted both the regional and global markets.”³⁵ Turning inward and bolstering sentiments of entertainment isolation is a policy called *saihan seido*, established in 1953 from a concern of “its products being devalued.”³⁶ This law extended to CDs and has allowed Japanese music companies to set the price of their physical albums, creating a monopoly on music. According to *The Economist*, “Music companies are able to leverage this monopoly power to maintain the status quo. Japanese talent agencies also stopped their artists from being on streaming platforms.”³⁷ Japanese music industry has been largely centered around CDs. Still, the rise of streaming services has forced these corporations to choose between advancing their industry or sheltering in place—Japan has seemingly chosen

33. International Trade Administration, “Japan Music Market.”

34. International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, *Global Music Report 2025*, 10.

35. Dal Yong Jin, “Digital Korean Wave: From Esports to K-Pop,” in *Hallyu! The Korean Wave*, ed. Rosalie Kim. (London: V&A Publishing, 2022), 43.

36. “Why Do the Japanese Love CDs?,” *The Economist*, April 25, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2024/04/25/why-do-the-japanese-love-cds>.

37. “Why Do the Japanese Love CDs?,” *The Economist*.

the latter. This choice has forced their industry to freeze the advancement of technology and social media and actively stop it, ultimately hindering the industry's long-term growth.

Moreover, Japan's approach to developing J-pop has been considered as culturally sterile. As Dal Yong Jin likes to put it, "Although Japan maintained its own cultural stardom in Asia until the early 21st century based on its unique hybridization process, known as odorless Japaneseness, the depoliticized Japanese popular culture has lost its grip in the Asian market and has not been able to penetrate the global markets meaningfully."³⁸ With little to no soft power and relegated to its own country, J-pop can be a prime new product for its soft power revitalization.

The choices that have driven the internally focused Japanese music industry might have severe consequences, and its entire structure could collapse. In its report on the Japanese Music Market, the International Trade Administration writes that, "Though Japan's population is less than half that of the U.S., some experts calculate that per capita spending on music in Japan is about double that of Americans"³⁹ While it is clear that Japanese companies have maximized music consumption, their domestic market cannot sustain further growth. With its market at a deadlock and no further hopes of expansion in Japan, shifting the Japanese music industry model is crucial for its continued growth. For these reasons, adopting new technologies like AI in select industries can reconnect the Japanese entertainment industry to the rest of the world, making J-pop even more important to the soft power strategy.

Andrew Chan, CEO of Sony Music, says, "In some ways, Japan's biggest strength is also its greatest challenge, and that's the fact that it is the second biggest market in the world. It hasn't had to look overseas for opportunities. It's very impressive to 'just' be incredibly

38. Jin, "Comparative Discourse on J-pop and K-pop," 64.

39. International Trade Administration "Japan Music Market."

successful in Japan.”⁴⁰ But now, with the rise of digitalization in Japanese businesses, this is a point and an opportunity for the music industry to expand J-pop reach with new technology like AI. Still, this path can only be made possible by following K-pop’s internationally focused business model.

Even though Japan has deeply rooted traditions and approaches, it can benefit from adapting K-pop’s soft power playbook while customizing it to resonate with its culture and methods. Two simple adjustments that J-pop companies can make that we can also use to measure their adaptation or “fluidity” are to see if J-pop idols trend towards leveraging social media to connect with fans and if there is a change to a global outlook through English lyrics or cross-border collaborations (indicating an international focus). These changes could be an extension of the long relationship between J-pop and K-pop. Dal Yong Jin writes that in the 1990s, “...there were two significant developments that led to structural shifts in Korean popular music: the advent of new music genres and the adaptation of the Japanese idol system.”⁴¹ Now, Japan is in a position to take the learnings from K-pop’s rise and apply them in its market. Jin further writes, “K-pop seems to have learned much from J-pop; however, K-pop has developed into a distinctive music sphere, which J-pop now attempts to follow.”⁴² By assuming the role of a learner through “hybridization of culture,” J-pop can develop into a politicized cultural product.

However, if shifting the industry model is too drastic a change for J-pop, Japan can innovate and expand on its existing framework by using its intense fan culture as a market to sell goods besides music. Already “upselling” or leveraging their image to sell CDs, J-pop companies can utilize their bands to deepen the financial depth and reach of their market. While K-pop idols have not been

40. International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), *Global Music Report 2024 State of the Industry*, (London: IFPI, 2024), https://ifpi-website-cms.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/IFPI_GMR_2024_State_of_the_Industry_db92a1c9c1.pdf.

41. Jin, “Digital Korean Wave: From Esports to K-Pop,” 47-48.

42. Jin, “Comparative Discourse on J-Pop and K-Pop,” 63.

as prominent in this space, a clear example is American celebrities, such as Ryan Reynolds or Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, who capitalize on their fame and following by leveraging their products, generating millions of dollars (e.g., Mint Mobile or Teremana Tequila). Successful domestic Japanese bands can create their own products (e.g., sake or other culturally specific products) connected to their brand, not only boosting the Japanese economy but also reaching global audiences and providing another means to enhance Japanese soft power.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the primary reasons for K-pop’s success in promoting Korean soft power are its leveraging and innovation of technology, unique experiences and performances, diversity and representation in bands, and social and political activism. It continues to expand into new places and spaces, adapting to each local environment. Its flexibility and cultural hybridization are yet another crucial aspect of the K-pop engine. Yet, the problem that persists is that the legacy of K-pop is short-lived in every band due to the structure of the fan culture: Oppa Budae. While this issue has been brought to attention, it can be further discussed, and solutions can be raised in future studies.

Japan’s economic decline is pushing it closer to a decision to revise its global economic strategy or risk being left behind. Additionally, due to the advent of AI, Japan’s soft power plan, centered around anime and manga, may be under threat. However, for J-pop, AI can be the future. Already, the rise in popularity of Hatsune Miku, an online J-pop idol (though not yet AI), who sells out concerts, could be the foundation for the next steps of AI in J-pop. Yet, the lack of progress and adoption of new technologies may prove a challenge for the J-pop industry, as seen in CDs. But if digital transformation policies extend and include Cool Japan, we might see an acceleration in the development of AI in these cultural industries.

However, now is the time for Japanese industries to innovate

in different ways to promote the sustainability of their economy. I believe that studying the historical development of Cool Japan, especially alongside the recent global success of films like *Demon Slayer* and *Kokuhō*, will offer valuable insight into how Japan can continue to shape its international image through cultural media. At the same time, it is essential to examine areas beyond the media. As stated by the World Travel & Tourism Council, last year 7.5% of Japan's GDP was from tourism, and that number is projected to increase to nearly 8% by 2034.⁴³ The 2025 Osaka World Expo, an international convention showcasing new inventions and culture that I recently visited, is a significant step in enhancing Japan's global recognition. With around 22 million total visitors and a total projected economic boost of around 3 trillion yen (approximately USD 22 billion) from the Expo, the trend for the Japanese economy appears to be driven by entertainment.⁴⁴ With this economic gain also comes a threat. While tourism is often associated with soft power, Japan now faces the growing challenge of overtourism, raising questions about sustainability and cultural impact, as it could degrade Japanese culture.

In my view, to combat the threat of overtourism altering Japanese ways of life, I would recommend that the Japanese government implement a policy that promotes foreign citizenship rather than tourism. This would have multiple positive effects: supporting an aging population, adding to the Japanese economy and workforce, but most importantly, encouraging foreign audiences to immerse themselves in Japanese culture and contribute to it rather than pure consumption. This could uplift the Japanese music industry to be a phenomenon in its own right with a growing audience. In that case, they can capitalize on this global stage and the

43. "Japan's Travel & Tourism Sector to Surpass Previous Records in 2024" *World Travel & Tourism Council*, 28 June 2024. Accessed 26 Nov, 2025. <https://wttc.org/news/japans-travel-and-tourism-sector-to-surpass-previous-records-in-2024>

44. "Visitors to Osaka Expo likely to exceed 10 million soon" *The Japan Times*, July 13, 2025. Accessed 26 Nov, 2025. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/07/13/japan/visitors-osaka-expo-10-million/>

“technological wild west” simultaneously. While it is still in its early phases, Japan can continue innovating in J-pop and entertainment, potentially expanding even further outside Japan, with a chance to reverse its decline. Both K-pop and J-pop are unique; they have and will continue to learn from each other. Although J-pop is projected to be in decline, if publishing companies can employ these strategies or take steps to pivot outside of Japan, it will be essential not only to revamp Japan’s economy but also to play a crucial role in its global image.

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