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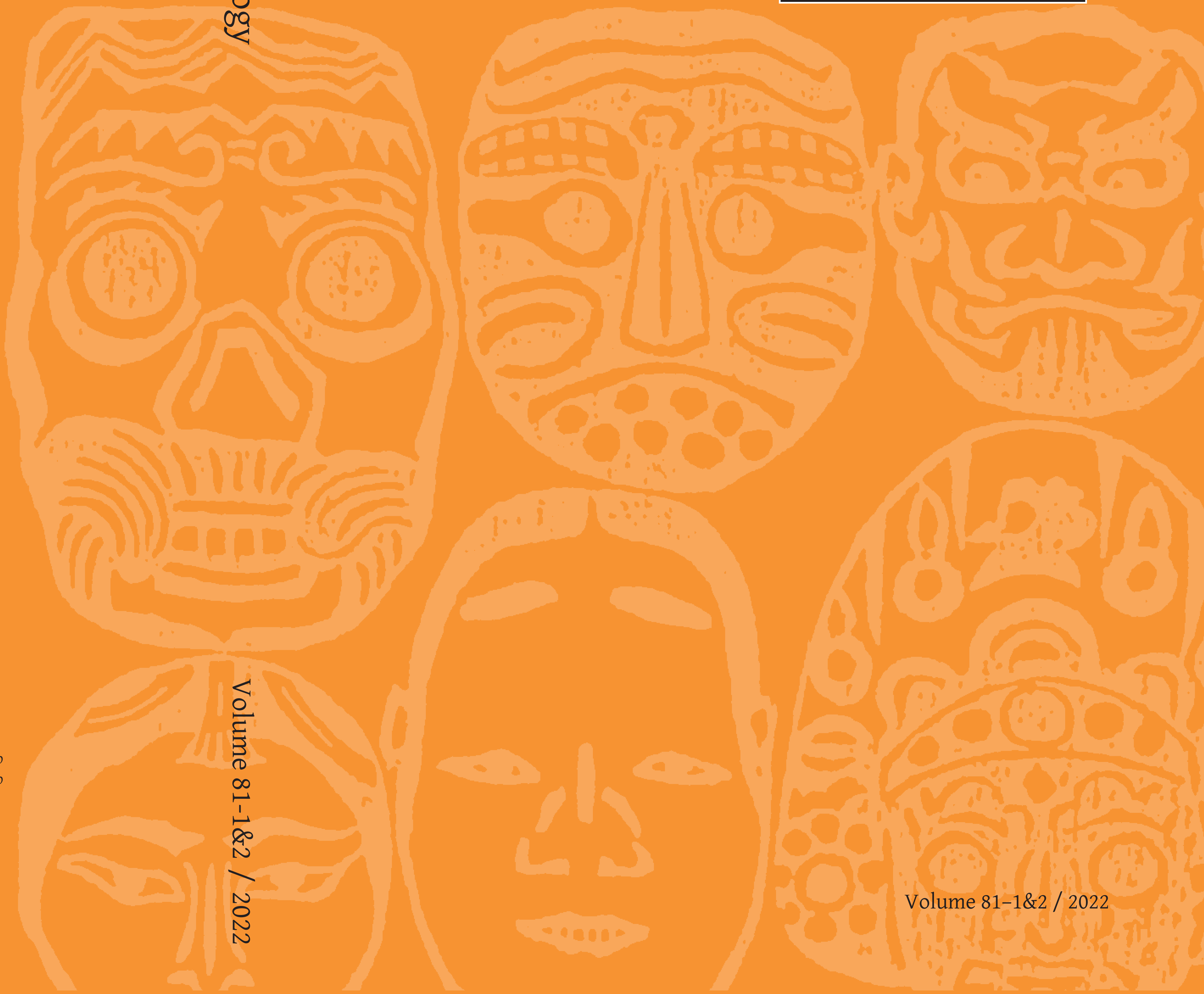

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For more detailed information, please download the Asian Ethnology Manuscript Submission and Style Guide at https://asianethnology.org/page/submissions

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Benjamin Dorman and Frank J. Korom

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Editors' Note

We are pleased to present this volume of *Asian Ethnology*. In addition to our normal policy of publishing individual articles, research notes, and reviews, we have included a new category, "documentary note," which is a contribution by Jon Kay focusing on ethnographic filmmaking.

This volume is essentially two issues combined into one. Similarly, in 2014 we published a single volume (*Asian Ethnology* 73–1&2), which featured two special issues on Indian tribal culture. In addition to publishing one combined issue this year, we have also decided to pause the submission process of the journal for a six-month period, starting on September 16, 2022, until March 16, 2023. We ask anyone interested in submitting work to the journal to understand that we will not be undertaking peer review for any new submissions during that period. However, if you have something in the pipeline you wish to submit, please do so after March 16, 2023, when we will again begin to accept submissions for consideration.

We continue to work on a number of individual articles we have received, and special issues of the journal, including one that is scheduled to be published in the first issue of 2023, "Demons and Gods on Display: The Anthropology of Display and Worldmaking."

This year also sees further staffing changes with the journal. Calynn Dowler, our editorial assistant at Boston University, will be stepping down to begin a new, tenure-track position at Vanderbilt University on religion and environmental anthropology. She has done an incredible job, so we wish her well in her future endeavors. Fathimath Anan Ahmed, a PhD candidate in cultural anthropology at Boston University, will replace Calynn. Anu, as she is more fondly known, explores how Maldivians experience madness and/or mental illness and how they construct themselves, along with their kin, as ethical "modern" subjects in the rapidly shifting sociopolitical context of the Greater Male' Region. Her research lies at the intersection of South Asian and Muslim studies, anthropology of morality, and psychological, medical, and linguistic anthropology as she examines how global discourses of health and religion, and the modernization efforts of a recently democratized nation state, become implicated in the formation of complex subjectivities.

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We have updated the website to include an "Announcements" section, in which we will post news related to the journal and also material related to publications and events connected to the Nanzan University Anthropological Institute. Last year we wrote in our Editors' Note (AE 80–1) about our hopes for a brighter, post-pandemic future. Clearly Covid-19 still affects us all in some ways. We are determined to continue to produce the highest quality journal possible, despite the conditions of the pandemic.

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"Three Trees Make a Mountain"

Women and Contramodern Buddhist Volunteerism in Vietnam

This article examines how women adapt devotional Buddhist worldviews within popular charity movements in Vietnam. Buddhist volunteerism is on the rise across Asia. In Vietnam, government officials encourage religious philanthropy among policy shifts toward increasing economic privatization and decreasing state welfare. Promoting philanthropy is one way officials prompt citizens to assume new responsibilities toward the state and one another by sharing private resources. Researchers have examined how popular charity trends in Asia compel volunteers to navigate changing understandings of moral personhood by internalizing modernist concepts of "rational good." I complicate these studies by using Casey Collins's theory of "Buddhist contramodernism" to show how women in Vietnam adapt devotional Pure Land Buddhism in addressing modern social concerns without adopting modernist Buddhist values. This article also expands Collins's theory by demonstrating how grassroots charity groups suggest the need for a broader definition of contramodernism.

Keywords: Charity—Buddhism—modernism—contramodernism—Vietnam—women

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On Saturday May 30, 2020, nine volunteers with a charity organization called the Bridge of Love Foundation traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to the rural Tiền Giang province to dedicate a bridge they had sponsored.[1] The Bridge of Love Foundation, established in 2005, collects funds from urban donors to support rural infrastructural development throughout central and southern Vietnam. During the drive to the bridge site, the group's organizer, forty-eight-year-old Chị Minh Lý, live-streamed a video to Facebook announcing that this marked the Foundation's 150th bridge. She explained how, despite the international financial uncertainties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Bridge of Love Foundation still managed to fundraise 90,000,000 Việt Nam Đồng, roughly $4,000 US dollars, to cover the total cost of construction. Chị Lý elaborated that the Bridge of Love Foundation's fundraising efforts were as strong as ever, owing to the incredible merit generated by the group's lay Buddhist volunteers. From a Buddhist worldview, merit is a beneficial result of good deeds that can improve the conditions of "karma" (*nghiệp chướng*; *nhân quả*). Karma is made up of the cumulative effects of one's actions across multiple lifetimes. Karma is constantly influenced by actions taken through the "body, speech, and mind" (*thân, miệng, ý*). Good karma can have a protective effect against undesirable life circumstances such as poverty and illness. In Chị Lý's speech, she implied that her volunteers were spiritually protected from the negative effects of the pandemic by the merit they had generated through previous charity work.

"Pray for these 'children of the Buddha' (*Phật tử*)," she implored, "that the merit of building bridges creates blessings for them and for their fathers and mothers, throughout many lifetimes, [and] many future incarnations! May those who transcend life [to the Pure Land] (*siêu sanh*), gain even more additional merit! Praise to the Pure Land Buddha *A di đà Phật* (Sanskrit, Amitabha)." Chị Lý's live-streamed speech was interwoven with references to places and spiritual figures associated with Pure Land Buddhism (*Tịnh độ tông*), an element of devotional Buddhism widely popular among women in Vietnam (Soucy 2016, 128). Pure Land Buddhism is traditionally associated with chanting practices oriented toward securing a place in the otherworldly realm of Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land after death (Le 2017). Practitioners also regularly invoke the name of Amitabha to summon compassionate supernatural support in everyday life. In her speech, Chị Lý used these terms to present philanthropic bridge construction as a merit-making practice that benefits both volunteers and their family members in this and future lifetimes, and which may help secure a place in the Pure Land after death.

Upon the group's arrival at the bridge site, Chị Lý began a second live-stream video showing dozens of local officials and villagers gathered under a canopy near the river. The new bridge had been festively decorated with red ribbons that matched several bouquets of miniature national flags. The Bridge of Love Foundation volunteers crowded together under the canopy in an array of brightly colored *áo dài* and *áo bà ba*—Vietnamese traditional clothing that indicated the event was a special occasion. Chị Lý positioned herself before the bridge and handed her smartphone to a local official to film while she delivered a second speech.

Chị Lý began her address by once again describing how, despite the financial pressures of the pandemic, volunteers with the Bridge of Love Foundation had the "predestined affinity" (*nhân duyên*) to fundraise for a spacious bridge that could help the village develop its local economy. She proposed that the bridge would allow villagers to export animal livestock for better sales in regional markets. Children would also have safer, easier access to nearby schools. Chị Lý swept her arm out, gesturing toward the cluster of volunteers, as she explained how these benefits to the community were all due to the dedicated contributions of the Bridge of Love Foundation members. These volunteers had "set aside a portion for society" (*dành phần cho xã hội*) to support national development through philanthropic donations of their money and time. Because they had practiced generosity "following the Buddha's teachings" (*theo lời Phật dạy*), these volunteers would gain merit and blessings from their good actions for many lifetimes. Their increased merit would also allow them to sponsor future bridges, further benefitting society by supporting continuous economic development. Chị Lý concluded by encouraging the crowd to regard the donors with the highest "respect" (*kính trọng*), calling for a round of applause. She reclaimed her smartphone to film the reactions of the volunteers. The camera focused to reveal that all Bridge of Love Foundation members in attendance were Kinh ethnic majority women between the ages of sixty and eighty-seven.[2] Just beyond the volunteers, two tables laden with food stood ready for event attendees to join together in making offerings to the Pure Land Buddha and local spirits. Through these offerings, the volunteers would petition for supernatural support to physically reinforce the bridge they were dedicating and to protect anyone who passed over it for years to come.

In this article, I examine how women in Vietnam assert themselves as fulfilling "responsibilities to society" (*trách nhiệm xã hội*) through devotional Buddhist approaches to charity work. While research on popular trends in Buddhist humanitarianism across Asia tend to frame charity programs as advancing Buddhist modernism, my study complicates these narratives by showing how women draw on devotional forms of Pure Land Buddhism to articulate the significance of "doing charity" (*làm từ thiện*). My research traces how women, particularly elderly women, actively adapt devotional Buddhist practices to address emerging social concerns without turning to the more meditation-based, secularized forms of Buddhism that are also gaining popularity in Vietnam (Nguyen 2020; Soucy 2016). In so doing, my research documents how elderly women's engagements with national development through devotional Buddhist practices exemplify what Casey Collins calls "Buddhist contramodernism" (2020).

Collins's theory of Buddhist contramodernism "challenges the traditional-modern binary" common in Buddhist studies by showing how seemingly traditional forms of devotional Buddhism are used to address modern social issues raised by trends of secularization, scientific rationalization, and institutional formalization in Asia (Harding, Hori, and Soucy 2020, 7). Collins's theory complicates scholarly narratives about the globalizing spread of Buddhist modernism by showing how contramodern Buddhist groups adapt nonmodern supernatural and magical religious practices to navigate contemporary social concerns. I use and expand Collins's theory by analyzing how elderly women in Vietnam similarly use devotional Pure Land Buddhism to address modern concerns of performing ethical citizenship in a secular state through volunteering. Altogether, this research advances understandings of global Buddhism as developing in multiple, complex ways that are nuanced by local concepts of religion and gender.

Gendering Buddhist contramodernism

Theorizing devotional Buddhist volunteerism as contramodern is helpful for emphasizing how traditional religious worldviews are highly adaptable, living ethical systems. The globalization of Buddhism has produced dualistic distinctions between modern Buddhism as an orthodox world religion compared with premodern Buddhist practices as traditional expressions of local culture (Soucy 2020, 57). Advocates for Buddhist modernism have used these binary categories to position traditional religious practices as primitive precursors to progressive, reformed global Buddhism. However, these distinctions are largely rhetorical, obscuring ways that traditional practices are also adapted to contemporary circumstances. Alexander Soucy analyzes how such binary categories often function to reinforce hegemonic power structures against marginalized groups, "particularly women" (ibid., 57). Much of Buddhist modernism has developed through male leadership and male-dominated institutions (ibid., 57). By analyzing how traditional Buddhist practices are also adapted in response to modern concerns, scholars can begin to better recognize the role of women in driving these alternative religious movements.

Collins's theory of contramodernism makes room to explore how women adapt traditional practices to address modern social concerns. Collins defines contramodernism as the rise of Buddhist groups that are "modern, but differently so. . . . These movements are neither modernist (fully aligned with rationalism, science, egalitarianism, etc.), nor are they antimodernist (rejecting secular democratic values, science, technology, etc.)" (2020, 55–56). Collins's theory highlights ways that religious groups use traditional beliefs and practices in responding to modernization without internalizing modernist values or epistemologies. Nonrational, magical, and supernatural religious practices may also serve as tools for addressing issues raised by cultural and political trends toward modernization. For example, volunteers with the Bridge of Love Foundation used devotional Pure Land practices of requesting and identifying supernatural support among everyday affairs through their infrastructure development programs. While concerns for supporting national development and fulfilling responsibilities of ethical citizenship in Vietnam's secular society show how the country has been influenced by modernization, volunteers' invocation of supernatural aid for their work shows a creative adaptation of traditional practices to address these concerns. As such, I propose that elderly lay women's charity work, as informed by devotional Buddhism, represents a feminine form of Buddhist contramodernism.

I offer one major modification to Collins's theory in order to make this argument. I propose that contramodernism need not follow the charismatic vision of a single individual. Collins builds his theory by analyzing several new religious movements that developed in Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Collins proposes that, among the contramodern groups he studies, charismatic leaders played a vital role by seeking to "reconfigure elements of 'traditional' Buddhism and 'folk' religion to meet the conditions of modernity" and by aiming to modernize Buddhism "through their own experiences and insights" (ibid., 52–53). Rather than "excising" supernatural and magical elements of traditional rituals—a common move for modernist Buddhist reformers—contramodernist leaders instead reoriented premodern practices toward alternative modes of making Buddhism "relevant and vital within modernity" (ibid., 55). Collins also differentiates contramodernist groups from antimodernists, who rejected all influences of modernity through "isolation or violent opposition" (ibid., 58). By contrast, he specifies that contramodernist communities "are often prosocial and at least nominally committed to progressive values (e.g. secular democracy, technology, egalitarianism)" (ibid., 58–59). Contramodernist groups thereby adopt some social qualities of modernization without the wholesale adoption of modernist values such as rationalization, disenchantment, or formalization of organizational structures.

My research traces many of these same characteristics among the Buddhist charity groups I accompanied in Vietnam. However, as I will demonstrate, volunteers adapted traditional devotional Buddhist practices through community discourse and by circulating personal stories, not by following one charismatic leader's mystical vision. While Chị Lý had charismatic qualities as the group's main spokesperson, she did not position herself as a spiritually advanced being, did not use Buddhism to propose a specific ideological agenda, did not assert a claim to leadership through a capacity for mystical insights, and was in many ways equally influenced in her Buddhist discourse and practices by fellow volunteers in the organization. Rather, volunteers with the Bridge of Love Foundation collaboratively adapted devotional Buddhist practices to support charity fundraising while responding to changing state calls for ethical citizenship and experiences of moral uncertainty caused by the nation's rapid development. I thereby modify Collins's theory by proposing that the Bridge of Love Foundation shows how movements of Buddhist contramodernism can occur without the mystical vision or experiences of a charismatic leader.

This article also nuances Collins's theory by exploring the gendered dimensions of contramodernism. Analyzing devotional Buddhism in charities as a form of contramodernism reveals how elderly women use religion to respond to rapid cultural, political, and economic change. In Vietnam, concerns for social "modernization" (*hiện đại hóa*) accompany shifting state discourse around ethical citizenship amid policy reforms toward economic privatization. Many Buddhist groups have responded to these trends by developing and promoting modernist, rationalized discourses of Buddhist ethics and moral selfhood. For example, Dat Manh Nguyen's research on Buddhist youth in southern Vietnam traces how formal Buddhist groups associated with the National Sangha (*Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam*) turn to secularized mindfulness programs to help young people navigate new civil and economic roles in society (2020). Soucy similarly traces how Buddhist modernism has gained influence among men and young people in northern Vietnam with the popularization of Zen meditation (2020, 64; 2016). However, these demographic trends still represent a minority compared to the elderly lay women who follow devotional Buddhism and constitute up to 90 percent of practitioners in many Buddhist communities (Soucy 2020, 64). Rather than overlooking elderly women's devotional religion as unchanging traditionalism—preserved by the nostalgic dedication of its practitioners—my research shows how elderly women are also important actors in adapting Buddhist worldviews to contemporary life.

This argument is significant, because the forms of devotional Buddhism practiced by elderly women in Vietnam are often popularly dismissed as "superstitious" (*mê tín*) and positioned as foils to growing trends of Buddhist modernism that have gained increasing state support since the early 2000s. Men use women's involvement in devotional Buddhism to justify gender hierarchies that subordinate women in society by arguing that women's susceptibility to belief in the supernatural proves they are "intellectually inferior and less rational" than men (Soucy 2012, 66–68). Anthropologists like Soucy and Lauren Meeker have explored how and why women maintain devotional Buddhist practices despite facing such intense scrutiny from both the state and men in their local communities. Meeker notes how women in Vietnam often struggle to balance expectations to uphold traditional cultural values and support state calls to advance modern progress. She describes how women paradoxically engage in devotional religious practices while striving to fulfill expectations to create "healthy and happy families" for the state and society, even as these devotional practices are stigmatized by government officials and local men (2019, 315).

Soucy has proposed that women maintain devotional practices despite such gendered marginalization and scrutiny because they gain symbolic cultural capital through feminine performances of religiosity (2020; 2012, 98–99). His research shows how devotional Buddhist practices are centrally relevant and meaningful for women's identities despite, and even in some ways because of, the gendered cultural discourse surrounding religion. By practicing devotional religion, women perform qualities of femininity such as reliance, weakness, and attentiveness to family care that can function as sources of meaning-making, community building, and cultural capital (Soucy 2012, 13). Altogether, these examples show how devotional Buddhism in Vietnam has been framed as irrational and unorthodox in ways that reinforce female participants' marginalization in society, yet women continue to find personal significance and value in these enormously popular practices.

While recent studies by Le Hoang Anh Thu (2020, 2017), Meeker (2019), and Soucy (2020, 2016, 2012) emphasize how devotional, typically Pure Land–influenced Buddhist chants and rituals are important spiritual resources for women in contemporary Vietnam, my research further explores how and why elderly women adapt these practices when joining popular Buddhist charity movements. I argue that elderly women mobilize traditional beliefs into an emerging form of Buddhist contramodernism by adapting devotional practices to address modern social concerns through charity. In the following sections, I first introduce information about the Bridge of Love Foundation's participant demographics, key terms, and fundraising projects. Then, I contextualize the group's role among growing popular trends of Buddhist volunteerism in Vietnam. I trace how these trends derive from shifting state definitions of ethical citizenship amid national economic restructuring. Finally, I offer a close analysis of ethnographic data from elderly female volunteers to propose that the group exemplifies an alternate form of Buddhist contramodernism.

Methodology and key terms

Private sponsorship of rural infrastructure has become a popular trend in Vietnam, particularly in rapidly growing urban areas. During twenty months of ethnographic research on Buddhist charities in Ho Chi Minh City, conducted from 2015 to 2019, I attended events hosted by three organizations that fundraised to sponsor infrastructure in rural areas throughout the Mekong Delta. For this article, I focus closely on data from the largest of these organizations, the Bridge of Love Foundation. I accompanied the Foundation for charity events at least twice each month after I met the lead organizer, Chị Lý, through a personal introduction from a volunteer who participated with two of the total twenty-five Buddhist charities involved in my research. Data for this article comes from informal conversations I had with volunteers, recipients, and local officials during events; formal recorded and transcribed interviews with regular Bridge of Love volunteers; and from interacting with volunteers and charity recipients over social media.

In describing the Foundation's charity activities, I use the terms "donor" and "volunteer" interchangeably. For example, some participants with the Bridge of Love Foundation made regular financial donations but did not attend many events in person, while others regularly volunteered at events in person but only occasionally gave small financial donations. When—as a non-native-Vietnamese-speaking white American—I awkwardly sought to differentiate between "volunteers" as literally "people who *do* charity" (*người làm từ thiện*) and "donors" as those "who had contributed money" (*đã đóng góp tiền*), I was quickly corrected that in Buddhist understandings of "giving" (Vietnamese, *bố thí*; Sanskrit, Pali, *dāna*), charitable actions were not limited to giving money or energy through time and physical labor but also included a wide range of intangible and emotional or affective forms of generosity. For example, charity included any form of "teaching" (*pháp thí*), as well as positive emotional exchanges like encouraging others to be fearless (*vô úy thí*). Volunteers were always donors, and donors were always "doing charity" (Thích 2007).

Breaking down these distinctions was an important way for participants to place event organizers on an equal social plane with financial donors. Le's research with Buddhist charities in Ho Chi Minh City highlights how grassroots charity work is most commonly performed by lower-class, self-employed, and retired people with limited incomes (2020, 5–6). These volunteer trends are emerging as economic stratification deepens class distinctions through Vietnam's shift to a "socialist-oriented market economy" (*Kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*). Among these shifts, charity events offer a space for people from diverse income levels to collaborate and interact with one another. Le argues that definitions of class in Vietnam, as in other "late-socialist societies," are not strictly dependent on one's financial status or consumption patterns (ibid., 16). Rather, "morality and knowledge" can also be key criteria for asserting oneself as an upwardly mobile, middle-class citizen (ibid., 16). Charity work therefore provides an important way for less wealthy volunteers to assert middle-class status. While low-income and retired event volunteers cannot make the same levels of financial contributions as high-income major donors, all charity members engaged in moral performances of mutual respect by rejecting terminological distinctions between people who donate effort (*công sức*) and people who donate funds.

In attracting both event volunteers and financial donors, the social media platforms Facebook and Zalo were central tools for publicizing event information and new projects. Chị Lý had a social media following of nearly five thousand Facebook followers as well as an extensive email contact list of previous financial contributors. Most bridges were funded through more than a hundred small contributions from repeat givers. According to Chị Lý, in 2018 the average bridge cost approximately 325,000,000 *Việt Nam đồng* (VND) to build—roughly equivalent to $14,000 US dollars (USD). However, depending on the necessary length and height of the bridge, some bridges could be constructed for 100,000,000 VND ($4,000 USD). Typically, to support each bridge, fifty to 150 donors gave amounts ranging from 50,000 VND ($2 USD) to 100,000,000 VND ($4,000 USD). Most financial contributions were given in the range of 1,000,000 VND to 5,000,000 VND ($40 to $100 USD). Occasionally, bridges were also single-handedly sponsored by major one-time donors. Major one-time donors were often businesspeople who had heard about Chị Lý through elite social networks of company leaders, professors, and engineers, or by long-term foundation members who saved up for years to sponsor a single bridge.

Although construction projects drew on funds from a wide range of donors, weekly charity events typically attracted a much smaller number of five to twenty regular attendees. These participants were not always immediate financial contributors to the project but donated energy by accompanying Chị Lý to groundbreaking ceremonies, bridge dedications, and inspections of future building sites. Event attendees asserted the importance of their roles as Foundation representatives by repeating the adage, "One tree cannot form a hill; but three trees concentrated together make a high mountain" (*Một cây làm chẳng nên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao*). In other words, each small task was valuable for the program's overall success.

Approximately 80 percent of regular event attendees were women over the retirement age of fifty-five. The median age of volunteers was about sixty. The group attracted many retired government officials and communist military veterans. Among event attendees, 64 percent were also first-generation migrants to Ho Chi Minh City. Half of these migrants had arrived shortly after the end of the war in 1975 to reestablish the city under communist government leadership. They had subsequently lived in Ho Chi Minh City for over forty years. While many retired women lived on modest pensions and savings, some had children and grandchildren who had gone on to successful business careers. In addition to their pensions and savings, these women also received money from supportive family members. Regardless of their incomes or abilities to make financial donations to the Foundation, event attendees positioned themselves as comfortably middle class.

Given their backgrounds in government service, retired women also maintained a high sense of responsibility toward civic engagement. In addition to describing charity work as meritorious in devotional Buddhist terms, they used patriotic language to emphasize the importance of charity as supporting national development. Volunteers incorporated national flags, colors, songs, and symbols into charity events. For example, several volunteers, including Chị Lý, always wore delicate silken *áo dài* or *áo bà ba* when attending charity events. The *áo dài* is Vietnamese formal clothing with nationalist cultural connotations (Leshkowich 2003). The *áo bà ba* also has nationalist cultural significance. The common regional clothing style had been adopted as a uniform for women in the southern faction of the communist military during the war for national independence and unity fought from 1954 to 1975.

This colorful range of clothes cast the Bridge of Love Foundation's work in a generally feminine, patriotic light. In comparison with other Buddhist humanitarian aid programs gaining popularity around Asia, volunteers' casual incorporation of traditional clothing for charity events also alludes to ways the organization does not function to enforce a systematized group identity through required uniforms. By comparison, research on international Buddhist aid programs like the Taiwan-based Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation suggests that volunteers learn to internalize a "new subjectivity" through adopting group habits, morals, slogans, appearances, and mannerisms. Members in these formal "industrialized philanthropy" programs adopt modernist Buddhist identities of moral personhood by learning to "[craft] rational action to contribute to the public good" through charity (Weller et al. 2018, 123). Wearing uniforms, maintaining specific hairstyles, and adopting prescribed greetings, gestures, and forms of etiquette while performing charity all reinforce an internalized group moral identity (ibid., 120). As such, organizations like Tzu Chi both derive from and advance rationalized, systematized forms of Buddhist modernism through charity programming.

By contrast, the Bridge of Love Foundation reflected a significantly less formalized style of grassroots charity. Rather than adopting systemized forms of self-presentation or internalizing discourse of rationalized moral action, volunteers actively framed their work in traditional, devotional Buddhist terms of making merit and summoning supernatural support. Whereas Tzu Chi volunteers reportedly gain trust in the organization through its demonstrations of institutional transparency and professionalism (ibid., 124), Bridge of Love Foundation members touted the organization's moral efficacy through tales of inexplicable healings among volunteers, magical transformations of bad weather, and the supernatural longevity of bridges constructed by the group. Similarly, rather than praising the organization's routinization as a sign of its moral order—as found among Tzu Chi volunteers (Huang 2009, 183)—Bridge of Love Foundation members shared stories of how they had overcome chaotic misadventures during charity events as evidence that the group was protected by the supernatural intervention of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Overall, the Bridge of Love Foundation demonstrates how Buddhist humanitarianism can spread through highly informal structures of grassroots charity programming, distinct from modernist groups like Tzu Chi. Elderly women's supernatural interpretations of events surrounding charity work, and their devotional motivations for volunteering to gain merit, also represent a form of women's Buddhist contramodernism in charity work. In the next section, I examine the political and economic conditions that have allowed for both modernist and contramodernist Buddhist charity movements to proliferate in Vietnam.

Context: The rise of religious humanitarianism in Asia

Buddhist humanitarian movements have arisen across Asia since the 1980s among regional shifts toward increased privatization and decreased state welfare provisioning (Weller et al. 2018, 53, 71). The state has compelled many religious charity programs to form through modernist conceptualizations of the role of religion in society, emphasizing the responsibility of religious groups to contribute to the public good (Fountain and McLaughlin 2016, 6). In countries like China, Taiwan, and Malaysia, increased government regulation has caused Buddhist humanitarian aid programs to become systematically formalized, for example, through adopting meticulous record keeping, subject to state audit (Weller et al. 2018, 5). These trends have overall resulted in the promotion of "large-scale, well-financed modern organizations" that also advance values of Buddhist modernism among volunteers (Huang 2008, 33).

In Vietnam, similar economic and political trends have fostered a popular boom of Buddhist volunteerism. Following the 1986 policy reforms known as *Đổi Mới*, the state began to decrease public welfare and social service provisioning while introducing economic privatization.[3] Rejecting the term "privatization," government officials use the term "socialization" (*xã hội hóa*) to emphasize how—under the emerging mixed-market economy—individual citizens must assume responsibilities to care for one another in the spirit of socialism (Nguyen 2018, 628). Under *Đổi Mới*, the state also loosened earlier restrictions on public religion, resulting in a resurgence of religious engagement (Taylor 2007). Government officials began to incorporate religious groups among calls for citizens to assume greater responsibility in practices of ethical citizenship by extending benefits to religious groups sponsoring charity (Hoang, Nguyen, and Reynolds 2018). For example, in 2013, the state offered tax reductions to "faith-based organizations" providing aid for "underserved populations" (ibid., 1078). Buddhist groups in the Mahayana-majority country responded readily, expanding and creating programs to feed the poor, subsidize medicine for hospital patients, house people with disabilities, sponsor infrastructure, and treat mental health issues

(Nguyen 2016). Buddhist charities now serve as the second most common providers of social services in Vietnam, following the state (Hoang, Nguyen, and Reynolds 2018, 1076).

In comparison with other Asian contexts, however, this surge in religious humanitarianism is not immediately linked with a corollary trend toward Buddhist modernism as encouraged by the state. This is likely due to the Vietnamese government's weaker capacity for regulation and surveillance over individual religious groups. Although the government favors the rationalist discourses of Buddhist modernism, because it "distances religion from superstition and most easily fits with the humanistic ideology of the Communist state" (Soucy 2020, 62), state influence over individual religious communities is still relatively soft (ibid., 67). Overall, modernist discourse has not gained significant authority within everyday Buddhist practice in Vietnam. The loose correlations among resurgent popular Buddhism, religious humanitarianism, and state regulation have allowed for Buddhist aid movements to spread with a widely diverse range of practices, beliefs, and moral discourses among volunteers.

Modernization and emotional motivations for volunteering

Lay members of several Buddhist charity movements reported that they began volunteering as a way to cope with feelings of urban alienation and moral uncertainties caused by widespread social change. Vietnam's comprehensive economic restructuring, widespread trends of domestic migration, and urbanization have sparked cultural changes unsettling to many residents of Ho Chi Minh City (Tran 2018). In other Asian contexts, the moral uncertainty of rapid development has mobilized volunteers to join charities and internalize modern Buddhist understandings of moral personhood (Huang and Weller 1998, 380). However, in Vietnam, charity volunteering has instead sparked a proliferation of multiple Buddhist discourses around morality and what it means to "do good" (*làm điều thiện*). In this section, I first describe how volunteers are drawn to religious philanthropy by experiences of moral uncertainty amid national development. Then, I consider how these common emotional motivations for joining charities can lead to both modernist and contramodernist adaptations of Buddhist worldviews in grassroots volunteer groups.

Among diverse types of Buddhist charity programming in Vietnam, lay members' motivations for volunteering were similarly driven by experiences of urban alienation. Elderly women who volunteered with the Bridge of Love Foundation consistently reported becoming involved with charity work to cope with feelings of loneliness and the moral uncertainties of life in Ho Chi Minh City. Volunteers described watching the city's rapid economic development with a combination of hope and anxiety. On the one hand, members of the Foundation explained that they viewed economic and infrastructural development as fundamentally beneficial processes that could improve the quality of life for everyone in the country.[4] On the other hand, volunteers were critical of the ways people in Ho Chi Minh City took advantage of the opportunities created by privatization to serve self-interest. For example, Foundation members complained of how constant traffic jams, seasonal flooding, and air pollution were caused by the selfishness of city dwellers striving for individual gain without care for others. These concerns for public welfare were mirrored and amplified by volunteers' personal fears of theft, violence, swindling, and health compromised by pollution.[5]

In addition to general feelings of urban anxiety and isolation, elderly women described struggling with a sense of purposelessness after retirement. Women like the sixty-four-year-old former accountant Cô An had initially entered retirement expecting to assume busy roles as caretakers for their children and grandchildren, only to find that their family members were preoccupied with work and education. Without work or childcare responsibilities to fill her time, Cô An described how she had been consumed by feelings of "boredom" and "sadness" (*chán*, *buồn*). Four years into her retirement, a former coworker invited Cô An to volunteer at a local monastery. She accompanied her friend to help distribute dried goods to poor families around the neighborhood. Cô An became interested in volunteering but wanted to do something that she felt could have a broader impact in society by changing the living conditions of the poor. She was intrigued by the transformational possibilities of sponsoring infrastructure in rural areas, which she believed could boost local economies and provide better access to education for children. Such charity initiatives were regularly lauded by state news programs and documentary television shows (Le 2020, 6). Sponsoring infrastructure reminded her of the deeper sense of life purpose she had felt while supporting national development as a government employee. Since joining the Bridge of Love Foundation, Cô An described regaining a sense of purpose while also experiencing improved health, which she attributed to the "blessings" (*phước đức*) of merit she gained by doing charity. Before, she felt left out of her children and grandchildren's busy lives, always waiting for them to have time available for her. Now, she laughed, they had to ask when she was available.

Elements of Cô An's story mirror the motivations and experiences of moral uncertainty that compelled middle-class women to become involved with volunteering among international Buddhist charities like Tzu Chi (Huang and Weller 1998). The modern social concerns produced through secular state calls to practice ethical citizenship, cultural changes accompanying economic privatization, shifting family roles, and experiences of urban alienation have generally contributed to the widespread popularization of volunteerism in Asia. The ways volunteers adapt Buddhist worldviews to address these modern social concerns, however, do not always advance modernist religious values and epistemologies, as found among many charity groups in China, Taiwan, and Malaysia. In the next section, I explore ways that Bridge of Love Foundation members adapted devotional Buddhist practices in creating contramodern responses to these modern concerns.

Miracles of merit: Devotional Buddhism in women's charity practices

While Bridge of Love Foundation members sought to navigate the moral uncertainties of a changing society by organizing charity, they also articulated the causes of moral uncertainty and the significance of altruism for making merit in devotional

Buddhist terms. Rather than using modernist Buddhist discourse to explain the rational significance of philanthropy, volunteers collectively circulated narratives of inexplicable and magical occurrences during charity events as proof that buddhas and bodhisattvas were invested in the success of their meritorious work. As the sixty-two-year-old military veteran Cô Thư once explained, by "advancing" (*tiến lên*) the nation through philanthropy, volunteers not only supported economic growth but also created merit, which made "the people of Vietnam" (*dân Việt*) collectively "happier, healthier, and more beautiful." Such claims derived from volunteers' devotional Buddhist worldviews, in which karma manifests in the immanent conditions of daily life. Doing good through fulfilling citizenship duties and supporting development could create immediate, concrete benefits of greater wealth, physical attractiveness, and improved health for everyone involved (Swenson 2020).[6]

Volunteers reinforced such claims about Buddhist merit-making benefiting the nation through personal stories of experiencing the miraculous effects of improved karma. The sixty-seven-year-old Cô Tuyết, for example, shared how she began volunteering at her sister's insistence that she needed more social activity in retirement. Cô Tuyết had suffered a steady health decline following a diagnosis of diabetes. After she began volunteering with the Bridge of Love Foundation, however, her karma dramatically changed. Not only did she feel herself becoming more naturally happy, compassionate, and generous—signs of her spiritual development—but her physical energy also greatly increased. Moreover, her doctors were astonished to report that she had recovered from diabetes. The disease had left her body. Cô Tuyết asserted that this was because of the blessings of merit she had accrued through donating to bridge construction.

Volunteers like Cô Tuyết proposed that bridge construction, specifically, was a uniquely meritorious type of charity, because donors gained merit for every single person who crossed the bridge. By sponsoring a bridge, donors secured a regular source of merit that would "create blessings" (*tạo ra phước đức*) for multiple lifetimes and for several generations among their family members. Volunteers also explained that bridge construction was an important form of philanthropy because bridges were in pressing demand throughout the Mekong Delta. Geographically, the delta region consists of two major rivers and "a dense network of numerous natural and artificial channels" that cover a significant portion of southern Vietnam (Liao, Le, and Nguyen 2016, 70). As such, water crossings are an essential part of village life in this region. Going to market, attending school, or visiting neighbors may require multiple stream crossings within a single village. Water crossings become a particularly salient part of daily routines during seasons of cyclical flooding, when village activities are literally suspended over higher water levels (ibid., 73).

Villages have been conventionally connected by makeshift bamboo-pole networks, often called "monkey bridges" (*cầu khỉ*), or by ferry systems. However, Chị Lý explained that bamboo bridge and ferry networks limit rural development, because they cannot support industrial transportation needs. Only a few people can cross bamboo poles at any given time, and ferries have a finite capacity to move cargo. By contrast, Chị Lý asserted that building concrete bridges allows larger quantities of crops to be exported more quickly, boosting local incomes. Bridges also provide faster, safer river crossings for village residents, thereby granting children better access to regional schools. These modern concerns surrounding economic development, mobility, and education were a central focus for Foundation members; yet volunteers also consistently articulated and interpreted these concerns through the language of making merit and securing supernatural support. Improvements to village life were cast not only as the rational outcomes of socialist citizens fulfilling duties to support one another through philanthropy—as framed by the state—but also as signs that their charity work had been completed in a spiritually efficacious way that created merit.

Foundation volunteers cited the supernatural longevity of their bridges both as a testament to the quality of materials they used and as evidence that the construction materials were reinforced with supernatural support. In explaining the importance of bridges to rural development, Chị Lý emphasized that philanthropically sponsored bridges had to be well made—with sound materials, at appropriate heights—or else they would disintegrate within a year and block boat traffic, causing more problems than they solved. Unregulated bridge construction was a major concern for local officials. Although private sponsorship and charity support for new infrastructure is increasingly encouraged by the state, there is also growing public concern that philanthropic bridge construction is insufficiently regulated. One article from the popular state-media source *Tuổi Trẻ News*, for instance, called for charities not to ignore or avoid regional officials when implementing philanthropic projects (Trần 2017). The article proposes that there is a problem with unregulated charities undertaking rogue development without consulting village leadership. Such media reports are reinforced by research on philanthropic infrastructure programs in Vietnam, which confirms that engineering quality occasionally goes untested by charitable donors and that there are widespread issues of embezzlement in funding allocation (Ha-Duong et al. 2016; Giang and Pheng 2015; Finley 2010).

Chị Lý suggested that the poor quality of such unregulated bridges was reflected by and compounded through the moral qualities of their sponsors. Donors who only sponsored bridges to attract public attention inevitably created hazardous infrastructure, as well as bad karma. Volunteers like Cô Thư illustrated critiques of the egregious carelessness of building weak bridges by sharing stories about young children who died on the way to school when these bridges collapsed.

The Bridge of Love Foundation sought to confront the issue of unregulated bridges by volunteering to replace badly made infrastructure. For example, during one groundbreaking event I joined in August 2018, the donors in attendance explained that they were replacing an unstable bridge that had been installed by a different charity group from Ho Chi Minh City only a few months before. These replacements offered not only infrastructural but also spiritual interventions for the villages they supported. Cô Thư and Chị Lý both described how, in contrast to dangerous concrete bridges constructed with cheap materials that rarely lasted a year, infrastructure built by Bridge of Love lasted reliably for up to a decade, even despite the intensive wear of seasonal flooding and constant use. The unusual longevity of Foundation Bridges not only reflected the high quality of construction materials but also showed that their bridges were reinforced with the protection and support of bodhisattvas like Avalokiteshvara (Quan Thế Âm Bồ tát).

Chị Lý and volunteers like Cô An, Cô Thư, and Cô Thuyết also shared personal stories as evidence of supernatural intervention from bodhisattvas during charity events. For example, Chị Lý described how, while visiting a construction site before an upcoming groundbreaking ceremony, she was almost severely injured by a sudden accident. Thanks to the "miraculous, magical" (*nhiệm mầu*) intervention of the Buddha, she was unharmed—a story she hoped would encourage others to similarly dedicate their lives to the good work of charity. Likewise, when Foundation members traveled to dedicate a bridge at the beginning of Vietnam's rainy season, a storm appeared from nowhere. The heavy clouds miraculously held off raining until the volunteers had safely returned to the shelter of their rented van. Foundation members agreed that the suspended weather was another sign of Avalokiteshvara's intervention on behalf of their program.

One consistent way that the Bridge of Love Foundation worked to incorporate devotional Buddhist practices into their charity programs was by making offerings to both the Pure Land Buddha and to local gods and spirits as part of groundbreaking ceremonies for new bridges. Volunteers collaborated with villagers and regional officials to prepare offerings of fruit, incense, and flowers for the Buddha. A second table typically featured offerings of candy, milk, rice porridge, and cigarettes for local spirits. Through these offerings, the women of Bridge of Love petitioned for supernatural intervention to ensure the safety of future bridge-goers. Through these rituals, the women also demonstrated feminine virtues of humility, dependency, and selflessness, publicly crediting the successes of their programs to blessings from buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Demonstrations of feminine virtue were similarly modeled by Chị Lý as the group's main spokesperson. For example, when volunteers praised Chị Lý's physical beauty as a sign of the merit she gained by working as a full-time charity organizer, she deflected such compliments by joking that—given how much she worked and how little she slept—she was only alive "thanks to pure supernatural energy" (*nhờ năng lượng sạch từ siêu nhiên*). This way of deferring compliments reinforced Chị Lý's self-presentation as a humble, hardworking, and dedicated woman who used her position to promote Buddhism.

These stories show how women volunteering with the Bridge of Love Foundation interpreted charity work through supernatural, magical, and devotional understandings of Buddhism. Like religious volunteers in other Asian contexts, women became involved with the Bridge of Love Foundation seeking to broaden their social circles, occupy free time, and fulfill patriotic desires to support the nation. However, while charity involvement has caused volunteers in other contexts to shift toward internalizing values of Buddhist modernism, my research suggests that popular movements of Buddhist volunteerism and Buddhist modernism are not immediately correlated across Asia—as evidenced among grassroots charities in Vietnam. In my conclusion, I return to Collins's theory to propose that women's devotional Buddhist volunteerism compels a broader definition of contramodernism, which also provides a framework for recognizing the dynamic diversity of grassroots Buddhist humanitarianism in Asia.

Conclusion

Members of the Bridge of Love Foundation drew on traditional, devotional understandings of Buddhism to craft responses to the modern social concerns that had compelled them to start volunteering. Vietnamese Buddhism is still practiced by an overwhelming majority of elderly women who follow devotional forms of religious practice. Local men disparage such devotional practices as evidence that women are naturally less rational and more emotionally dependent than men, justifying women's subordinate position in society. Devotional Buddhism is also positioned as premodern and traditional, and feminized as irrationally laden with superstition. As such, devotional Buddhism is used as a foil for rationalized movements of Buddhist modernism that tend to be led by men. Despite the stigmatization of devotional Buddhism, however, women's involvement is as popular as ever. Soucy has argued that women continue to practice devotional Buddhism because it allows them to publicly demonstrate feminine virtues of dependency, weakness, and nurturing care. These virtues grant women social capital and desirability by showing that they fulfil culturally prescribed gender roles.

Women volunteering with the Bridge of Love Foundation similarly performed feminine virtues while demonstrating devotional Buddhist practices in their charity work. They circulated stories of supernatural interventions from buddhas and bodhisattvas during charity events and described the merit gained through philanthropy as having immediate transformative effects in their personal lives. Rituals performed, filmed, and circulated on social media surrounding charity events showed women deferentially petitioning for support from supernatural beings. Such devotional conceptualizations of charity stand in distinction to modernist forms of Buddhist charity gaining popularity in other Asian contexts.

Collins proposes that scholars need a more dynamic framework to consider how contemporary religious groups adapt traditional Buddhist practices to address modern social concerns. He introduces the term "Buddhist contramodernism" as an analytical category to complicate the binary positioning of traditional versus modernist Buddhist groups. However, Collins specifies that contramodern movements typically follow the vision of a charismatic leader. This qualification is meant to distinguish contramodernism from other Buddhist-influenced new religious movements as they developed in Japan (2020, 52). I adapt and expand Collins's theory for a broader context by adding a gender analysis of women's uses of devotional Buddhism in popular charity movements in Vietnam. By examining how whole groups of women adapt devotional practices together to address modern social concerns, I open his definition of contramodernism as moving beyond the visionary leadership of a single charismatic individual.

Grassroots Buddhist charity movements like the Bridge of Love Foundation are arising in response to changing cultural, political, and economic conditions in Vietnam. Buddhist volunteerism is mobilized by the state as a means to practice secular, socialist forms of ethical citizenship. Religious humanitarianism in Asia has generally led to the popularization of modernist values and epistemologies among volunteers. However, the specific dynamics among devotional Buddhism, gender roles, and weak state regulation in Vietnam have allowed a diverse range of Buddhist practices to flourish among charity members.

Elderly women who join Buddhist charities adapt devotional worldviews and practices in describing the meritorious significance of their philanthropic work. Adaptations to understandings of devotional Buddhism occur as group members collectively interpret charity events and personal experiences as evidence of supernatural interventions in daily life. Unlike the Japanese contramodern groups Collins analyzes, women adapt traditional Buddhist practices to address modern social concerns through collective interpretations of stories, feelings, and events experienced together. Their uses of devotional Buddhism to promote philanthropy mark the emergence of new, distinctly contramodern Buddhist trends among charity movements in Vietnam, without the guidance of a charismatic leader.

By analyzing devotional Buddhist charities as contramodern, this article opens ways to consider the role of women in driving adaptations of contemporary Buddhism. Scholarship that reiterates categorical binaries between traditional and modernist forms of Buddhism may subtly reinforce gender hierarchies that position men as active religious reformers and women as passive religious followers. Rather, my research shows that women also adapt devotional Buddhist worldviews and practices for new social movements, such as the popularization of Buddhist volunteerism in Vietnam. Vietnam's distinct economic and political conditions have allowed a diverse range of Buddhist practices to flourish among national trends of religious philanthropy; however, scholars in other contexts may similarly find that a broader definition of contramodernism reveals a proliferation of ways that Buddhist humanitarian groups have developed and spread throughout Asia.

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Notes

1. All names of people and organizations, aside from major geographical locations, have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

2. The Kinh ethnic-majority group constitutes 85.3 percent of Vietnam's total population (United Nations 2019). There are wide disparities in access to financial resources for ethnic majority and minority populations in Vietnam. Ethnic minorities are generally isolated to rural areas with limited options for education and healthcare. Consistently throughout my fieldwork with Buddhist charities in Vietnam, I found that all volunteers were either ethnic-majority Kinh or Chinese-heritage Hoa people. I list these ages because I knew each member in attendance from previous events.

3. Johnathan London's work more specifically explores how the state first withdrew from, then reasserted itself in, social service programs such as health care. See London 2013.

4. Erik Harms noted a similar positive feeling toward economic trends of privatization and development in his ethnographic research in Ho Chi Minh City (2016, 95).

5. Volunteers often circulated news stories of horrific violence and theft happening among strangers in the city, such as the report of how "yet another" motorbike taxi driver was stabbed in the neck and had his bike stolen (*Tuổi Trẻ News* 2018).

6. Correlations between virtues and aesthetics are common among Buddhist cultures. Ian James Kidd (2017) details how Buddhist morality is described as manifesting through physical appearances in other historical contexts.

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Sectarians, Smokers, and Science

The Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore

Based on historical research and ethnographic documentation, this article discusses the institutions, beliefs, and rituals of the sectarian religion the Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although the Zhenkongjiao originally rose to prominence as a result of its opium rehabilitation tenets, the organizations described in this article have long abandoned such a premise and have realigned themselves to contemporaneous needs. In this study, I challenge previous scholarship that historicized the Zhenkongjiao within convenient rise-and-fall mythemes by showing how the Zhenkongjiao's leadership had been proactively situating itself within changing ontologies, epistemologies, and social needs throughout these two centuries. In particular, by comparing and contrasting the Zhenkongjiao's approach to "science" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I shed light on the agency exercised by the supporters of a Chinese sectarian religion, who demonstrated maneuverability in reigniting and recontextualizing interest in their activities.

Keywords: Zhenkongjiao—opium—Chinese charities—Chinese religion in Southeast Asia—science—sectarian religion

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The Zhenkongjiao, alias *Kongzhong Dadao* (Way Within Emptiness), translated into English as the Religion of the Void (Xu 1954)[1] or literally True Emptiness Teachings, refers to a Chinese sectarian religion (Broy 2015)[2] whose rise to fame in twentieth-century southeast China and Southeast Asia was characterized by its rehabilitation of opium addicts with meditational regimes and tea drinking rituals. Some Zhenkongjiao temples, such as the Tiannantan Jieyanshe in Singapore, preserved their opium rehabilitation functions in their names (figure 1), whereas others—notably the Tianling Zong Daotang in Changi Road, Singapore—had their names used interchangeably with secular-sounding titles such as the Opium Addicts Treatment Association by the press throughout the 1950s (*The Straits Times* 1956b). Today, Zhenkongjiao temples still offer cups of prayed-over tea to visitors and worshippers seeking a cure for their own ailments. Based on historical research and ethnographic documentation, this article discusses the institutions, beliefs, and rituals of the Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, temples operating under the Zhenkongjiao's name were once proliferate throughout the twentieth century (Liao 1968).

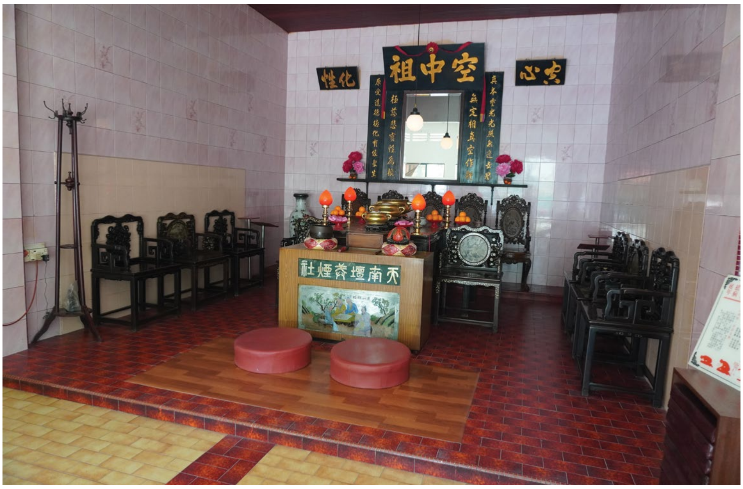


Figure 1. Interior of the Tiannantan Jieyanshe. Note the stylized spelling of the organization's opium curing appellation on the altar table. Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, March 2020.

As a sectarian religion, the Zhenkongjiao saw itself as a distinctive community that stood out from—despite drawing upon—the *sanjiao* (Three Teachings) of China, namely Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In many ways, the Zhenkongjiao's history paralleled the fortunes of vegetarian halls affiliated with the *Xiantian Dadao* (Great Way of Former Heaven) in Singapore and Malaysia. Both traditions were inspired by the syncretism of the *Luojiao* (Luo Teachings) (Luo 1962, 127–68; Show 2018b, 17), a Ming-dynasty (1368–1644 CE) sectarian religion (Overmyer 1978). Similarly, both the Great Way of Former Heaven and the Zhenkongjiao originated from Jiangxi province, China (Xu 1954; Show 2018a, 38; Show 2020, 237). Like the Zhenkongjiao's opium rehabilitation temples, the Great Way of Former Heaven's vegetarian halls also gained prominence in the socioreligious environment of twentieth-century Southeast Asia, albeit by appealing to a different niche, where women were empowered to develop their spiritual and personal careers (Freedman and Topley 1961; Show 2018a; Show 2018b).

Unlike the Great Way of Former Heaven, the Zhenkongjiao—perhaps due to its relatively late entrance into Singapore and Malaysia—had escaped the scrutiny of English scholarship. In 1954, Xu Yunqiao published an article detailing the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs, scriptures, and its possible sources of inspiration. Less than a decade later, Luo Xianglin published his monograph (1962) to mark the centenary of the Zhenkongjiao's founding. Luo's book remains an important study referenced by later researchers. From the 2000s, shorter pieces of Chinese scholarship have described the Zhenkongjiao in the context of overseas Chinese Southeast Asian communities (Shi 2014, 34–76; Chen 2016, 321–95)—notably Singapore (Tham 2011; Shi and Ouyang 2012), Malaysia (Ngoi 2016), and Thailand (Chen 2009).

Much of this existing body of scholarship, however, assumes an evolutionary teleology in the history of religion when contextualizing the Zhenkongjiao's fortunes. This framework continues to influence the postcolonial outlook of the Chinese intelligentsia (Yang 2011). Xu compared the Zhenkongjiao somewhat favorably with Islam and Christianity before noting that "(readers) cannot deny that as compared to other religions, the scriptures, the teachings and philosophy of the Zhenkongjiao pale in comparison" (1954, 32). Chen Jinguo surmised that the Zhenkongjiao exhibited traits of a "mature but incomplete religion" (2009, 83, 94). By elaborating upon this notion of incompleteness, Chen later suggested that the Zhenkongjiao was not only undergoing a "religious involution" but was trapped in a "deathlike and isolated" state since 1949 as well (Chen 2016, 394–95). Ouyang Banyi's dissertation concurred with this assumption of imperfection (2013, 3), whereas research by his supervisor Shi Cangjin depicted the Zhenkongjiao's leadership as responding belatedly to a decline in fortunes after the 1960s (Shi and Ouyang 2012, 96–99; Shi 2014, 64–76). Similar impressions of decline in Singapore after an initial wave of success in the first half of the twentieth century were also foregrounded in the works of Tham Wen Xi (2011, 16–55) and Ngoi Guat Peng (2016, 136–37, 142). Characterizations like these, whether in terms of a structural deficiency or a reactiveness inherent to the Zhenkongjiao, left actors with little or no agency in captaining their own future. This article seeks to temper this interpretation by showing how the Zhenkongjiao's supporters had been proactively situating it within changing ontologies, epistemologies, and needs throughout these two centuries.

This article also problematizes a supposition that Chinese sectarian religion—with the possible exception of the *Yiguandao* (Unity Way) (Billioud 2020)—had experienced difficulty transitioning into the postwar years and beyond. From the 1960s, sectarian religious organizations, doctrines, and rituals appeared anachronistic with socioeconomic change and structural transformations within Chinese societies. Growing literacy and rapidly changing intellectual environments, coupled with competition from better-organized institutional religions, as we shall see, had undercut the popularity of sectarian religion. The Zhenkongjiao had experienced dwindling followership, alongside the *Wuweijiao* (Non-Action Teachings) (ter Haar 2014, 218) and the Great Way of Former Heaven (Show 2018b, 43), among others.

However, contrary to Chinese scholarship on the Zhenkongjiao, modernity is not an inevitable road that sectarian religion needs to tread—namely disappear entirely or become assimilated into institutionalized religions. Drawing on Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) and Daniel Goh’s (2009) discussion on how modernity can be “provincialized” as an alternative system of thought susceptible to assimilation into sectarian religion (rather than the other way around), I discuss how the Zhenkongjiao had attempted to realign its doctrines and rituals within a discursive setting inspired by “science.” By comparing and contrasting the Zhenkongjiao’s approach toward “science” across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, I shed light on the agency exercised by the Zhenkongjiao’s supporters, who have demonstrated maneuverability in attempting to reignite interest in their activities.

Primary sources consulted for this article include oral history interviews with the leadership and followers of the Zhenkongjiao in Singapore. From August 2018 to March 2020, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews in the form of informal conversations with twenty-eight leaders and members of the Zhenkongjiao in Singapore.[3] Questions revolved around their personal history with the Zhenkongjiao and their past religious experiences. All conversations were conducted in either English or Mandarin. Most of my informants are above the age of fifty, and at least half of them are retirees or are semi-retired. In addition to oral history, I also drew upon educational pamphlets and booklets published and freely distributed under the auspices of various Zhenkongjiao organizations in Singapore since the twenty-first century. Likewise, hagiographies, meditational manuals, commemorative volumes, and newspaper articles published throughout the twentieth century were also examined to better understand how the Zhenkongjiao’s leadership negotiated with continuity and change over time.

Historical background of the Zhenkongjiao in China

Before going into the Zhenkongjiao’s activities in Malaysia and Singapore, I will provide some context into the origins and sources of inspiration for its beliefs in China, with a particular emphasis on how the Zhenkongjiao was backgrounded by two different sociopolitical regimes, namely the late Qing (from the reign of the Xianfeng and Xuantong emperors, 1850–1911) and Republican China (1912–49). Incumbent scholarship and hagiographical traditions recognized that the Zhenkongjiao was founded by the charismatic leader Liao Diping (1827–1893) (among others, see Luo 1962), whose religious center was originally based in Xunwu, Ganzhou (present-day Jiangxi). In 1857, Liao found spiritual tutelage under Liu Bifa (n.d.), a master from the *Dacheng Jiao* (Great Vehicle Teachings, another designation of the Non-Action Teachings). In the process, Liao was introduced to the Five Books in Six Volumes (Wen 2014 [1935], 3–8), an anthology compiled by the semi-mythical founder of the Non-Action Teachings, Luo Qing (n.d.) (ter Haar 2014).

The political and sociocultural environments that provided the backdrop of the Zhenkongjiao's origins lend credence to these claims. Ma Xisha and Han Bingfang (2004, 917–23) noted how Ganzhou had long been a target of surveillance by imperial authorities as a hotbed for "heterodox" activity associated with the Great Vehicle Teachings. More recently, Barend ter Haar noted the prominence of the Non-Action Teachings in Xunwu throughout late imperial and Republican China (2014, 200–1). Liao's history with the Great Vehicle Teachings probably refracted into the Zhenkongjiao that he founded in 1862, which shared a distaste for idol-worship (ter Haar 2014).

Despite these conceptual overlaps, three key departures from the Great Vehicle Teachings reflected religious innovation on Liao Diping's part. Firstly, the Zhenkongjiao's devotees can consume meat freely, in contrast to the strict vegetarianism typically associated with the Great Vehicle Teachings and other like-minded sectarian religions (see ter Haar 1999, 44–63). After a divine revelation, Liao abandoned vegetarianism, earning him the ire of his former colleagues from the Great Vehicle Teachings. Liao's departure from the Great Vehicle Teachings' vegetarian regime extended to a ritual devised by him, where livestock can be sacrificed to avail his devotees of their this-worldly misfortunes and illnesses (Yun 1924–25, unpaginated). Animal sacrifice, euphemistically known as *fanghua* (releasing of flowers), would present complications later.

Secondly, Liao was originally propelled to fame as a religious leader after he claimed that he could cure people of their opium addictions and illnesses (Wen 2014 [1935], 14–15). Liao's approach vis-à-vis his devotees closely resembled what Susan Naquin (1985) termed "meditational" groups and ter Haar's (2020) characterization of sectarian religious networks that operated along "vertical" lines.[4] The initial renown of the Zhenkongjiao was thus closely associated with the thaumaturgical powers of Liao and his successors, in contrast to a basic knowledge of scriptural and religious tenets that wove a "horizontal" religious network together (ter Haar 2020).

Finally, after Liao experienced some success as a religious leader, he compiled his own canon (Wen 2014 [1935], 14), the Four Books in Five Volumes, a title that was probably inspired by Patriarch Luo's Five Books in Six Volumes (see Overmyer 1999). Like the Non-Action Teachings, the Zhenkongjiao's rituals revolved around the recitation of the Four Books in Five Volumes, which promised to "bring prosperity to its reciters, promote wisdom among its expositors and to eliminate opium addiction and illnesses among its listeners as per their hearts' desire" (Wen 2014 [1935], 14). Liao's recompilation was probably inspired by—and drew upon the renown of—Luo's career, where the Five Books in Six Volumes served "as an anthology that united the essential works of the entire Buddhist canon" (ter Haar 2014, 4). Liao's imitation of Luo extended to integrating parts of the Five Books in Six Volumes into his own compendium of the Four Books in Five Volumes (Luo 1962, 134–39).

Other aspects of the Zhenkongjiao's rise to prominence reflected broader sociopolitical needs and trends. By the nineteenth century, the consumption of opium in China became branded as a societal and financial scourge by the Jiaqing (1760–1820) and Daoguang (1782–1850) emperors of the Qing dynasty (Windle 2013, 1191–92). Liao's declaration that he would rid his devotees of opium smoking occurred between 1862 and 1863, approximately two years after the end of the Second Opium War (Wen 2014 [1935], 14). The Zhenkongjiao, however, did not possess a monopoly on the promise to cure patients of their opium addictions and illnesses. Advertisements taken by other religious authorities and self-proclaimed experts in Republican Chinese newspapers touted similar claims (*Minguo Ribao* 1917; *Shishi Xinbao* 1933), which suggested that a societal-wide demand for such services was common then.

Nevertheless, the injunction against opium smoking was emphasized in Liao's *Bao'en baojuan* (Precious Scroll of Repaying Gratitude), which promised that those who give up opium smoking "would not be allowed to enter hell for all eternity" (Liao 2015 [1862], 138). Characteristics like these—where sectarian religions reinvented themselves to fit contemporaneous concerns—were common throughout late imperial and early Republican China (Clart and Scott 2014; Clart, Ownby, and Wang 2020). By riding upon late Qing and early Republican China's anti-opium crusade (Zhou 1999), the nascent Zhenkongjiao gained some breathing space from state curtailment. Yet circulated sources hinted that the Zhenkongjiao's supporters had to win official recognition and did not receive it by default (Ling 1935, chap. 17).[5]

By the mid-1930s, the Zhenkongjiao expanded from southern Jiangxi into the Meizhou and Xingning areas in Guangdong, as well as Fujian further east and, more broadly, "in the *Nanyang* (southern seas)," namely Southeast Asia (Ling 1935, chaps. 12, 13). Joyce Madancy (2003, 89–91) had also drawn attention to how the Zhenkongjiao was one among many other providers of opium rehabilitation regimes in Chaozhou and Fujian throughout the late imperial and Republican Chinese periods. The genesis of the Zhenkongjiao within these historical circumstances and its spread into the coastal ports of Fujian and Guangdong (Madancy 2003) eventually sowed the seeds of the Zhenkongjiao's expansion abroad.

Chinese and Southeast Asian circulations, 1900s to 1950s

The first Zhenkongjiao temple established in colonial Malaya was the Pili Hongmaodan Zhenkong Zushi Daotang, established in 1906 in Ipoh. One of the temple's pioneers Huang Shengfa (n.d.), a native of Jiaoling in Guangdong, came to Malaya in his youth and became addicted to opium during his sojourn. Shengfa returned to China in search of a cure, where he was not only cured of his addiction by a master from the Fubenyuan lineage known as Huang Daoyun (1870–1918) but invited the latter to return to Malaya with him to spread the Zhenkongjiao's teachings as well. From Ipoh they both expanded the Zhenkongjiao's influence in Malaya, via two different directions. Huang Daoyun made his way southward to Singapore to establish the Xingzhou Fubenyuan Daotang (founded 1910), whereas Huang Shengfa made his way to other parts of the Malayan peninsula and southern Thailand to proselytize (Huang 1965, 38).

Three points from the Zhenkongjiao's initial genesis in Southeast Asia are relevant to our discussion. Firstly, the Fubenyuan lineage that popularized the Zhenkongjiao among the overseas Chinese initially was headquartered in northwestern Guangdong adjacent to Xunwu in Jiangxi, namely the Hakka-dominated regions of Meizhou and Jiaoling (Huang 1965, 21–22). As Zhong Jinlan (2015) has shown, many temples associated with the Fubenyuan lineage in Southeast Asia can trace their place of origin to Meizhou. Although the exact nature of Huang Shengfa's relation to Huang Daoyun was unclear, we can infer that place-of-origin affiliations may have catalyzed their mutual introduction and Shengfa's decision to support his master's trek abroad.

Secondly, the Zhenkongjiao did not enter Southeast Asia from scratch but tapped into preexisting networks, opportunities, and contacts to facilitate their entry into the region. It was the constant traffic of people between China and Malaya that set the stage for the importation and localization of new ideas and personalities—as embodied by the Zhenkongjiao and Huang Daoyun, respectively—from abroad into the region. The invitation and introduction of foreign masters into Southeast Asia via overseas Chinese intermediaries appears to be a strategy common among the first batch of masters who entered the region. Huang Dazhong (1885–1950, figure 2), for example, was born and raised in Ganzhou, but he left for Singapore in 1926 after he was—in a manner reminiscent of the two Huangs—"persuaded by seven 'Nanyang gentlemen' to come and raise a Chen Kung temple in that city" (Chin 1977, xv).

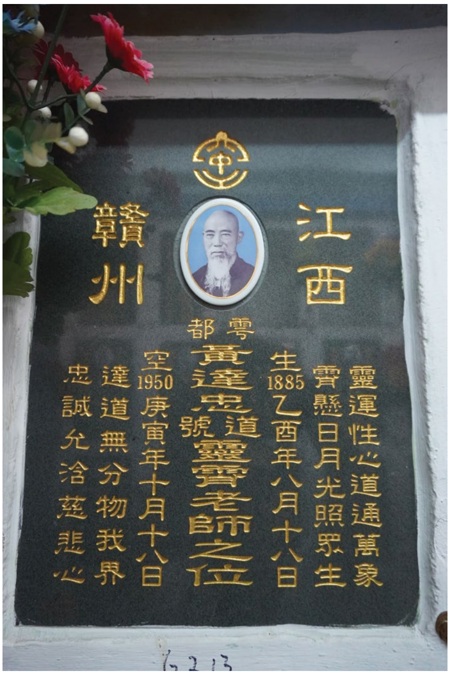


Figure 2. Niche holding Huang Dazhong's remains in the columbarium of the Changi Tianling Zong Daotang. Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, December 2019.

Finally—a point that is relevant to the Zhenkongjiao's original rise to fame overseas—was the proliferation of opium consumption among the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Prior scholarship had rightly noted how the region provided a supply of opium addicts receptive to the Zhenkongjiao's rehabilitative regimes (Luo 1962; Shi 2014; Chen 2016). These works, however, had never accounted for a gap of over fifty years between the Zhenkongjiao's genesis in 1862 and its initial landfall in Malaya by the early 1900s. Time lags aside, I believe that the Zhenkongjiao's belated presence in Malaya and Singapore was precipitated by a shift in colonial and international attitudes toward opium smoking by the first decade of the twentieth century (Reins 1991; Su 2009; Abdullah 2005). Although the British administration and Chinese businesses in Malaya were originally complicit in the trade and tolerance of opium smoking throughout the 1800s (Trocki 1990), it was only the early 1900s that marked a societal and political turn against opium consumption (Abdullah 2005, 43–50). When opium became relabeled as a problem that necessitated active tackling instead of an indispensable part of the colonial political economy (Kim 2020), the Zhenkongjiao was presented with a window of opportunity to establish itself in Southeast Asia. Ipoh's history as a mining town with a population drawn from Guangdong may have provided the two Huangs with a demographic of potential opium addicts to draw from (Carstens 1996, 129), given place-of-origin affiliations and an occupational predisposition toward opium smoking. The founding of the first Zhenkongjiao temple in Ipoh not only reflected these demographic patterns but also testified to how historical patterns of Chinese migration and religiosity were conditioned by British colonialism in Southeast Asia.

The rest of the twentieth century provided a favorable setting for the Zhenkongjiao to extend into the rest of the Malayan peninsula, as well as into the Dutch East Indies (later Indonesia) and southern Thailand (Liao 1968). In Singapore and Malaya, official support latched upon the Zhenkongjiao's anti-opium stance and faith healing rituals. In an episode reminiscent of the Non-Action Teachings' claim that they were protected by a proclamation conferred upon them by imperial authority (ter Haar 2014, 182–87), the *Kongzhongjiao Fazhan Shilue* (Supplementary Histories of the Kongzhongjiao; henceforth, Supplementary Histories) (Huang 1965, 34) described a similar episode, where "an official certificate giving master Huang the permission to proselytize in both Singapore and Malaya" was presented to Huang in 1912 after the latter had cured a number of terminally ill patients referred to him by the British in Singapore. This anecdote about a certificate of entitlement bestowed upon the first Zhenkongjiao master to enter Southeast Asia (which was lost when it changed hands in Kuala Lumpur), however unverified, suggests some extent of meaningful interaction between the then British authorities and the Zhenkongjiao.

Partnerships like these were occasionally punctuated by short-lived wars of words between the Zhenkongjiao's defenders and doctors, who labeled the former's rituals as "nonsense" (Lim 1952; *Singapore Standard* 1952). Prescribing the Zhenkongjiao's opium rehabilitation regime to convicted addicts was also an option exercised by the judiciary (*The Straits Times* 1956a). By 1956, official opinion seems to have turned in the Zhenkongjiao's favor, where a Dr. Leong, who represented the British authorities' survey of the temple's methods vis-à-vis the Opium Treatment Center on St. John's Island, proclaimed that he was not only "impressed" but "conceded the 'logic of the treatment'" prescribed by the temple's leadership (Eastley 1956). In the same year, the second chief minister of Singapore Lim Yew Hock (1914–84) graced the reopening of the same temple (*The Straits Times* 1956b), again testifying to the overlapping interests shared between the Zhenkongjiao and the authorities in Singapore.

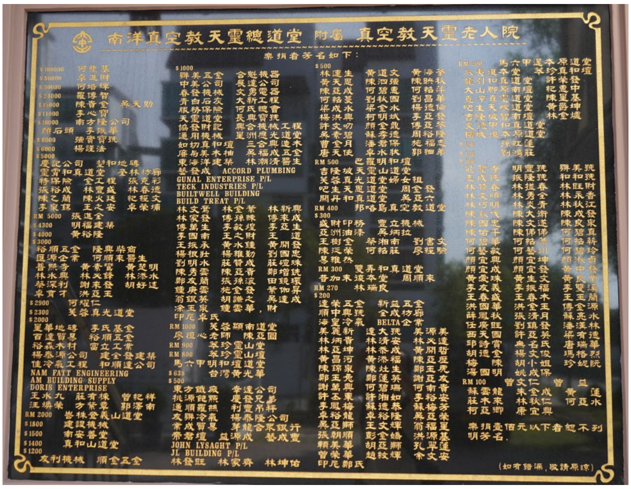
Continuity and change in the second half of the twentieth century

Paradoxically, the initial boom in the Zhenkongjiao's fortunes in the 1950s sparked new insecurities from within the Zhenkongjiao about the sustainability of its opium rehabilitation credo. Far from being abruptly confronted with societal and political change, the Zhenkongjiao's leadership had attempted to find new niches to appeal to in both Singapore and Malaya. Having noted that the number of opium addicts was already dwindling by the end of the 1950s, the Supplementary Histories (Huang 1965, 72) argued that they "still had a core duty to cure its devotees of illnesses," even if the "'addicted gentlemen' (opium addicts) were a thing of the past." The same text later mused that "the methods of curing people were too simplistic, and in the past ten years or so where medicine and cultural knowledge were underdeveloped and rural, it was not difficult to convince people of its efficacy; yet, with advances in medicine, and the flourishing cultural environment of today, circumstances are different" (Huang 1965, 74–75). Besides having to deal with changing societal needs, tracts like these reflected how the Zhenkongjiao recognized the birth of an increasingly literate audience, who stopped taking the Zhenkongjiao's ontology for granted.

A decade later, the Zhenkongjiao Federation of Singapore presented its masterplan for the future by declaring its allegiance and support for the state's campaign against drug abuse (Xu 1976, 1–8). Interestingly, these texts allied themselves with Occidentalist tropes embraced by the post-independence state, where Singapore's morality was besieged by "yellow culture" and ideas imported from "the West and Europe" (Xu 1976, 3), including lackadaisical attitudes toward societal responsibilities alongside recreational drugs such as methoxetamine. Similarly, an effort was also made to link the Zhenkongjiao's prior opium rehabilitation efforts with the incumbent movement against drug abuse, where the sheltering of orphans and the construction of nursing homes were discussed alongside fundraising projects for a drug rehabilitation center since 1974 (Xu 1976, 1–8).[6]

Through such rhetoric, the Zhenkongjiao's leadership attempted to put their prior experience to purposes beyond the narrow purview of opium addiction. One congratulatory foreword proposed that drug addicts "could make their way to the Zhenkongjiao's temples, where they could stay for a short time under the guidance of the temples' masters and caretakers" to be rid of their compulsions (Xu 1976, 5), which suggested that the Zhenkongjiao considered modifying their opium rehabilitation regimes as well.[7] Contrary to characterizations that presented it as a passive agent predestined to fade into obscurity with the growing availability of healthcare and the fall of recreational opium use (Shi and Ouyang 2012, 95; Shi 2014, 70), the Zhenkongjiao demonstrated due resourcefulness when charting its path for the future.

Divestment from opium rehabilitation programs in Singapore and Malaya took similar forms, where the leadership of both countries' Zhenkongjiao Federations started to pivot toward secular and charitable activities. The Supplementary Histories, for instance, noted how a nursing home in Perak, Malaysia, was constructed in 1964 as part of the turn toward newer initiatives, before stressing how this project was the "first of its kind" that "provides specialist treatment services" in a manner that wins "the praise of many others." In addition, readers were promised, the Federation would "assist other local charitable organizations financially as well" (Huang 1965, 26–27). These efforts have taken on cross-border incarnations as well. The stela dedicated to the construction and refurbishment of the retirement home behind the Tianling Zong Daotang in Changi Road, Singapore, for example, recognized contributions from various Zhenkongjiao temples in Malaysia (figure 3).[8]



南洋真空教天靈總道堂 附屬 真空教天靈老人院

樂捐者芳名如下：

Figure 3. Commemorative stela embedded in the wall of the retirement home attached to the Tianling Zong Daotang, Singapore, undated. Note the contributions by Zhenkongjiao temples in Malaysia as well. Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, December 2019.

Stressing the Zhenkongjiao's support of secular charity was neither new nor unique and remains a legitimizing strategy within the toolkit of Chinese religious institutions (Weller et al. 2018; Yang 2020). Tan Chee-Beng (2012, 77) had pointed out how Teochew Benevolence Halls were dually represented by their religious and charitable activities, where supporters who "wish(ed) to present a cosmopolitan, non-superstitious image . . . emphasize(d) the charity component" of the Benevolence Halls' activities. The same went for the Dejiao: as Formoso (2010) notes, the Thye Hua Kwan Foundation latched itself onto the discourse of "Asian values" to advocate a brand of religious philanthropy in line with statist visions.

However, some paper blueprints did not manifest in practice. The case of Singapore testifies to a lack of success in the Zhenkongjiao's leadership at transiting away from opium rehabilitation to other aspects of socially acceptable charity from the 1960s to 2000s. Recall that the Zhenkongjiao, in 1976, had couched itself along the lines of resistance against the encroachment of (stereotyped) Western decadence and recreational drug users (see Kong 2006). Yet, despite attempts at linking its activities with the ongoing pushback against "yellow culture," little success was observed.

We can infer why this attempted intertwining of interests between the post-independent state and the Zhenkongjiao did not bear fruit in the 1970s and beyond. Firstly, the rehabilitative regimes endorsed by the Zhenkongjiao may have been seen as incognizant of a sociopolitical culture that prided modernity and scientific advancement. This coincided with a shift in religious outlook, where younger and more educated Singaporeans turned away from "superstitious" rituals in favor of ethically practical and philosophically rigorous religious traditions (Tong 2007). In this regard, the Zhenkongjiao's ritualistic focus appears to have worked against its claims to modernity. For example, despite aligning itself with anti-drug campaigns, tea, exercise, and meditative regimes were promoted without adequate and convincing contextualization (Xu 1976, 12–15).

In other aspects, the Zhenkongjiao's lack of success seems to have more to do with efficient statist bodies that pushed the Zhenkongjiao's attempt to build bridges into irrelevance, rather than the latter's want of creativity and agency. With a zero-tolerance approach adopted toward drug abusers by drug rehabilitation centers and the police force (Ng 2019–20), the Zhenkongjiao's attempt at transiting toward drug rehabilitation programs was outperformed by the post-independence state and its associated agencies. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, at least three members of the Singapore parliament commended the Zhenkongjiao's effort in the rehabilitation of drug addicts, which suggested that the state was cognizant of the Zhenkongjiao's attempt at realigning itself with incumbent social concerns (*Nanyang Shangbao* 1979, 1981; Xingzhou Ribao 1981). However, there was no discussion about how the Zhenkongjiao's initiatives could expand with tangible state-sanctioned support, where both national and societal actors could coordinate their policies rather than pursuing a common goal in parallel streams. This silence was instructive, for it seems that beyond recognizing the existence of these activities, state actors were content to maintain the status quo, rather than offering the Zhenkongjiao's drug rehabilitation efforts greater momentum by integrating them into nationwide antinarcotic campaigns.

Another aspect under-addressed by the present scholarship was the challenge presented to the Zhenkongjiao by better organized and reformed Chinese religious denominations, where lines between overlapping beliefs were now drawn between so-called "pure" and "syncretic" traditions. The Zhenkongjiao's repertoire of syncretistic scriptures was thus scrutinized by reformers, who sought to purge Chinese religion of its ritualistic and "superstitious" dimensions. Given the constraints of space, this section discusses the challenge presented by reformist Buddhism in Singapore (Chia 2016) and, to a smaller extent, Malaysia (Tan 2020). Buddhists who participated in this reformatory wave not only championed "canonical fundamentalism" (Chia 2016, 145) but advocated for a decoupling from un-Buddhistic practices as well. The Zhenkongjiao, with its allowance for meat offerings, animal sacrifice, and recitation of Buddhist sutras embedded in the Four Books in Five Volumes, presented an affront to stauncher Buddhists in post-1970s Singapore and Malaysia.[9] To be sure, interreligious conflict over the Zhenkongjiao's dietary habits was not new: Liao not only refused to resume his vegetarian diet, despite the urging of his former colleagues from the Great Vehicle Teachings, but proceeded to "recite from the Diamond Sutra" with "a mouthful of chicken meat" (Wen 2014 [1935], 12). Likewise, the Zhenkongjiao's hagiographies documented the persistence of such disagreements vis-à-vis other Buddhists and sectarians, who criticized the Zhenkongjiao's affiliates for "reciting scriptures without keeping a vegetarian diet" (Wen 2014 [1935], 34–35).

Suffice to say, the Zhenkongjiao's acceptance of meat eating and promotion of animal sacrifice contradicts a longstanding Chinese mentalité that associated compassion for animals with religious cultivation (see, among others, Goossaert 2018). From the 1970s onward, modernized institutional religions that presented a more attractive religious cosmology and ethical codes (including vegetarianism), such as reformist Buddhism, managed to grow at the Zhenkongjiao's expense. A master who was once attached to the Tianling Zong Daotang admitted to me that newcomers tend to "suffer from a lack of confidence" after they got wind about the centrality of animal sacrifice.[10] Till today, the contradiction between the Zhenkongjiao and the Buddhist injunction against meat eating remains unresolved. A ritual specialist attached to a Zhenkongjiao chanting troupe told me about his verbal scuffles with Buddhist monks, who admonished him for eating meat despite reciting Amitabha Buddha's name.[11] Interestingly, some of the Zhenkongjiao's leadership considered abandoning their sectarian affiliation for Buddhism as well. After an administrator of a Zhenkongjiao temple was caught red-handed with a portrait of three Buddhas while playing taped Buddhist sutras in the temple he managed, he was criticized as "arrogant," "ignorant," and "uneducated" (Lin 1998, 10–11). Unlike the Great Way of Former Heaven's vegetarian halls, which could undergo Buddhicization in Malaysia and Singapore (Show 2020, 239–48), the Zhenkongjiao maintained its hybridized stance toward the Three Teachings. Even though the Zhenkongjiao did uphold some Confucian and Daoist tenets (Ngoi 2016), integration into these postcolonial denominations remains difficult. Till today, the Zhenkongjiao in Malaysia and Singapore remains very much a religious category of its own.

Finally, the Zhenkongjiao's shrinking membership was also reflective of the ill-institutionalization of charismatic authority by the Zhenkongjiao's first few batches of masters in Singapore and Malaysia (most of whom had passed away as of the early 1970s). The circumstances surrounding the breakdown of this web of traveling charismatic leaders are beyond the scope of this article and the subject of another ongoing study.[12] According to a still-practicing *xiansheng* (mister; the term is gender-neutral in the Zhenkongjiao's context), when her predecessor had passed away, devotees of old would refrain from returning after they noticed the absence of the previous mister.[13] In retrospect, the drifting away of devotees who ordered themselves around a singular master was unsurprising, given that vertically organized religious affiliations were dominated by strong master-follower relations (ter Haar 2020).[14] Characteristics like these were a key part of the Zhenkongjiao's organization since the nineteenth century, as evinced by a consistent focus on the miracle-working capacities of the Zhenkongjiao's patriarchs and leadership.

A short-lived newsletter that circulated in Singapore and Malaysia also noted a decline in the Zhenkongjiao's ability to uphold its own tenets. For instance, a temple in Johor Bahru housed a pair of fortune tellers who were accused of operating under the Zhenkongjiao's name to swindle devotees of their money (Ling 1999, 11). Similarly, a now defunct temple in Yio Chu Kang had its leadership replaced by ruffians, whose lack of accountability eroded prior confidence in the institution (Ling 1998, 7–9). Admittedly, publications like these where opposing factions were demonized should not be taken at face value. Yet, such tracts testified to the lack of a centralized authority—the Federations in Singapore and Malaysia notwithstanding—that was able to bring its influence to bear, a phase that dovetailed inconveniently with the deaths of a preceding batch of miracle-working leaders.

Historical and incumbent appeals to "science"

I have elaborated upon the broader constraints that hampered the Zhenkongjiao's institutionalization in Southeast Asia by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Despite researching the Zhenkongjiao in the twenty-first century, Tham (2011), Chen (2016), Ouyang (2013), and Shi (2014) had repeated Luo's (1962) findings without addressing the possibility that the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs and rituals could have been repackaged within novel ideologies. Existing research thus essentialized the Zhenkongjiao's practices and exegeses as timeless and unchanging, which this section challenges, through an ethnographic investigation of how "science" was deployed in the Zhenkongjiao's post-2000s exegeses.

The rest of this article discusses an ongoing attempt at scientizing the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs and rituals through in-person proselytization and freely distributed publications.[15] By "scientization," I am referring to the "processes by which adherents of religions align their religion with the natural sciences" (Aukland 2016, 194). My approach is shaped by Philip Clart's (2003) interrogation of the autonym "Confucian" vis-à-vis popular religion's appropriation of the term in Taiwan. Instead of engaging in a fact-checking exercise that answers the question, "To what extent are the Zhenkongjiao's doctrines and rituals scientific?," this section provides an emic perspective of how the Zhenkongjiao's promoters engaged with "science" on their own terms (Clart 2003, 36).[16]

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the Zhenkongjiao's publications presented a hybridized image, namely one that championed once-foreign notions about what a Protestant-inspired "religion" should be (Goossaert 2008). Statements of the Zhenkongjiao's position as a "religion" that was "newly invented" in contrast to "superstitions" reflected an institution anxious to protect itself from a "modern Chinese iconoclasm" (Luo and Ling 2014 [1916]; Yang 2011, 15).

Notwithstanding the Zhenkongjiao's apologetic attempt at claiming cognizance with modernity, a closer look at its publications reveals an ambiguous relation with "science," a concept intertwined with an ontologically tenuous modernity by advocates of the May Fourth Movement (Uberoi 1987). In a manual titled *Wuwei Jingzuo Fa* (Methods of Sitting in Non-Active Meditation), the authors contrasted their guidance against "superstition," which included those who "consulted spirit mediums, (and) spoke of gods and ghosts" (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 24). However, even though *kexue* (science) was foregrounded (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 10–11), the concept was not wholeheartedly embraced:

> Chinese medicine in our country has referred to qi [life force] very often, but this concept has been ridiculed by Western doctors as unnatural. . . . In today's age of science, once ancient philosophical terms are mentioned, they are simply mocked as nonsense. . . . Today, as the authors wish to discuss the actual meaning of the term, if we simply abandon the terminology of old and use modern day terms, we

> fear that we would be missing the forest for the trees and ignoring the knowledge of our forebears.[17]

The rest of this quotation continued with a discussion about how the human body belonged to a metaphysical universe that included, among all else, the elements of fire and water (see Schipper 1993, 62). Nevertheless, the quotation is revealing, because the authors argued against a sociocultural environment dominated by scientism in the twentieth century (Shen 2016). Another section—which grew from a list of problems associated with the prescription of medicine in a "scientifically prosperous era"—concluded that an already-established cure to illnesses was found in the manual's prescribed instructions (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 24–26). Scientism and an overzealous faith in medicine were thus countered as inadequate as far as the Zhenkongjiao's therapeutic practices were concerned.

The Zhenkongjiao's hagiographies do testify to the claim that medicine was unnecessary, an argument that could hardly qualify as "scientific" to previous observers. In the *Zhenkong Jiaoshi* (History of the Zhenkongjiao), a disciple of Liao fell ill after he gathered medicinal herbs. Liao not only admonished him for doing so but implied that the disciple's illness was retribution for the latter's actions as well (Wen 2014 [1935], 19). Examples like these testified to how the Zhenkongjiao remained nested within a paradigm of health that existed outside of medical science, as the Methods of Sitting in Non-Active Meditation had made clear via its displeasure at mis-prescriptions and science's scorn toward the notion of *qi* (life force).

This ambiguous relationship with science continued into the twentieth century, where no thorough effort was made at engaging with the term. This contrasted with other early twentieth-century case studies where meaningful—albeit largely unsuccessful—attempts had been made to scientize Chinese religious beliefs (Ownby 2020; Schumann 2020). Cursory and sporadic efforts at situating the Zhenkongjiao within the discursive environment of science continued in 1959 and 1976, where terms such as "carbon dioxide," "oxygen," "physics," and "psychology" were mentioned passim without appropriate contextualization (Xie and Huang 1959; Xu 1976, 12–13). Such claims did not convincingly strengthen the Zhenkongjiao's claim that they were cognizant with modern-day scientific paradigms. In the twentieth century, the Zhenkongjiao did not manage to concertedly reconcile its concepts with those of science, besides stating and absorbing neologisms reflective of the time.

The present phase of the Zhenkongjiao's scientization only gained ground since the 2000s. It is tempting to correlate the third phase of the Zhenkongjiao's scientization with the STEM-centric (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) culture of Singapore and Malaysia. The STEM emphasis, however, had played a significant role in shaping the economic policies of Singapore and Malaysia since the 1990s. It seems unlikely, then, that the STEM-centric environment and the Zhenkongjiao's scientization project are correlated.

More convincing explanations can be found in the specific discourses that the Zhenkongjiao's proselytizers had coopted. One aspect that has been heavily capitalized upon was the rise in attention—particularly in the popular press—toward mental wellbeing and stress associated with urban living and a sedentary lifestyle. The term *xinwu gua ai* (no obstructions in your mind-heart) described a higher state of consciousness entered by those who had participated in the Zhenkongjiao's meditative regimes (Xu and Yang 2007 [1947], 16; Huang post-2013, 10).[18] However, in its most recent incarnation, the same term has been deployed prescriptively:

> TS told me that he wanted [the temple] to have a "mind" program. He cannot explain it in words, but the answer to mental problems "like stress" experienced by younger Singaporeans can be dealt with by the Zhenkongjiao. Answers can be found in *xinwu gua ai wu gua ai* [there are no obstructions in your mind-heart] in the opening of the Precious Scroll of Repaying the Void. TS said that when he was younger, he also had these problems and when he chanted from this book, he felt much better. Told me that he got to know a psychiatrist "in the Buddhist organization." He wanted this psychiatrist to write something in support of the Zhenkongjiao's ability to cure mental illnesses. TS then told me about how chanting works to stabilize the magnetic field within us. That's why people go to the temple when they are in trouble, because their "magnetic field" is being disturbed.[19]
>
> TS told me about how meditation stabilizes the magnetic field in your body to create positive energy. He commented that youngsters are not interested in the Zhenkongjiao but "all religions are the same, they teach you to stabilize your emotions." Recommended me to chant the Precious Scroll of Repaying the Void if I lost my temper because of the lines "*xinwu gua ai wu gua ai* [there are no obstructions in your mind-heart]," where it may "Only [be] one sentence but it encompasses a lot."[20]

Given his reference to subtle healing energies, mental powers, and magnetic fields, this informant's appeal to "scientificity" appears to have reflected influence by New Age beliefs (Albanese 2000). Other temples have also capitalized upon a similar logic of mind-over-matter when promoting the Zhenkongjiao's rituals to a potential base of mentally weary devotees. Flashbulb events that made international headlines—such as the Tham Luang Cave collapse in 2018—were assimilated into the Zhenkongjiao's promotional material to justify its practices (figure 4), even if the key ritual implements, such as the Four Books in Five Volumes and the ceremonial tea drunk, had not changed since the beginning of the twentieth century.

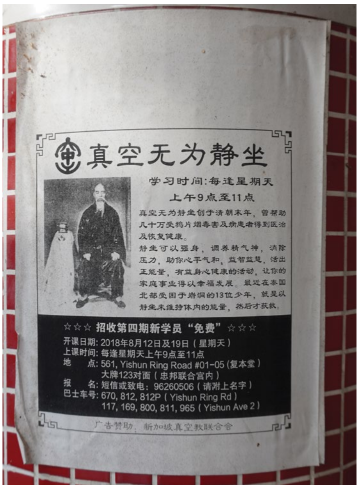


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Figure 4. A promotional notice for meditational classes hosted by a temple in Singapore. Note the poster's reference to Huang Dazhong's meditative position (see figure 2). Part of it reads, "Meditation can strengthen your physique, adjust your *jing* (essence), *qi* and *shen* (spirit), alleviate stress . . . which is not only beneficial but fruitful to your family and career. Recently, in northern Thailand, thirteen teenagers were trapped in a cave, and (it was) because of meditative techniques that they were able to preserve the physical capacities, (before) they were rescued." Photograph by Esmond Chuah Meng Soh, April 2021.

Although meditative rituals remained a part of the Zhenkongjiao's practice and had received their own fair share of scientization, the subject—at least in printed form—of demystification shifted toward the process of "making" ceremonial tea, where the Four Books in Five Volumes were recited over cups of tea on the Zhenkongjiao's altars. In a freely distributed educational booklet, the process of making "holy-tea" was described as (Huang post-2013, 36–37):

> Since 1999, there is a Japanese hydo-researcher [*sic*] and author named as Masaru Emoto who wrote on the healing power of water. . . . According to Masaru Emoto's research, the molecular structure of water will form into a beautiful cum perfect crystal shape under harmonious environment. . . . These water molecules are believed to be highly energized and could heal our bodies with harmonized vibrations. . . . many studies in the past have been conducted on the same characteristics of water that has been chanted by religious prayers. While water is a very unique element that can absorb and dissipate energy, it will be logical for it to synchronize with faithful prayers that can be treated as "Holy water."
>
> In our religious practice, Grandmaster ZhenKong [Liao Diping] initiated the tea-drinking ceremony after every prayer session since he began preaching. . . . Using his supreme wisdom, Grandmaster ZhenKong fully comprehended the significance of water properties that aligned to his objective for healing ailments. Therefore, he used holy-tea as a miraculous antidote to detoxify, purify, and cure many opium addicts and the sicknesses without medication. . . . Chanting this Holy Text carries highly energized power that can dissipate evils, remove obstacles, rectify negativity, and develop positive energies. It is this miraculous effect that we believe the prowess of DAO has injected into the tea, in curing umpteen sicknesses for more than last 100 years.

Similarities between the discussion of beneficial vibrations in this passage and earlier references to healing energies associated with New Age thought can be discerned. Likewise, soundbites in this booklet mirrored its 1959 counterpart, where terms such as "energized," "molecules," and "research" were referenced in-text. Yet there are key differences between what the authors chose to demystify in 1959 and 1976 as compared to today. Before the 2000s, claims about the benefits of tea drinking merely stressed the substance's inherent physiological benefits, such as promoting digestion and tea's detoxifying properties (Xie and Huang 1959, 9; Xu 1976, 15). However, since the 2000s, the discursive focus pivoted toward the ritualistic performance that tea had to undergo before it could be endowed with curative effects. Mounting professional and public debate over the existence and worth of water memory in the twenty-first century, we can suspect, provided the catalyst for reinterpretation (Enserink 2014; Vithoulkas 2017).

To be sure, the Zhenkongjiao was not the first to realign itself according to the logics of healing water. Dominik M. Müller (2018), for example, noted how the healing water hypothesis scaffolded research of Zamzam water's supernatural properties in Brunei Darussalam's brand of bureaucratized Islam. The notion of "bureaucracy"—in contrast to the spontaneity of charisma—as Müller described can explain why the Zhenkongjiao chose to structure its scientization along the healing water hypothesis. Broadly, the healing water hypothesis provides a rhetorical conduit that contextualized Liao Diping's rehabilitation of opium addicts alongside the continued relevance of the tea drinking ritual today. Practitioners were not only assured of the tea's curative effects but the tried-and-tested historicity of the ritual through analogical reasoning as well. As Liao had injected his hostility toward opium smoking into the tea that was imbibed by his patients, practitioners could channel their healing aspirations through the same process today.

Moreover, as noted previously, the Zhenkongjiao's initial success in Southeast Asia was intertwined with the thaumaturgy of its initial batches of masters and misters. Ceremonial tea, in both hagiographical and present-day retellings, was an indispensable adjutant to successful cures and rehabilitations (Wen 2014 [1935], 55–56; Eastley 1956; Huang 2016, 72). Yet, these masters existed as an afterthought that harked back to a mythologized past that contrasts with the Zhenkongjiao's struggle to maintain its relevance today. Against this context of fleeting charisma, the present-day pivot toward water memory could be contextualized as a renewed attempt at institutionalizing—while still paying homage to—the legacy of leaders who are no longer alive.

With water memory providing the point of departure, the efficacy of ceremonial tea was simultaneously decoupled from the Zhenkongjiao masters' personal powers and reinvested within scientific-sounding language that provided a "powerful vocabulary of legitimation" (Müller 2018, 174). In this reinterpretation, the Zhenkongjiao's masters of old merely abided by a process that was consistent with universal principles, rather than parochial techniques found within themselves. No longer was a specific actor—much less substance (bottled water had sufficed in some temples)—quintessential to the ritual's success. Tea's antioxidant properties were still referenced (Huang post-2013, 37), but its importance was dwarfed by the "science" of water memory. As of the 2000s, it was the ritual itself and the effects of water memory that guaranteed the curative effects of the liquid. Water memory thus simultaneously served to demystify and relegitimize a ritual that was associated with "superstition" by unconvinced observers while justifying its continued practice.

The discussion here is relevant not only to Singapore but Malaysia as well, where the same books have been endorsed by (and possibly distributed under the auspices of) the Zhenkongjiao's other regional centers (Huang 2016, 9–12). Similarly, after a conference about the Zhenkongjiao's future action plans in Hat Yai, Thailand, in 2012, a mug emblazoned with the *Kongzhong tu* (Diagram of the Central Emptiness) was sold to those who wanted to make holy tea at home according to the aforementioned logics (Huang post-2013, 33–34).

The present-day scientization of the Zhenkongjiao's rituals and activities seems to have less in common with the alternative scientific paradigms associated with various Qigong masters than it does with Hindutva historicism. Unlike Li Hongzhi (born 1951) of the Falun Gong (Farley 2010), none of the Zhenkongjiao's promoters had attempted to construct a parallel (and rivaling) paradigm to justify their claims to "scientificity." In the introductory text *Kongdao Liuxing: Ruwei* (A Journey into the Void: A Comprehensive Explanation) (Huang 2016, 46–47), Liao Diping's thought was connected to the historical Buddha (fifth to fourth centuries BCE) and the scientific notions of Albert Einstein (1879–1955):

> In Buddhism, the Buddha had noted that the myriad of ways are born from the mind, and everything is the product of the mind. All living beings and their fates are all the products of one's self cultivation, and [thus] all decisions lie in one's hands, and have nothing to do with a Creator [god]. . . . Einstein made a similar point before, [where] the religious philosophy that is closest to science is Buddhism. My view as an author is that Einstein had yet to know our old Patriarch's [Liao's] meditative insight and knowledge of the "journey into the void," and what a regret it was [to Einstein?]! Otherwise, this great and world-renowned scientist would have looked at our Patriarch Liao very differently! . . . What Einstein did not know was that even before he had conceived of the theory of relativity, our patriarch [Liao] had already understood this theory in depth! It was only at that time when nobody can use the terminology of science to explain the mysteries of *Chan* [Zen] in a manner suitable for exposition.[21]

A key difference between this text and its twentieth-century predecessors lay in how the authors conceptualized the Zhenkongjiao's relationship with science. The Methods of Sitting in Non-Active Meditation, although acknowledging the contributions of science, frowned upon the latter's derision of life force, despite the concept's centrality in the Zhenkongjiao. Similarly, from the 1950s till 1970s, although findings from science were referenced to validate the efficacy of the Zhenkongjiao's rituals, both schools of thought lived within—but coexisted as—different paradigms. In contrast, this post-2000s quotation insists that the Zhenkongjiao was "science," as evinced by the juxtaposition of Liao's thought with Einstein's. Reinterpretations like this mirrored attempts at historicizing science through Hindutva lenses, where arguments were made for a past permeated with modern-day technology and knowledge (Kapila 2010; Arnold 2000, 169–85). Similar claims can be detected in this case, where Huang stressed that the gulf that separated Liao Diping from the Buddha and Einstein was not related to a difference in intellect but the incommensurability of historical contexts.

Another pertinent element that underpinned the Zhenkongjiao's newest wave of scientization lay in a persistent—but inhomogeneous—attempt at representing the Zhenkongjiao's meditative rituals and exercises as a panacea to the lifestyles of people (see similarities with Rao 2002, 7–8):

> ZT told me about how senior citizens do not find it meaningful to bend or kneel in temples, because they claim that they are old. She complained that [they should], since "you [they] do not come daily to kneel and worship, but only when they happen to come to the temple." She then told me about how in this time and age people take everything for granted and do not exercise. She told me about how "blood does not circulate as often in our bodies with the advent of washing machines, and how the Patriarch [Liao Diping] had foreseen this." I asked her to clarify this point: does she mean that Liao Diping had predicted we will have washing machines and how we can use the method of worship for better health? She corrected herself: "This is based on what I know, and I am merely explaining it to you."[22]

Likewise, environmentalism and the "law of attraction"—again reflective of how New Age beliefs provided a source of inspiration (Smythe 2007)—also gained a foothold in the Zhenkongjiao's repackaging of its ethical and belief systems:

> TM explained to me about how the Zhenkongjiao "is a modern religion, which the Patriarch [Liao] had [already comprehended] a century ago. Why do devotees of the Zhenkongjiao abstain from burning joss paper? It's because we are environmentally friendly. We sit in meditation and drink tea, [in contrast] with people living hectic and modern lives, where they are easily agitated [before] they hit and scold others." Told me that the Zhenkongjiao is a religion that is ethically rigorous with the *wugui sikao* [Five Dedications and Four Tests]. It is a religion that allows you to "communicate with the universe," and sitting in meditation serves this purpose. He told me that an Australian author who had already discovered a means of communicating with the universe wrote *The Secret*. He admitted to me that he had not read the book in its entirety, but he still found it comparable to the Zhenkongjiao's teachings.[23]

Despite the specific context (urban and sedentary Singapore) within which both informants had actively couched their exegeses, both sidelined the historical genealogy of the Zhenkongjiao's origin from the Great Vehicle Teachings. Breathing and meditational exercises were a key component of the Chinese sectarian experience since the late Ming and Qing dynasties (Chiu 2007; Zhuang 2002, 491–512), although they may be conceptualized along soteriological and eschatological lines in addition to or in contrast with practical health benefits.

I end by shedding light on how animal sacrifice was quietly retired from public prominence by the 2000s. Throughout the twentieth century, the Zhenkongjiao appealed to karmic metaphysics to justify the ritual's continued relevance (Yun 1924–25, unpaginated; Xie and Huang 1959, 3–6). How did this turn out in the post-2000s? Although organizations in Singapore still request their Malaysian counterparts to perform the ritual for them in proxy,[24] the ritual's significance was downplayed to a newer generation of potential converts (Huang post-2013, 20–21):

> Back then, sacrificing of animals was common practice in China among all cultural festivals. Grandmaster [Liao] preached such methodology to suit the nation's culture as well as providing food to the poor. In fact, there is no preaching of killing animals in all the 4 major Holy Texts of our sect. Therefore, *fanghua* [animal sacrifice] ritual is not a compulsory practice and should NOT be debated upon! . . . In modern society, killing of animals are restricted to authority license [*sic*] and appointed venue. . . . However, the Baokong holy text [one of the Four Books in Five Volumes] says, "The Buddhas are always efficient in umpteen manifestations". This reminds us to be versatile and select alternative [*sic*] when we are restricted to *fanghua* activities!

Reconceptualizing animal sacrifice as optional rather than a central part of the Zhenkongjiao's beliefs could thus be understood as a pragmatic attempt at resituating the sectarian religion within a Chinese religious discourse that favored compassion toward animals. As Huang himself may have noticed, and as his predecessors may have realized since 1959, it was difficult to convincingly reconcile the karmic metaphysics of animal sacrifice with the scientized discourse that the Zhenkongjiao embraced as of the early 2000s and beyond.

Conclusion

This article served to problematize linear rise-and-fall narratives regarding the history, beliefs, and practices of the Zhenkongjiao in Singapore and Malaysia from the twentieth century till today. Global forces and an abrupt turn in societal attitudes toward opium smoking opened a window of opportunity for the Zhenkongjiao to enter Southeast Asia, where it eventually entered a marriage of convenience with the then-British government in Singapore and Malaysia. From this article, it is clear that even though the Zhenkongjiao originally rose to prominence as a result of its opium-curing credo, the leadership of the movement in Singapore and Malaysia had recognized the unsustainability of its opium-curing enterprise and sought to divest it into other concerns of the day. However, for the case of Singapore, the transition toward these secular causes was largely unsuccessful as a result of rapidly changing and larger forces beyond the Zhenkongjiao's control. Unlike other more successful instances of religious charity and philanthropy in Singapore, the Zhenkongjiao lost its initial edge to other competitors, such as the Thye Hua Kwan Foundation and Buddhist Free Clinics (Formoso 2010; Kuah-Pearce 2009, 182–86).

Nevertheless, my ethnographic documentation of the contemporaneous realigning of the Zhenkongjiao's activities, rituals, and beliefs within the mold of "science" testifies to the resilience and continued agency exercised by the Zhenkongjiao's promoters. As the scientization of the Zhenkongjiao's rituals and beliefs has shown, sectarian religions were not necessarily trapped by their obligation to the past. Discourses, knowledge, and re-representations from early twentieth-century China can be creatively redeployed to navigate the present in contemporary Southeast Asia.

Interestingly, and despite (in spite of?) the absence of a charismatic leader, the Zhenkongjiao's reinvention along "scientific" lines since the 2000s appears to have taken root from within already institutionalized actors and mediums, such as the misters of various temples and freely distributed educational materials. While "science" and "modernity" as legitimizing concepts were claimed and interpreted differently, they were consistently referenced by the various members of the Zhenkongjiao, again hinting at how this pursuit of "scientificity" developed independently instead of being conditioned by a centralized figure or authority. This article provides a glimpse of what sectarian movements can do to innovate in the present, but it remains to be seen if the Zhenkongjiao's re-representation (and truncation) of its own discourses within "scientific" paradigms will bear fruit in the days to come. Only time will tell.

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NOTES

1. This article is dedicated to the memory of two scholars who specialized in the history of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia: Xu Yunqiao (1905–81) and Luo Xianglin (1906–78). The author would like to thank the *Asian Ethnology* editors and anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. This article is drawn from my Master's thesis "Sages, Smokers, and Sojourners: Revisiting the Religion of the Void (19th Century–Today)," whose writing was supported by the NTU Research Scholarship. I am grateful to my supervisor, Professor Koh Keng We, for his encouragement and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I would also like to thank Professors Park Hyung Wook and Lisa Onaga for introducing me to the history of science and technology, as well as Professor Els Van Dongen, who introduced me to the history of the overseas Chinese and the intellectual history of modern China. My fieldwork in Singapore and Malaysia received the gracious hosting of the Benyuanshan and Fubentang temples in Singapore. Among everyone else, I would like to thank Francis Lim, Linda Leow, Huang Chunsheng, Leow Jingwen, Michael, Toh Shou'de, Huang Jiawei, Ng Aik Siang, Richard Lee, Lin Jinchun, Uncle Minghua, and the anonymized informants. Similarly, I would like to thank Uncle Liu Kim Beng and Sister Chen Yuezhu for showing me around the Tianling Zong Daotang and Tiannantan Jieyanshe, respectively. Nicholas Lua and Richelle Chia also commented on earlier drafts of this article. All Chinese characters are transliterated according to the *hanyu pinyin* convention, except for verbatim quotations. Xu Yunqiao's article was translated into English in the same issue of the *Journal of the South Seas Society* by Chiang Liu, who titled his translated and eponymous work as "The Religion of the Void." Here, I have preserved the English translation of the Zhenkongjiao's name by Liu, but I will refer to the original Chinese piece by Xu in the rest of this article.

2. The characterization of religious groupings like the Zhenkongjiao remains disputed. Chinese scholars have continued to adopt terms that include, but are not limited to, "salvationist religions" and "secret religions." As Broy (2015) has noted, these labels remain problematic, and he proposed the use of "sectarian religion" instead. Since this has been problematized elsewhere, I will adopt Broy's characterization throughout this article in favor of consistency.

3. According to Chen (2016, 330–37) there are still 125 functioning Zhenkongjiao temples in Malaysia. In Singapore, seven temples are open for public worship. Many of the Zhenkongjiao's leadership in Singapore featured in more than one temple. For example, the facilitators of the Benyuan Xulingshan Temple (Bukit Batok) were also involved in the running of the Benyuanshan Temple (Pasir Panjang) in between religious festivals, whereas another informant who helped out in the Zhenkongjiao Fubentang (Yishun) concurrently held a leadership role in the Xianchuan Zong Daotang (Tampines).

4. According to ter Haar's typology (2020, 21), vertically connected networks were characterized by strong master-disciple relations and did not include "separate (impersonal) institutions." People belonging to horizontally organized groups, in contrast, were characterized by a higher

degree of homogeneity in their belief and rituals, since they met on a consistent basis and "form(ed) integrated local groups" (ter Haar 2020, 19).

5. This reference is unpaginated. The chapters are provided to aid bibliographic consultation.

6. This was mentioned in passing by Shi (2014, 75), but without any substantiation.

7. Shi and Ouyang (2012, 95) suggested that the opium curing techniques did not work on recreational drug abusers. This hypothesis lacks substantiation and is contradicted by the Zhenkongjiao's attempt at rebranding itself as a part of the post-1970s anti-drug campaigns.

8. There are no clearly stated reasons offered for this area of specialization, although two possibilities exist. Firstly, because the Zhenkongjiao possessed a rhetorical injunction against the use of medicine, it did not develop its own professionalized medical services, unlike other religious charities such as the Singapore Buddhist Free Clinic (see Kuah-Pearce 2009) and the Thye Hua Kwan Foundation. The second reason is historical. Newspaper articles noted that many Zhenkongjiao temples once provided lodging for the aged who were left without dependents, hence justifying the Zhenkongjiao's continued investment in this aspect of secular charity (*Nanyang Shangbao* 1981).

9. This was mentioned in passing by Shi and Ouyang (2012, 95; see also Shi 2014, 70) but without any substantiation.

10. Interview with SG, ex-master attached to Changi Tianling Zong Daotang in Bedok, Singapore, January 14, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own. To protect the identity of my informants, pseudonyms will be used throughout this article.

11. Interview with HM, ritual specialist attached to a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, December 25, 2018. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own.

12. This historical question will be addressed in my upcoming dissertation.

13. Interview with ZT, resident mister of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, March 13, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own. The title of "mister" is elusive to characterization. On the one hand, the term describes a Zhenkongjiao temple's resident ritual specialist. On the other hand, some misters enjoyed renown as the founder of multiple temples, whereas the terms "mister" and "master" were used interchangeably elsewhere. As such, the translation provided in this article remains an arbitrary one.

14. Shi and Ouyang (2012, 94–95) argued that the Zhenkongjiao's decline in contemporary Singapore can be traced to the first batch of masters, who may have ignored the Zhenkongjiao's philosophical tenets in favor of rehabilitating opium addicts and curing illnesses. This hypothesis is unconvincing, for it presupposes a divide between the Zhenkongjiao's "high" philosophy and "low" pragmatic rituals. This argument also sidelines the sociology of vertically ordered sectarian religions (ter Haar 2020), which organized themselves around the patronage of miracle-making personalities. Convincing substantiation on both authors' part is also lacking.

15. The initiative discussed in this section is still ongoing since the 2000s, and not every part of the Zhenkongjiao's opus has been scientized. For example, the Zhenkongjiao's cosmology was still explained within the language of its 1950s counterparts (Huang 2016, 15–42). The absence

of scientized abstract ideas (such as the eponym "Emptiness") may reflect the difficulty of realigning such concepts with contemporary concerns. The Zhenkongjiao's intellectual history will be addressed in detail in my upcoming dissertation.

16. Some of the sources consulted for this article may have referred to various claims as "science," even though other scholars and professional bodies have labeled these ideas as "pseudoscience." Given the pejorative nature of the latter autonym, I will not be adopting the term in this article out of respect for my informants' beliefs.

17. This quotation was originally in Chinese. The translation presented here is my own.

18. This stanza, although attributed to Liao's Precious Scroll of Repaying the Void, has its roots in the Buddhist Heart Sutra (seventh-century CE onward). The reference to this Mahayana Buddhist text is not surprising, since the Zhenkongjiao's opus was inspired by the Five Books in Six Volumes of the Great Vehicle Teachings (which also included a portion of the Heart Sutra).

19. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with TS, committee member of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, January 12, 2020.

20. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with TS, committee member of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, July 26, 2019.

21. This quotation was originally in Chinese. The translation presented here is my own.

22. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with ZT, resident mister of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, March 13, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own.

23. This quote is from my fieldnotes after I had undertaken an interview with TM, committee member of a Zhenkongjiao temple in Singapore, March 15, 2020. This interview was performed in Mandarin. The translation presented here is my own. The Five Dedications and Four Tests are precepts that adherents of the Zhenkongjiao are expected to pledge obedience to.

24. I am currently digitizing a collection of handwritten records regarding monetary contributions to animal sacrifice rituals from the 1970s to the early 2000s in Singapore, which shows how the practice is still upheld, even if the activity is physically performed elsewhere (see Tham 2011).

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From the Margins to Demigod

The Establishment of the Kinnar Akhara in India

This article introduces the Kinnar Akhara, a recently established transgender religious organization that stems from the *hijṛā* tradition, a religiously syncretic subculture of transgender individuals in India. The Kinnar Akhara was established in 2015 by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a transgender activist and at the time a *hijṛā* leader, together with other *hijṛā*s. Their purpose was to legitimize the presence of *hijṛā*s (now labeled *kinnar*s) and that of transgender people among the Indian population. To obtain this, they evoked a past Hindu religious identity, challenging the male-dominated and change-resistant patriarchal world of the *akhāṛā*s, while also questioning the Islamic legacy of the *hijṛā* traditions. The article analyzes the Kinnar Akhara as a form of selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition and as a form of religious feminism. It further highlights the complexity of this religious movement, which harnesses local and global dynamics and challenges cultural and social structures.

Keywords: LGBT+—Sanskritization—religious feminism—*hijṛā*—Kinnar—*akhāṛā*

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*Hijṛā*s form an ancient religious subculture of trans-women that combines Hindu and Islamic features. Today they are in economic and social hardship, to such an extent that the word *hijṛā* has become a derogatory term in contemporary India. In 2015 Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a *hijṛā* leader and transgender activist, decided together with other leaders to establish the Kinnar Akhara (*akhāṛā*). The Kinnar Akhara aims to unify groups of *hijṛā*s (now labeled *kinnar*s) who are reclaiming their Hindu religious identity and dignity, in order to legitimize their presence and that of transgender people among the Indian population. To this end, they relate themselves to mythological celestial beings (*kinnar*s) and refer to Hindu scriptures, aligning themselves with orthodox and heterodox Hindu traditions and rituals. These new stands challenge the male-dominated and change-resistant patriarchal world of the *akhāṛā*s but also question the Islamic legacy of the *hijṛā* traditions.

By means of textual, ethnographic, and online sources, this article describes the religious identity construction of the Kinnar Akhara using two analytical perspectives: that of selective Sanskritization and that of religious feminism. Considering Sanskritization as the process whereby groups modify their beliefs, rituals, and practices in order to be closer to those who are dominant in the religious landscape (Srinivas 1966, 6), the Kinnar Akhara identity reshaping can be investigated as a form of selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* traditions, which involves not only a phenomenon of emulation but may have sociopolitical dimensions (Jaoul 2011). Since Kinnar Akhara identity-shaping involves the exclusion of Islamic features, it is important to consider whether it has aligned itself with the anti-Muslim turn taken by the current BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government to obtain recognition and support (Chacko 2018). Some claims released by *kinnar* leaders have already mobilized the lay transgender communities. However, this article demonstrates that apart from this possible political component, the Kinnar Akhara is creating a challenge to the Indian patriarchal world of the *akhāṛā*s; it is vocal in its strong condemnation of Indian patriarchal society and in support of gender equality and social justice. In practice, these themes occupy the *akhāṛā*'s attention more than communalist ones. Therefore, the article suggests that the Kinnar Akhara may be also seen as a form of what Emma Tomalin calls "religious feminism," defined as "re-interpretations of religious systems that are consistent with the 'core' values of the tradition as well as various types of feminist thinking" (2006, 387). In effect, the Kinnar Akhara leaders use different strategies, moving between Western feminist discourses as activists, as well as moving between the different religious systems of the *hijrā*s and of the *akhāṛā*s, aiming their reinterpretations and adjustments to conquer social space and recognition. The consequences, however, have as yet to be verified.

This article initially engages with a presentation of the *hijṛā* tradition and relates its later development to the creation of the Kinnar Akhara. The use of the word "*kinnar*" will be contextualized and the tradition of the male *akhāṛā*s presented. After a description of the dynamics developed between the male *akhāṛā*s and the Kinnar Akhara in 2019, this article provides examples of *kinnar*s' selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition and questions its "saffronization." In the end it shows the *akhāṛā*'s feminist standpoint. Since this article discusses preliminary results of a wider research project, it does not present fully developed conclusions; rather, it attempts to draw attention to a contemporary process of religious identity-making, which reveals power dynamics that concern the religious, social, and political spheres.

The *hijṛā* traditions: Present and historical developments

The Urdu term *hijṛā*[1] refers today to religiously syncretic communities, often marginalized and stigmatized, constituted by "feminine-identified persons who pursue distinct professions such as ritualized blessing during weddings and childbirth . . . typically dress in women's clothes and may undergo penectomy and castration (orchiectomy) but also commonly designate themselves as distinct from men and women" (Dutta and Roy 2014, 323).[2] These communities may have regional features (for example, see Reddy 2005; Mal and Mundu 2018) but may also have transnational aspects, as they are also present in Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (see Hossain and Nanda 2020). In general, the term *hijṛā* collects an "extraordinary blending of the biological body, gendered identity and sexuality in complex permutations and combinations within a specific social and cultural milieu" (Mal and Mundu 2018, 622, referring to Goel 2016).[3]

Hijṛā traditions likely stemmed from or benefited from the acknowledgment of "third nature" individuals present in *dharmaśāstrik* literature, as well as from stories and myths about same-sex procreation and androgynous gods or heroes who turn into eunuchs in the Hindu epics and early Vedic and Puranic literatures.[4] They also draw their "cultural heritage from the *Khawjasara* of [the] Mughal era," eunuchs employed by Mughal rulers as caretakers of their harems (Mal and Mundu 2018, 622). However, as highlighted by Adnan Hossain and Serena Nanda, although Mughal eunuchs had some similarities with *hijṛā*s—and *hijṛā*s today recall the power and role of eunuchs, underscoring their special status in the past—in reality, eunuchs were not invested with religious or ritual powers, which derived instead from *hijṛā*s' connection with Hindu traditions and deities (2020, 40). For their religious role, *hijṛā*s received patronage from Muslim and Hindu rulers and therefore held a religious place in Indian society and even a certain prestige.

From the early nineteenth century, as the British gradually took over, these rights were greatly reduced; *hijṛā*s underwent strong repression and were criminalized under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871, a law that was revoked in 1952 (Dutta 2012, 828). It is during the British period that the word *hijṛā* became an umbrella term under which to gather different regional names, such as *khojā*, *pavaya*, *khasua*, and *mukhannas*,[5] notwithstanding their diversities. Through the prevention of emasculation,[6] the CTA aimed in the long term to eliminate the practices of eunuchs *tout court*, and through the prohibition of performance and transvestism it also aimed to remove *hijṛā* "as a visible socio-cultural category and gender identity" in the short term (Hinchy 2014, 279).

Despite these colonial attempts, *hijṛā*s were able to find a way to elude controls and keep their tradition alive, articulating "an alternative socio-cultural and gender identity through the everyday re-telling of their communal mythology, derived from Hindu myths of androgynes and emasculates" (ibid., 284, 286), an approach that has been used by present *kinnar*s as well. Although in the British period the "community was forced into the urban underworld of low caste workers, prostitutes and beggars" (Dutta 2012, 828), it was able to maintain its tradition in the private sphere, making *hijṛā*s' households a crucial space for their resistance to colonial projects (Hinchy 2014, 287).

Today, *hijṛā* households are spread all over India and are organized around seven *gharāṇā* (literally "houses" or "clans").[7] A *hijṛā* household is structured as a commune "generally composed of individuals from a diverse range of religious, caste, class, ethnic, linguistic, gender and sex backgrounds" (Roy 2015, 12). Each member contributes with her earnings to the management of the place, which therefore works as a residential and economic unit as well as a place for protection (Nanda 1990, 30). As the work of Jeffrey Roy in Mumbai has shown, *gharāṇā*s are the nucleus of all social activities and "identity making processes," since each may be conventionally associated with certain occupations (2015, 10).

Similar to Hindu ascetic orders, *hijṛā* households rely on an internal system of laws and rules, but also upon elaborate structures that appoint "familiar" roles and relationships to different members of the household (e.g., aunt, sister, daughter, and so on), established around the figure of the guru who manages it (Hall 1995, 42). The guru is herself part of a hierarchy and under the control of *naik*s or *nāyak*s (chiefs), who meet to discuss events and decide the policy of their communities, even on a national level.[8] Like ascetic groups, inner hierarchies are not based on age but upon time of entry into the community (Nanda 1990, 43). There are then multiple divisions, ranks, roles, and rules to follow that are controlled by *hijṛā* houses' councils called *jamāt* or *pañcāyat* (Goel 2016). Although a *hijṛā* is strictly associated with her household, as part of a lineage she can move among households belonging to the same *gharāṇā* (Reddy 2005, 9).

Hijṛā communities are highly syncretic, combining Hindu and Islamic features.[9] Their heads are mostly Muslims, and although individuals from all religious backgrounds can become *hijṛā*s,[10] according to Reddy's ethnography, they first have to convert to Islam. As we will see later in the article, this is an aspect challenged by the Kinnar Akhara. This conversion would result in the adoption of some Islamic practices, such as *namāz*; pilgrimages, especially to Sufi shrines and possibly to Mecca; greeting each other with *salām 'āleikum*; and burial at death (Reddy 2005, 105). However, *hijṛā*s may also identify themselves as Hindu, and in general they follow Hindu goddesses and participate in Hindu festivals, demonstrating that their mixed approach depends on the context in which they happen to perform worship (ibid., 113). The power of their performances, nevertheless, is associated with a Hindu religious background.

While the reasons for choosing to become a *hijṛā* differ,[11] to officially enter *hijṛā* society the individual has to find a guru and get initiated. Theoretically, in order to become a "true" *hijṛā*, if the individual is not a eunuch by birth, he should undergo a ritual called *nirvāṇ*, during which the penis and testicles are removed,[12] but this ritual is not compulsory and remains an individual choice. The word *nirvāṇ* comes from a Buddhist background, indicating a state of neither suffering nor desire, in which the individual attains liberation. For *hijṛā*s, the state of *nirvāṇ* is a kind of liberation, since it marks their new birth. The penis and testicles are removed from the body with a cut, and the blood is left flowing, because it is thought that the male blood is leaving the body (see Nanda 1990, 27). It is thought that through this initiation a curse of impotence is removed, and the individual is reborn as a "she" and as a vehicle for the power of the goddess Bahucara Mata, who is constantly worshiped and invoked for protection during the emasculation ritual. It is also thought that castration bestows "fertility power." *Hijṛā*s are believed to have the power to confer fertility on others, by sacrificing their individual fertility in order to bestow universal procreative power (Reddy 2005, 97). Castration also marks the entrance into celibacy and the repression of a *hijṛā*'s sexual desire, which is transformed into sacred power. These "powers" legitimize *hijṛā*s' religious roles and other activities.

Traditionally *hijṛā*s are performers: they sing and dance on special occasions (see Roy 2015). One such occasion is the *badhāī*, the celebration of the birth of a male child or of a marriage, where they bless the child and the family, or bring fertility to the married couple (Nanda 1990, 2, 4). This practice appears in the *Mahābhārata* epic, specifically when Arjun takes part in weddings and births by singing and dancing after deciding to spend one year as a eunuch named Brihannala, in the court of King Virata. According to Alf Hiltebeitel (1980, 153), Arjun would then represent Shiva's creative power as a self-castrated god, giving *hijṛā*s an explanation and legitimation for their roles as dancers and bestowers of fertility. Another practice is the *māṅgtī* (also called *basti*), which refers to the collection of alms from shops, temples, or people sitting in trains or walking on streets (see Mal and Mundu 2018).

The power of *hijṛā*s' blessings is connected to another story that would link them to the deity Ram, the divine hero of the other main Hindu epic known as the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Before going into exile, he told the people of Ayodhya, male and female, to go back to their houses. However, since he did not include those who were neither man nor woman, they remained there waiting for him. When he came back, after twelve years, he found them still there, and to thank them for their devotion, he bestowed on them the power that whatever they say will come true.[13] As a result of these traditions, people may fear *hijṛā*s, who announce their presence in public spaces with a special type of clapping, known as *tālī*. As Kira Hall says (1995, 188), *hijṛā*s have to learn how to clap after entering the community, and they are "well-known throughout northern India for their resonant, hollow-handed clap." This clap is an unambiguous marker of *hijṛā* identity in public spaces, "acknowledging their stigma and playing on it . . . to their advantage," but it is also used within the *hijṛā* community to reinforce their ideas and statements (Reddy 2005, 137). It is not unusual that, when they want to show their disappointment, *hijṛā*s clap, especially when they want to curse people. In fact, *hijṛā*s also embody an inauspicious potential that manifests itself through cursing and abusing people (Nanda 1990, 5). Because of these behaviors, especially in the main cities,[14] people are not only scared but also annoyed by *hijṛā*s. Their association with homosexual prostitution, which is often a way to mitigate economic hardship, further increases their marginalization and stigmatization.

With the growth of the LGBT[15] movement in India, a new attention has been given to *hijṛā*s, reframing them as legitimate historical figures of queerness in the nation (Saria 2021, 11), while also incorporating them into the category of "transgender." The diffusion of the transgender category and movements associated with it have created new opportunities for *hijṛā*s. The expansion of global human rights movements supported by NGOs has motivated *hijṛā*s' activism to fight for social integration, legal equality, social services, employment, educational opportunities, and so on, leading them to become an "established part of the South Asian NGO sector" (Hossain and Nanda 2020, 46). In 1994 *hijṛā*s gained the right to vote as women in the national elections; in 2005 the Indian state added in its passport application forms the E option for eunuchs, to affirm their nonbinary (male or female) status. By 2009 both *hijṛā*s and transgenders were officially listed among "others" in ballot forms. The most decisive step was on April 15, 2014, when the third gender was officially recognized.[16] *Hijṛā*s have also achieved success in political office at national and local levels, a right they won in 1977 (see Reddy 2003; Hossain 2020, 414–15).

However, despite all these "successes," downsides are also present. The use of the "transgender" category has also worked "to engender a new hierarchy in which *hijṛās* become the embodiment of an indigenous and traditional, but also backward and non-respectable subject position against the modern and modernizing transgender community, which significantly, in many cases seeks integration, not distinction from the larger society" (Hossain and Nanda 2020, 47). This has led to strong friction between *hijṛā*s and lay transgenders, the latter strongly resisting association with the former, an approach that tends to further marginalize *hijṛā*s, "pointing at their preexisting pejorative connotations" (Hossain 2020, 408). As Hossain has pointed out, *hijṛā*s' involvement as politicians and activists may damage them as subjects with ritual power and significance, therefore ending *hijṛā* subculture by incorporating it into mainstream occupations through new forms of employment (2020, 419). Furthermore, electoral victories do not necessarily represent emancipatory possibilities, considering that *hijṛā* politicians often emphasized aspects of their identity that worked to bolster majoritarian Hindu nationalist politics (Reddy 2003). Thus, they usually refrain from acknowledging any association with Islam in their public engagements, "thereby re-producing the hijra as a subculture rooted in Hindu tradition" (Hossain 2020, 415).

Creating the *Kinnar Akhara*

From this background of *hijṛā* activism and politics, the Kinnar Akhara was established to return to a supposed original and respected status, in contrast with the degradation and marginalization of these communities despite their legal recognition and political success.[17]

The aforementioned main leader of the Kinnar Akhara, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, is indeed a transgender/*hijṛā* rights activist and was the first transgender person to represent the Asia-Pacific at the United Nations in 2008. She was also one of the petitioners in the case that allowed for the recognition of the third gender in 2014. After winning the battle in court, she decided—together with other *hijṛā* leaders—to bring this battle to the general public, because any government program could only succeed with popular acceptance from the wider community. In an interview Laxmi declared the following:

> Religion is the one avenue that connects with the masses and fills the gap that activism cannot. . . . Activists in the LGBTQ community are only connected with only a certain group of people in their own community. It's an echo chamber.
>
> (*Bharat Marg* 2019)

As Laxmi told me in 2019, twenty-two *hijṛā*s/*kinnar*s met on October 19, 2015, to talk about the *akhāṛā*, and this was finally established on October 30. According to *kinnar*s, transgenders traditionally occupied a religious space in South Asia, and it was necessary to reclaim it. To do that, they presented themselves through a new *kinnar* identity and, following a policy similar to that of *hijṛā* politicians, rejected their Islamic background to claim their place among one of the most visible Hindu religious institutions, the *akhāṛā*.

Here I will describe how the choice of the word *kinnar* was the first meaningful step to construct a new identity. The word *kinnar*, used especially in Madhya Pradesh (but also in Gujarat) as a more respectful term than *hijṛā* (Loh 2014, 14), has been adopted by the Kinnar Akhara to link transgender identity to celestial beings associated with music. Present in the Vedas and Puranas, *kinnar*s are listed in the *Manusmṛti* law code, together with *sādhu*s, *yakṣa*s, and *gandharva*s, as those beings that do not reincarnate, given their divine origin. For this reason, contemporary *kinnar*s declare themselves to be demigods. Laxmi also recalls a passage in the *Rāmcaritmānas*, a sixteenth-century epic poem written in the Awadhi dialect of Hindi, in which the author Tulsidas uses the term *kinnar* to describe the third gender when he says, "*dev danuj kinnar nar śreṇi sādar majjahin sakal triveṇī*" ("deities, demons, *kinnar*s, men, women, all went to Triveni, the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers with the mythological river Sarasvati").[18]

However, if we actually scrutinize the *Manusmṛti* (1.39), *kinnar*s (literally "what man") are presented in a list that also mentions monkeys, fish, various kinds of birds, wild animals, and humans. Wendy Doniger explains the passage by saying that *kinnar*s could be a species of ape, and that in mythology they are alternatively said to be creatures with the head of a horse and body of human, or the head of a human and the body of a horse (1991, 8). In *Manusmṛti* 3.196, *kinnar*s are further mentioned as the offspring of Atri and appear together with demons, genies, ogres, snakes, and centaurs (ibid., 64). While *kinnar*s as demigod musicians are treated with special regard in these texts, in textual sources the third gender is acknowledged only in passing. In the *Manusmṛti* there are references to *klība*, a word that can refer both to homosexual and impotent men, and in the second volume of the *Suśruta Saṃhitā* (36–45) the term *śaṇḍha* identifies one of the five types of *klība*, the one who has the qualities and behavior of a woman. The erotic manual *Kāmasūtra* explicitly describes a third gender (or a third "nature" or "sexuality") as *tṛtīya prakṛti*, stressing that it manifests in the form of a woman and in the form of a man. The one in the form of a woman would imitate women's dress, chatter, grace, emotions, and so on, who "gets her sexual pleasure and erotic arousal as well as her livelihood from this, living as a courtesan."

A link between the *kinnar* demigod and the third gender is not present in textual sources, so the claim made by contemporary *kinnar*s to be demigods can be interpreted as way to recall a supposed mythological past to obtain sociopolitical empowerment, and to rehabilitate a distinct Indian/Hindu transgender identity.[19] However, as we will see in the following paragraphs, this new semi-divine identity has been received with suspicion by some activists, who interpret it as "an alibi to absorb *hijṛās* within ascendant right-wing Hindu nationalism" (Saria 2021, 4). The word *kinnar* is not the only one through which their religious identity is constructed though, since defining the group with the word *akhāṛā* has several implications as well.

Traditional *akhāṛā*s and contemporary *kinnar*s

The term *akhāṛā*, which generally means "training ground," specifies religious ascetic communities belonging to both Shaiva and Vaishnava orders. Although identified by specific names such as *gosain*s/*saṃnyāsī*s (in the case of Shaiva warriors), *fakīr*s (Sufi warriors), and *bairāgī*s/*vairāgī*s (Vaishnava warriors), these ascetics were in the past generally called *nāgā* ("naked," from Sanskrit *nagna*) because they tended to wear little or no clothing. They represented the armed sections of Hindu orders and acted as warriors as well as mercenaries. It is difficult to discern the origin of these groups or when they were properly organized. As William Pinch writes, the presence of warrior ascetics in India has a long pedigree, and it is strictly connected to the "automatic equation of asceticism with power" (2020, 157). As several studies have suggested (Lorenzen 1978; Ghurye 1964), however, the emergence of *nāgā* groups is connected to the admission of low-caste individuals, untouchables, and women into the ascetic world. Pinch has also argued that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries north Indian ecological and political shifts precipitated the selling and abandoning of children into the care of local institutions or into the families of landed magnates, leading toward forms of domestic, agricultural, and even military slavery (Pinch 2006, 81). Organizationally, the nonbiological bonds of loyalty that tied *celā*s (disciple) to their gurus would have enabled smaller bands of armed ascetics to expand over time into larger and more institutionally complex regiments and armies (ibid., 80). These regiments and their monasteries were identified as *akhāṛā*s.

Warrior ascetics became a "common feature of the religious and political topography of eighteenth-century north India" (Pinch 2020, 159), until the East India Company and then the British Raj threatened their power and activities. Wandering ascetic warriors were a problem for the British administration. Therefore, although the Company and the Raj did not hesitate to ally with powerful ascetic commanders when convenient, in general they tended to criminalize armed ascetics, while supporting a more devotional and monastic form of asceticism (Pinch 2006, 259). The fact that *nāgā* groups survived in the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries and continued to be an important section of both Shaiva and Vaishnava orders suggests that their contribution was, and still is, more social than militaristic (Pinch 1996, 29).

Since the end of the nineteenth century, thirteen *akhāṛā*s have been acknowledged, and today their leaders form the Akhara Parishad (*akhāṛā pariṣad*), a committee that has a fundamental role not only in the organization of religious events but also in the "protection" of Hindu *dharma*, or sacred duty.

Notwithstanding the different religious backgrounds, *nāgā* and *hijṛā* histories present similar developments (especially in relation to colonial rule).[20] Furthermore, there are strong structural similarities between their communities: both are organized according to lineages (*gharāṇā*s and, for the ascetics, *paramparā*s), which underline the importance of the guru-disciple relationship and the creation of familial links with other members of the order; the guru is in both orders part of a wider hierarchical structure; an initiation with specific rituals is required to enter the group—Shaiva *nāgā sādhu*s even go through a particular practice in which the penis is strongly pulled by the guru to ensure celibacy; the individual has to follow the rules and laws of his or her new ascetic family; both ascetics and *hijṛā*s collect alms; they both have secret languages and esoteric practices, which are not shared with uninitiated people; both have to follow a particular *sādhanā* (spiritual discipline) to get religious/spiritual power to assist lay people; and both can include individuals coming from low castes. In general, both communities are comprised of liminal people that move in between worlds; they enter a religious world from where they take their identity and whose inner rules they have to follow, and a social world with which they have to interact to assure their survival.

Given such similarities, it is not surprising that *kinnar*s decided to reframe themselves as an *akhāṛā* organization. When I asked Laxmi why they decided to create an *akhāṛā*, she replied: "That is the way. . . . Whichever community had lost its own presence came with an *akhāṛā* and went forward. And for me it had to be in that way, as *Ādi śaṅkarācārya prabhu* said. We follow his footstep." Laxmi was referring to the eighth-century philosopher Adi Shankara who, according to her, organized the Shaiva *akhāṛā*s to face social troubles and to have a voice among the masses, which is a vocal goal of the group. According to Arpita P. Biswas, the idea actually came from Acarya Jitendra Anand, a *saṃnyāsī* living in Varanasi, who is well known for his support of Hindu nationalist (*hindutva*) politics and founder of the nongovernmental organization Ganga Mahasabha clean-up project, and who "was trying to come back into political relevance by initiating the formation of a militia, the Kinnar Akhara" (2021, 84).[21]

However, the choice of the term *akhāṛā* was not welcomed by the Akhara Parishad, which led to a direct dispute. The thirteen traditional *akhāṛā*s are strongly male dominated and, although some have female sections, there is a tendency to discourage female participation, since women are considered an obstacle for male ascetics.[22] Furthermore, they claim that the number of *akhāṛā*s is fixed and cannot be modified, for individuals can join one of the already existent *akhāṛā*s. For this reason, the Akhara Parishad is strongly against the recognition of the Kinnar Akhara, especially when it appeared for the first time at a religious event, the Ujjain Kumbh Mela of 2016, one of the main religious gatherings in India. There, the Kinnar Akhara obtained permission to set up camp, and *kinnar*s were also allowed to bathe during the auspicious days, although they did so at a different time from the male ascetics. Already in Ujjain, their *peśvāī* (the procession to reach their camp at the festival that they called, instead, *devtā yātrā*) created a certain interest among a large crowd that awaited their arrival with curiosity. In the 2019 Allahabad Kumbh Mela, the Kinnar Akhara garnered even more support from the public. In this case their *devtā yātrā* was followed by a crowd larger than that for male ascetics, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi led the procession as a warrior, riding a camel with a sword in her hand, appearing to openly challenge the *akhāṛā*s (see figure 1). Although their camp was quite far from the center of the religious scene, it was one of the most visited and searched for.

This success led Hari Giri Maharaj, the head of the Juna Akhara, the most influential *akhāṛā* and the one with the largest number of members, to negotiate with the leaders of the Kinnar Akhara. On January 12, 2019, in a meeting of historical importance held at Juna's Moj Giri *āśram*, Hari Giri signed an agreement with Laxmi and fifteen chosen *kinnar* leaders, in which he acknowledged the *kinnar* presence in Hindu religious history, thereby including the Kinnar Akhara among Juna Akhara's supported *akhāṛā*s, such as the Avahan and the Agni (see figure 2).

The result of these events suggests that, although not officially recognized by the Akhara Parishad, the Kinnar Akhara is considered to be independent of the Juna, since it follows its own rules and practices but participates with them during important events. In fact, this agreement led to another major result: namely, the adjustment of the order and timeline for the procession and ritual bath of the *akhāṛā*s during the Kumbh Mela, which has remained almost unchanged since the nineteenth century.[23] It is now modified to include the *kinnar*s in the schedule. This procession is an impressive moment in which the various *akhāṛā*s parade in succession to reach the bathing spot, the *saṅgam*: while the majority of *nāgā*s walk, the leaders process on

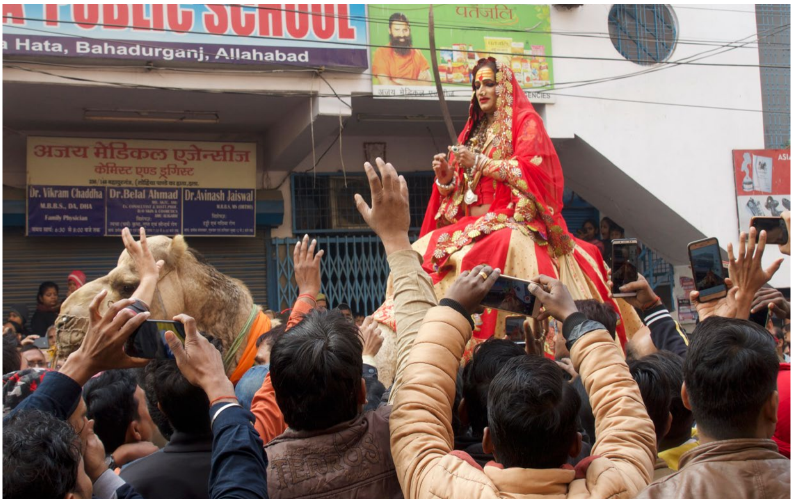

Figure 1. Laxmi during the *peśvāī*, Allahabad. Photo by Daniela Bevilacqua.

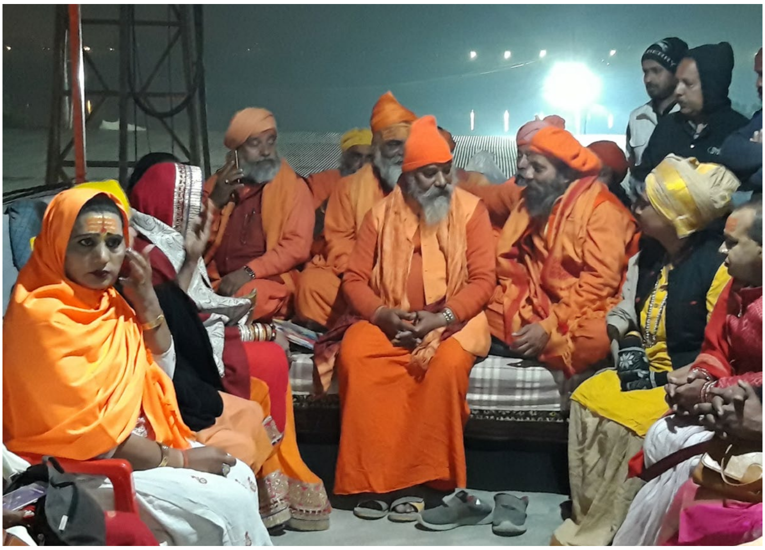

Figure 2. *Sādhus* and *kinnars* discussing on the night of the agreement.
Photo by Daniela Bevilacqua.

floats, waving to the crowd of people waiting for their *darśan* (auspicious sight) on the way to their bath. Usually, the procession is opened by the Maha Nirvani Akhara with the Atal Akhara, then followed by the Niranjani, along with the Anand Akhara. Then comes the Juna, in tow with the Avahan and Agni Akharas, respectively, which close the time slot for the Shaiva *akhāṛās*. In 2019, the Kinnar Akhara's procession was inserted in between the Avahan and the Agni.

These turning-point events changed the attitudes of representatives of other *akhāṛās* and religious groups, who started to visit the *Kinnars*' camp and show respect toward their leaders. However, the Kinnar Akhara is still not accepted by all the *akhāṛās*, and preliminary informal interviews with *nāgās* I conducted in 2019 demonstrated the *sādhus*' distrust toward them. The opposition to the Kinnar Akhara does not come only from the male ascetic world but also from some members of the transgender community, especially because of some of the steps the Kinnar Akhara has taken to construct an identity that looks exclusively to Hindu traditions.

A selective Sanskritization of *hijṛā* traditions?

The Kinnar Akhara's practices and religious stands are here presented as a form of selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* traditions. Drawing on Nirmal Singh's consideration that Sanskritization is not an overarching concept and cannot be used as "an analytical concept, entering as a building block for any elaborate sociological theory, made up of [a] logically connected non-contradictory set of propositions" (2006, 108–9), I propose another interpretation of Sanskritization, that of selective Sanskritization. Selective Sanskritization has to be considered as a useful heuristic concept that can be associated with other theories to describe specific historically, socially, and geographically contextualized situations. In this way, the concept does not become a cage to fit the case study in but rather a tool that takes into consideration contemporary changes and the specificity of the singular case studied without losing its value.

As my preliminary investigation has demonstrated, *kinnar*s' agency manifests in a Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition that does not occur through a strict emulation of Brahmanical textual sources nor of the ascetic world, but through a selection of features that can be easily adopted by *kinnar*s without losing their distinctiveness. *Kinnar*s indeed do not want to become like or be recognized as ascetics; rather, they want to remain *kinnar*s while appropriating certain ideas and practices that allow them to be recognized as Hindu. This approach also concerns the practices associated with *hijṛā* traditions that are maintained and highlighted in their Hindu past and origin. Therefore, they do not follow a "Brahmanical" track submissively. Rather, the way they are shaping a *kinnar* identity demonstrates that multiple agencies participate in it, and there is a clear selection of what to adopt or discard. To exemplify this, I will take into consideration two very different leaders, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and Bhavani Ma, the first a Brahmin by birth and the second a Dalit by birth. I will frame the leaders in the context of the more general changes brought about by the Kinnar Akhara into *hijṛā* traditions.

*Kinnar*s, and especially Laxmi, present themselves mostly as Shaivite followers,[24] not only of Shiva in his *ardhanārīśvara* (half man, half woman) form but also in his form of *mahākāleśvara* (great lord of time) residing in the renowned Mahakaleshvar temple in Ujjain, which contains one of the twelve *liṅgam*s of light, the aniconic manifestations of the deity Shiva. To express this connection, *kinnar*s have established that their greeting is *jai śrī mahākāl*, which means "glory to the lord Mahakal." Laxmi has declared herself to be an ardent devotee of Mahakal and that she loves doing his *śṛṅgār*. The word *śṛṅgār* holds a variety of meanings that range from decoration (Kumar 1988) to erotic mode (Doniger O'Flaherty 1969). In its decorative meaning, followed by Laxmi, it is mostly associated with a celebration that consists of cleaning and decorating temple deities. During some *śṛṅgār* devotional events, music and dance programs may be held (Kumar 1988, 141). Considering Laxmi's background as a dancer, her *śṛṅgār* also recalls the use of a metaphorical romantic relationship between lover and beloved to express the devotional relationship between the individual and the divine in classical theatrical dance (see Zubko 2014, 48–49). This attitude is well represented in the Vaishnava *bhakti* (devotion) tradition, where the word *śṛṅgār* is used to express the emotional mood (*ras*) through which a devotee engages with the deity who is the object of devotion. The *śṛṅgār ras* finds place in many religious lineages associated with cross-dressing and the emulation of female attitudes (see Lorea 2018, 181–87). However, it should be noted that in these groups transvestism is not part of a gender or sexual identity but rather occurs as "imitation of a character of the cosmic drama . . . through one's devotional self" (ibid., 185). Therefore, Laxmi's religious approach can be identified as a devotional one, very much in line with the mainstream religious attitude of several religious currents.

The connection between the Mahakaleshvar temple and the Kinnar Akhara is remarkable, because the place is also a *śākti pīṭh*, one of the 108 "seats" of the goddess Sati associated with feminine power (*śākti*) emanating from her dismembered body parts that fell in these places that have become pilgrimage centers over time. It is believed that the upper lip of the goddess fell there after her immolation. Therefore, the choice of this temple can be interpreted as a way to associate *kinnar*s with both male and female powers. This association is also symbolized by the specific shape of their *tilak* (forehead mark) that identifies the sectarian affiliation of an individual devotee. The *kinnar tilak* consists of the three horizontal lines (*tripuṇḍr*) typical of Shaivites, made with a yellow paste but crossed by a vertical red line in the middle, the symbol of the Shri (feminine), and the application of a big, red *bindī*, usually worn by married Hindu women.

While Laxmi presents herself as a devotional follower of Mahakal, as mentioned earlier, Bhavani Ma has highlighted her connection with *tāntrik* traditions. She is associated with an *aghorī* guru[25] from South India named Manikandan Baba, and in the 2019 Kumbh Mela he publicly performed special ceremonies in the Kinnar Akhara camp. This relationship was also maintained in June 2019 when Bhavani Ma participated in the Ambubachi Mela held in Kamakhya, Assam, where the main temple is considered another important *śākti pīṭh* containing the fallen *yoni* (vagina) of Sati. The Ambubachi Mela is a weeklong festival held every year around the middle of June to celebrate the yearly menstruation course of goddess Kamakhya. Menstruation, perceived as highly polluting in Hindu society, becomes a tool of enlightenment in the *tāntrik* traditions of the so-called left-hand path. In Ambubachi, the temple remains closed for three days, "due to the perceived impurity induced by menstruation," but the supposed menstruating blood of the goddess collected in blood-soaked cloth is believed to be a blessed substance (Borkataky-Varma 2018; see also Urban 2010).

I attended the Ambubachi Mela in 2017 and in 2018. There, I met *hijṛā*s (not yet known as *kinnar*s at that time) who were especially present at the cremation ground, sharing the place with Manikandan Baba's *aghorī*s. Their relationship could be due to *tāntrik* practices or, in light of the festival period, to a peculiar celebration that involves the participation of "polluted" characters such as prostitutes and *aghorī*s (see Parry 1994, 256), but to my knowledge the connection between *hijṛā*s and *aghorī*s has yet to be properly investigated. In 2019 Bhavani Ma attended the Ambubachi Mela with other *kinnar*s from West Bengal. Their presence was covered by several media outlets, since their procession, carried out under the banner of Bhavani Ma, once again drew a large crowd. During the festival, *kinnar*s shared a building with Manikandan Baba,[26] and they often participated in the evening ceremonies organized by him at the charnel ground. In so doing, Bhavani Ma established a strong connection between the Kinnar Akhara and this renowned *tāntrik* place where the festival occurs.

These two portraits of Laxmi and Bhavani demonstrate that *kinnar*s come not only from high castes supporting Brahmanical orthodox stances, but that they can also embrace heterodox celebrations. In both cases they have become leading protagonists of sacred spaces that they reinterpret and occupy according to their personal agency. It would be wrong to think that Bhavani associated herself with a *tāntrik* practice because of her low-caste origin, since she participated in all the orthodox ceremonies performed by *kinnar*s in the 2019 Kumbh Mela. She was at the forefront together with Laxmi during the *kinnar*s' *devtā yātrā*, the procession through which *kinnar*s officially entered the *melā* (festival) ground for the first time, and which began in the Ram

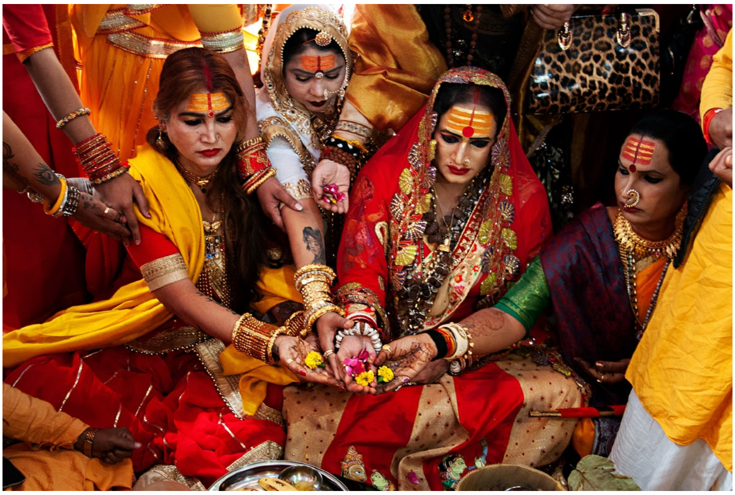

Figure 3. Kinnar Akhara members performing the *liṅgam abhiṣek*, Allahabad.
Photo by Alessio Maximilian Schroder.

Bhavan Chauraha neighborhood of Allahabad, with a *liṅgam abhiṣek* (anointing) ritual. At that time, several *kinnar* leaders including Bhavani squeezed themselves in a little *pracīn* (old) Shiva temple to pour water, milk, curd, and various other offerings over the *liṅgam* (see figure 3).

This *devtā yātrā* offers an interesting example of how *kinnar*s are carving a specific identity that uses symbols from ascetic and *hijṛā* traditions. After the *liṅgam abhiṣek* the *kinnar*s got on their floats and opened their *devtā yātrā*, which covered only six kilometers but lasted eight hours because of the size of the crowd. The use of colorful and decorated floats, the presence of musical bands, the use of animals such as camels and horses, and the bestowing of blessings and small presents thrown from the tracks were all features that characterize the procession of ascetic groups in general. However, *kinnar*s were also there to satisfy public expectation about their powerful blessings. People in the crowd, recognizing *kinnar*s' traditional powers, were also asking them to bless their babies or to bite or kiss coins,[27] a practice that is usually associated with *hijṛā*s, who transmit their blessings and good luck through these actions. In the camp, *kinnar*s continued their activities of blessing people and also dancing in front of them: there were often long queues of devotees waiting to touch the feet of—or to receive a touch, word of support, and blessing from—*kinnar*s seated in the main pavilion. *Hijṛā* practices thus have not been abandoned, since *kinnar*s continue the practice of *badhāī* and *māṅgtī*, as well as using the *tālī* "language." *Kinnar*s acknowledge these as a part of a Hindu tradition that was appropriated by Muslim gurus, who also used to oblige Hindus to convert to Islam before initiation into the *hijṛā* community. The sensitive topic of conversion was stressed several times during the *melā*s, and the *kinnar*s maintain that since several Hindus had to convert to Islam to become *hijṛā*s, by entering the Kinnar Akhara they can now return to their former religion. However, conversion or "reconversion" to Hinduism is not compulsory, and Muslim and Christian *kinnar*s are also accepted. Already in 2016, Laxmi stressed that only those people who are interested in rising to the position of *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* or *mahant*—religious titles adopted from the Hindu ascetic hierarchy to replace the aforementioned term *nāyak*[28]—have to convert to Hinduism (Dikshit 2016). The Kinnar Akhara is otherwise open to everyone without caste and gender distinction, which means that also non-transgender individuals and trans-men can be a part of it.[29]

Probably because of this inclusive policy, the initiation has been modified. While a practice like the *nirvāṇ* ceremony previously discussed is not mentioned, a *kinnar*'s initiation resembles that of ascetic Hindu orders in which, generally speaking, during a ritual the disciple is given a new name from the guru, a mantra, a *mālā* (string of beads), a *tilak*, and specific ascetic clothes. I noticed that after the Kinnar Akhara made its alliance with the Juna questions arose in the camp as to whether *kinnar*s should have their name ending in Giri, or in one of the ten "surnames" present in the Dashnami *sampradāya* to which the Juna order belongs. Eventually some decided to add it, while others embraced the title *mā* (mother), often used by female ascetics (Clémentin-Ojha 1985) as well as by *hijṛā*s to address their guru. Another issue related to initiation was that of hair shaving: when they enter the ascetic path *sādhu*s have to shave their hair completely or, in the case of Vaishnavas, leave the topknot intact. But Laxmi pointed out that *kinnar*s had their own identity and should not follow *saṃnyāsī* (renunciant) procedures. Since then, she had been very vocal in stressing that *kinnar*s are not ascetics but a different category of holy beings, given their demigod status. It thus also follows that *kinnar*s are not obliged to follow celibacy or dietary prescriptions.

The examples given here demonstrate how the Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition does not occur through a complete emulation of the ascetic world or the adoption of an entire set of Brahmanical "purity" rules but through a selection of features that can be easily adopted by *kinnar*s without losing their distinctiveness.

A saffronization of the *hijṛā* traditions?

The claims made by Laxmi about Muslim gurus and possible reconversions have not gone unheard. Her opponents accuse her of being a "daughter" of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), two Hindu organizations, one cultural and the other religious, with a strong, right-wing nationalist attitude. This was particularly ubiquitous when she decided to openly support the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya: Indian trans, intersex, and gender nonconforming individuals and groups released a response to condemn Laxmi's support and accused her of being "bound to fuel communal hatred and violence . . . alienating minority-religious and atheist, gender expressions and identities" (Trans, Gender Nonconforming & Intersex Collectives 2018). This *Round Table* response positioned itself against a saffronization of the LGBT+ communities, accusing Laxmi of appealing to *hindutva* ideology in her aspiration for a political position within the BJP. Neha Dixit from *The Caravan* reports the claims of Meera Sanghamitra, a transwoman activist who related the establishment of the Kinnar Akhara and the "reconversion" to Hinduism with "the *ghar wapsi* [home return] and purification framework of the Sangh," a campaign run by Hindu right-wing political groups to convert non-Hindus to Hinduism (Dixit 2019).

One may rightly question whether the Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition is part of or a consequence of the sociopolitical transformations India has experienced in the last years under the Modi government. With the rise of the BJP to power since 2014, there has been a resurgence of a far-right *hindutva* movement, and the current ruling narrative "posits a narrow and rigid version of Hinduism as fundamental to Indianness," popularizing a repressive, high-caste, chauvinist version of it (Banaji 2018). The protection of this Hindu-Indianness has been used as a pretext for violence against minorities, especially Muslims. Likewise, Indo-Islamic culture has been completely marginalized to favor the idea that India was great when it was Hindu, neglecting any contribution of Muslim rulers or South Asian Islamic culture to that of the subcontinent, therefore entrenching "the impossibility of imagining Muslims as having had a positive influence on modern-day India" (Waikar 2018, 171).

Nationalist groups, however, do not shine for their advocacy in supporting queer groups, although this has been changing. As the work of Paola Bacchetta (2019, 377) demonstrates, Hindu nationalist groups have been mostly queerphobic and have reworked "colonial misogynist notions of gender and sexual normativity," often rejecting homosexuality as not Indian. In 2016, the international secretary general of the RSS's cultural-religious wing, Champat Rai, said that homosexual acts were influenced by Western culture and were against Indian culture. In an earlier phase, the RSS supported a gendered binary "that included direct queerphobic pronouncements against lesbian and gay subjects, as sexual subjects, and their explicit exclusion from the Hindu nation" (ibid., 385).[30] However, more recently, the nationalist position has become more complex and contradictory, and there "is a great difference across all these positions between attitudes towards homosexual and transgender subjects" (ibid., 386). It is likely that the visibility the Kinnar Akhara has gained may have moved Mohan Bhagwat, a leader of the RSS, to claim in 2019 that, "society is changing and we need to accommodate everyone so they do not feel isolated." His statement anticipates a book titled *The RSS Roadmaps for the 21st Century*, which expresses the RSS's views on contemporary issues. It was written by Sunil Ambedkar, the national organizing secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (*Business Standard* 2019).

However, given the general queerphobic attitude of nationalist groups and the battles fought by several *kinnar* leaders to have their rights recognized and to decriminalize homosexuality, it is doubtful that the Kinnar Akhara is actually taking inspiration or comfort from them. Considering the turn toward the RSS, it is questionable whether this is a case of a queerization of Indian politics rather than a saffronization of the *hijṛā* tradition.[31] Laxmi has said several times that she is not interested in politics,[32] and she will support any party that works for the transgender community. She has lamented her exhaustion at people calling her "BJP *kī beṭī*, RSS *kī bahū*" (daughter of the BJP, daughter-in-law of the RSS), and her exhaustion from fighting the male *akhāṛā*s, when she should instead be spending her energies "in creating opportunities and an equal space for *hijṛās*, my brethren, instead" (*Bharata Bharati* 2017). She recently reiterated her position as one against communal division, and she also pointed out how her words about the Ram temple were misunderstood, and that from a "liberal Laxmi" she became a right-wing supporter with the entire country against her (The Public India 2020).

Laxmi's critics have become critics of the Kinnar Akhara, because they associate the Akhara exclusively with Laxmi's identity and social background. For example, a strong statement such as "joining the Hindu fold has been that caste has crept into the Kinnar Akhada"[33] seems indeed based only on the persona of Laxmi, but the Kinnara Akhara is not reducible to the figure of Laxmi. As already mentioned, Bhavani comes from the Valmiki caste, a Dalit group. Although she is not as famous as Laxmi, she is a powerful leader of the Kinnar Akhara. Furthermore, Bhavani was the Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) candidate from Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) in Uttar Pradesh for the general election of May 2019. She said she decided to contest elections after witnessing the popularity of the Kinnar Akhara during the Kumbh Mela: "You can only fight for your rights when you have conquered the fight for food," she said to *The Caravan* newspaper (Dixit 2019). "I am now past it." She admitted that she had approached the BJP and the Congress, and all were dismissive; while the AAP accepted her candidacy, it was not very supportive, mostly because she did not have enough money to support her electoral campaign. Among her few poll promises were the revival of the factories and tanneries in the Naini Industrial Area and the amendment of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2018. When asked by Muslim men how she was going to protect Muslims who were being killed and marginalized, she replied: "I am a Haji[34] and I am a monk. When a transgender child is born to a family, they abandon them regardless of whether they are Muslim, Hindu, or Christian. We are the ones who raise them regardless of their religion. How do you ever think the Hijra community can set religious boundaries?" Bhavani's example shows that while some critics point to features of the Kinnar Akhara that favor a pro-*hindutva* interpretation of the movement and its leaders, its reality is more differentiated. From the political point of view, the *akhāṛā* established for *kinnar*s follows a more pragmatic than religious stand.

Furthermore, to criticize the use of religion and automatically associate this use with *hindutva* politics means to give "the burden of being politically correct" even to those coming from marginal spaces of representation that do not always have the possibility to achieve a populist space (Goel 2020). The majority of *kinnar*s come from a marginalized, oppressed position. Could we read the opposition to *kinnar*s' deification as an opposition to an identity that does not match the rubric of gender and sexual identification that Indian activists, governmental state, and transnational developmental agencies have created, legitimizing certain roles and activities while opposing those individuals who do not conform to a "globalized," standardized, transgender identity (see Dutta 2013; Mount 2020; Consolaro 2020)?

Discourses of respectability, empowerment, and legitimation have led to extremist results, as *Transgender India*'s 2016 Facebook campaign titled "I am not a *hijṛā*" illustrates. In this campaign, trans-women took photos of themselves holding signs describing why they were not *hijṛā*; that is, "I am a trans, and I am a surgeon. I am not a *hijṛā*," or "I am a trans, but I am not a sex maniac. I am not a *hijṛā*" (Goel 2019). This campaign was also opposed by members of the transgender community who, although recognizing the importance of acknowledging the different non-*hijṛā* trans identities present in South Asia, insisted that privileged sections of the community not reiterate negative stereotypes about the *hijṛā* community (Chakraborty 2016). The opposition to *hijṛā*s risks translating into an opposition to *kinnar*s, since many come from the same tradition and background of marginalization and social struggle.

Therefore, returning to the question of saffronization of the *hijṛā* tradition, one should inquire whether in practice the Kinnar Akhara is indeed using "the gendered grammar of upper-caste Hindutva politics" (Biswas 2021, 86) to obtain Hindu reforms. If we look at talks and practices, the eradication of Islamic heritage does not seem to be a main priority of the organization. Neither is the banishing of Muslim *hijṛā*s or actions against them, and nor does it seem that there is hostility to the word *hijṛā* itself, which is still used by *kinnar*s to describe themselves and their community. Rather, it seems that the *kinnar*s' priority is to garner power, social space, and rights using religion as a tool, which is why I associate them with the concept of religious feminism, which I explore in the next section of this article.

Is Kinnar Akhara a case of religious feminism?

Laxmi often describes herself as an activist who happened to become *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* of the Kinnar Akhara. She continues to work for numerous NGOs, such as Astitva Trust, Asia Pacific Transgender Network, and Maharashtra Trithiya Panthi Sangatana, but she has also established Kineer Services Pvt. Ltd., which is a social enterprise to empower and support the transgender community.[35]

It is possible to find tens of her talks and speeches online, and in none of these does she speak against Muslim *hijṛā*s. Rather, she criticizes Indian patriarchal society and the patriarchy in Hinduism. As she said to the *Times of India*, "Religion has been made patriarchal. The akhada parishad is a male-dominated, patriarchal body. They (ABAP) didn't even accept the Dashnami Panchayati Majiwada,[36] [so] expecting them to accept trans person[s] is far-fetched" (Mishra 2021). And again, to *Reuters*, she stated the following:

> When a woman still becomes powerful, the patriarchy assassinates her character and calls her names. But the community cannot wait for laws to improve its lot, and must continue to fight for its rights. . . . No one will bring us our rights to our doorstep; we have to lobby, we have to all be activists. We have to demand and take our rights. (Chandran 2016)

Her approach is not a one-off case. Bhavani, while competing for the Lok Sabha election, highlighted to *The Caravan* that in the feudal and patriarchal culture of Uttar Pradesh, "shot through with toxic masculinity," religion was the only tool she had to "shut the men up" (Dixit 2019). And again, "These men, who would not even let me stand in front of their gates when I asked for badhai, now, they touch my feet. They come running with their families and women to get my blessings. Religion's validation helps in shutting up all these men." Such claims further demonstrate the pragmatism behind the establishment of the Kinnar Akhara. As also pointed out by Pavitra Ma, *mahāmaṇḍaleśvar* and secretary of the group, *kinnar*s' main purpose was to reconquer a space in society to stop the marginalization and stigmatization of *hijṛā*s or transgenders; they wanted to mingle with people so they could approach them without fear, accepting their right of existence without any bias. She points out that their struggle was a struggle for the young generation, to save them going through what their elders went through. Such a social acceptance that is able to lead to consistent change was possible only by conquering and using the religious space. As I stressed at the beginning of this article, according to *kinnar*s, religion was the quickest way of creating change that affects not only the middle to high classes but also the grassroots of society. And it was very effective, since, as several *kinnar*s have claimed, they are now worshipped by the same people who used to treat them badly.

Rather than "rejecting the religion for its inherent patriarchy" (Tomalin 2006, 385), *kinnar*s have opted for a reinterpretation and exploitation of a religious system that, theoretically, grants them a religious role. The label *sanātana dharma*[37] to indicate a universal religion, devoid of caste, gender, and religious discrimination, is often used against those religious people (ascetics and householders) who attack the legitimacy of the Kinnar Akhara. Members refer to specific sections of religious texts with the aim of highlighting the role and power of androgynous/non-normative individuals to reclaim and rebalance an institutionalized hierarchy (religious and social) in which only males are on top. The effectiveness of this strategy has been acknowledged also by members of the transgender community that support the work of the *kinnar*s, as reported by *The Caravan*. Ashok Row Kavi, chairperson of Humsafar Trust, the oldest Indian organization fighting for LGBT+ rights and editor of *Bombay Dost*, India's first registered LGBT+ magazine, declared that "religion is a regressive source, but it is also the only support for the very weak" and that it is "laudable if someone has been able use it to de-stigmatize and integrate transpersons into the society" (Salian 2019).

Although not all *kinnar*s are explicitly motivated by a feminist agenda, it is not unlikely that their *akhāṛā* may affect women more broadly, since two cisgender women have already been elected as *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara*, a title that very rarely is attributed to Indian women in traditional *akhāṛā*s. And it is not difficult to imagine that the Kinnar Akhara's fight for its complete recognition might also lead to the recognition of the female Pari Akhara led by Trikal Bhavanta, which is exemplary of what Antoinette DeNapoli calls "dharmic feminism," an Indic "style" of religious feminism in South Asian contexts (2019, 30). It is also not difficult to imagine that it will foster associations with a "feminist theological stance,"[38] such as that of the high-profile and well-educated female guru Anandmurti Gurumaa, studied by Angela Rudert (2017, 130).

It is notable that in these three cases charismatic "feminist" leaders contest religious misinterpretations and how women (and trans-women) have been prevented from embodying religious authority. Surely their "ascension has been fueled in part by the confluence of broader human rights-based discourses and social justice frameworks illustrative of the feminisms of global modernities" (DeNapoli 2019, 45). However, while Trikal Bhavanta and Gurumaa's movements are strongly based on their charismatic leaders, the Kinnar Akhara's incredible success does not only rely on its leaders' charisma but also on the routinized charisma that was already invested in *hijṛā*s and individuals now associated with *kinnar*s. It seems that the Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition, and the occupation of religious space in a very visible and powerful way, has almost "freed" some people to openly and unanimously recognize the powers and roles traditionally attributed to *hijṛā*s. And these powers and roles, rather than the new rituals and practices, are still those that mostly attract people toward *kinnar*s.

Additionally, the Kinnar Akhara has demonstrated itself to be highly inclusive. Since initiation into its religious order is possible for everyone, it has created a religious space within the heart of Hindu orthodoxy. The order is thus able to gather those individuals (LGBT+ people but also cisgender women) who are in search of a religious path unhampered by their gender identity, or who would like to participate in religious events without hiding themselves. Furthermore, the activist aspect of the Kinnar Akhara, mostly represented by Laxmi's relentless activities and talks, is also able to capture the attention of those more interested in social, rather than religious, changes. As Laxmi's success relies on her being "a cross-over transgendered figure, one who moves seamlessly between the *hijṛā* ghetto and the mainstream society" (Biswas 2021, 86), so the Kinnar Akhara, presenting various attitudes, religious stands, and identities, has been able to create a respected and recognized community of *kinnar*s.

Conclusion

The Kinnar Akhara can be described as employing a selective form of Sanskritization on the *hijṛā* tradition, but it cannot be described as a saffronization of the same, at least not yet. Given the inclusive attitude of the *akhāṛā*; its openness to every individual without distinctions of caste, gender, or religion; and especially its challenges to patriarchal society and Hindu ascetic structures rather than Islam or Muslim *hijṛā*s, it still remains to be seen what the future holds in store for this transgendered community. The main religious challenge it faces is posed by the same Hindu ascetic fold that *kinnar*s want to emulate, in terms of general structures and the potential therein to interact more openly and honestly with lay society, while at the same time imbuing the community with a completely specific *kinnar* identity to achieve specific goals. It is not impossible that one of the outcomes of the Kinnar Akhara's actions will be a further stigmatization of Muslim *hijṛā*s over time, and it is likely that some of its leaders will take a more saffronized political stance. However, in light of information available on *kinnar* activities and standpoints, it seems that it is more appropriate at the present moment to describe their *akhāṛā* in terms of religious feminism that, through selective Sanskritization of the *hijṛā* tradition, is shaping its own space, identity, rituals, and so on by creating power dynamics that support gender and social struggles in contemporary India. As mentioned by Susan Stryker (2019), the construction of a (trans) religious self is indeed going to motivate intervention into the "secular order of the world," and, in the case of the Kinnar Akhara, this intervention will surely shape religious, political, and social spaces.

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NOTES

1. As stressed by Hossain, the meanings of the word *hijṛā* "shifted over time in response to various colonial and postcolonial notions of gender and sexuality" (2020, 406) and demonstrate the cultural and intellectual biases not only of the users but also in relation to the context in which they are expressed.

2. On the definition of "neither men nor women" see Nanda (1990).

3. *Hijṛā*s have been subjects of several studies (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005; Boisvert 2018; Saria 2021), with some focused on their recent history (Hinchy 2014; Gannon 2009), practices (Mal and Mundu 2018; Bockrath 2003), language and performance (Hall 1995; Loh 2014; Roy 2015), social and economic status (Jami 2005; Mal 2015; Satyal 2001), and relations with lay transgender communities (Puri 2010; Dutta 2012; Dutta and Roy 2014; Consolaro 2020). On Pakistan see for example the work of Rehan et al. (2009), Alizai, Doneys, and Doane (2017); on Bangladesh see Khan et al. (2009), Aziz and Azhar (2020), and Hossain (2012, 2017, 2020); and on Nepal see Knight, Flores, and Nezhad (2015). Roy (2015) has presented an innovative study on *hijṛā* and *gharāṇā* tradition.

4. As Goldman has pointed out, few cultures have accorded to the phenomenon of transsexualism and transvestism "so prominent a place in the realms of mythology and religion as has that of traditional India" (1993, 376).

5. The terms *mukhannais* and *mukhannas* are used in the *Hadit* of Islam; *mukhannis* indicate those individuals who behave as females and therefore loathe their male identity, while the *mukhannas* are biological males who are effeminate but do not want to change sex (Teh 2010, 91).

6. The CTA stopped eunuchs from becoming the guardians of children, and the police also removed children residing with eunuchs in order to prevent their emasculation (Hinchy 2014, 276).

7. Goel notices that the organization in *gharāṇā*s is traditionally spread in communities of musicians, dancers, and prostitutes; so, being *hijrā*s associated with dance, music, as well as sex work, it is likely that the practice of creating *hijṛā* houses has been borrowed from these other traditions (2020, 148).

8. These discussions could also be international; as Hossain has verified, *hijṛā*s from West Bengal and Bangladesh cross the border on both sides in order to help resolve each other's disputes (2018, 324).

9. This is not true for the *hijṛā*s in Pakistan, who maintain a clear Islamic identity (Hossain 2012, 499), while in Bangladesh *hijṛā*s also worship Maya ji, a Hindu goddess considered the primordial *hijṛā* archetype, who has similar features to Bahucara Mata (Hossain 2018, 328).

10. Bockrath claims that in Northern India, the disciple takes the religion of the guru, whether she comes from either a Muslim or Hindu family, “but traditional sectarian differences seem to give way to the survival instinct.” Furthermore, “[t]he more egalitarian ideal of Islam seems to be the hijra inclination” (2003, 92).

11. Such as: to completely express a feminine gender identity, to escape from poverty or from the bad treatment of the family of origin for an individual’s female attitude, after sexual abuses, etc.

12. Hossain highlights that in Bangladesh people instead view the *hijṛā* practice of emasculation as a fraud, since a real *hijṛā* is an individual who is born with missing or ambiguous genitals (2020, 36).

13. As several studies have demonstrated, myths have had a strategic and communicative use, becoming therefore potent vehicles for low-caste and marginal groups “to creatively express their social and political needs and aspiration” and means to claim recognition and equality (Doron 2009, 3). Jennifer Loh has pointed out and explained how narrative has been used by *hijṛā*s in order to explain and justify their status and ritual role in contemporary Indian society (2014, 24). She also demonstrates that *hijṛā*s do not refer to any specific primary texts (they just would talk about “ancient texts” in general), reporting oral myths that form part of a cultural canon (ibid., 28, 30).

14. As Saria has argued (2021, 58), the situation can be different in villages, where *hijṛā*s are still considered for their religious roles and called to perform accordingly. I was told the same by a *hijṛā* from West Bengal who studies in Kolkata but prefers to do her performances in villages linked to her guru’s area of influence.

15. In use since the 1990s, the acronym LGBT stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender”; hereafter, other more inclusive alternatives have also been used. This article will use the acronym LGBT+ to also encompass spectrums of sexuality and gender.

16. This has also created friction, because the third gender was recognized as OBC (Other Backward Class), irrespective of official religion, caste, and class (Goel 2019). Furthermore, in 2016 the Indian government proposed a Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill, which nevertheless criminalized begging and denied people’s right to self-identify as trans and was therefore strongly opposed until those provisions were removed. The revised version remains controversial.

17. As several studies have shown (see for example Dutta and Roy 2014; Khan 2016), there is still confusion on how to implement laws in practice and how to precisely define transgender identity. Furthermore, the revised Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill of 2016 was strongly opposed by the transgender community, since it denied any affirmative action for transpersons in education, healthcare, and employment and criminalized both begging and sex work—forms of livelihood that many transpersons depend on for survival. A 2018 National Human Rights Commission of India report estimates that 92 percent of transgender Indians beg or do sex work due to the inability to participate in any other economic activity. Less than half have access to education, 62 percent suffer abuse and harassment, and almost everyone has faced social rejection multiple times (National Human Rights Commission India 2018).

18. See Das (2019). However, here most likely Tulsidas refers to mythological beings; *kinnar*s in medieval texts are often associated with other such beings, like *gāndharva*s and *apsarā*s (see Callewaert 2009, 381).

19. The reconstruction of an imaginary and mythological past did not only rely on past Brahmanical sources but on practical attempts. During the Allahabad Mela, in the *Kinnars*' camp a tent was organized to collect the works of several artists, and Laxmi asked some of them to think about a "*Kinnars*' iconography" to be used in future. She wanted a number of demigod *kinnar*s characterized by specific features to be easily recognized. This visual production was to be associated with a textual outcome: a *Kinnar Purāṇa*.

20. However, a direct confrontation between the *hijṛā*s' and the ascetics' worlds has yet to occur. There are a handful of references in monographs: about the self-understanding of *hijṛā*s as *saṃnyāsī*s and as ascetics in general (see for example Nanda 1990, 10, 16, 126); about their initiation and practices being similar to *tapas* (see Reddy 2005, 96–98); and about their structures (Boisvert 2018, 49).

21. The inception of the Kinnar Akhara would have taken place when Laxmi went to Varanasi for the last rites of her father. Biswas claims that it was "popularly believed that the genesis and motivation for the Kinnar Akhada was, on one hand, to counter the masculinist, patriarchal character of the Indian Akhada system and, on the other, [it] was to facilitate the incorporation of largely Islam-following *hijṛās* into the folds of Hinduism—their rightful place within Sanatan dharma and thereby the Indian mainstream society" (2021, 84). I could not find further information about Acharya Jitendra, who has never been mentioned by *kinnars*.

22. An attempt to have recognized a women-only *akhāṛā* failed. In the Magh Mela of Allahabad 2014, *sādhvī* Trikal Bhavanta led a group of about fifty female ascetics and proclaimed the formation of a new *akhāṛā*, exclusively dedicated and accessible to women. The purpose of her action was to mobilize women's pride to improve their status in the religious hierarchy of ascetic orders: according to Bhavanta, although women do hard work in all the *akhāṛā*s, they are relegated to a subjugated position in a system run by men. On this fascinating topic see DeNapoli (2019).

23. The main moments during the Kumbh Melas are the *śāhī snān*, the royal baths during which, at a propitious time, ascetics dip in the *saṅgam*, the place where the waters of the three rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, and the subterranean Sarasvati) meet. In the past, disputes over the order of bathing led to bloody fights among ascetics, until it was codified during British rule two centuries ago. On the historical organization of the Kumbh Mela see Maclean (2008).

24. Despite this general Shaiva approach, some leaders also propose a different religious attitude. For example, *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* Hemangi Sakhi Ma is a strong Vaishnava devotee and has already mentioned an intention to establish a Vaishnava section of the Kinnar Akhara (*Neo News* 2021).

25. *Aghorī*s represent a group of Shaiva ascetics who often dwell in the charnel ground and are used to tantric antinomian practices (see Zotter 2016).

26. I thank Prema Goet, who was actually staying in the building, for this information. Bhavani Ma and Manikandan Baba lived in different floors of a building in Kamakhya, while the top floor was left for devotees (personal communication, February 15, 2021).

27. Both Laxmi and Bhavani have produced two coins, one in a gold color and the other in silver, as *prasād* (blessed offerings) to give to their followers. On the coin there is the image of Bahucara Mata on her rooster, therefore maintaining the deity as bestower of their powers.

28. At this stage, I do not have information about how this title appointment occurs and has occurred. I hypothesize that *hijṛā* household leaders, who once declared their association to the

Kinnar Akhara, have their role translated into this new hierarchy, but this hypothesis needs further investigation, especially considering the fact that many leaders are Muslims.

29. During the 2019 Kumbh Mela for example, two cisgender women were appointed *mahāmaṇḍaleśwara* of the *akhāṛā*: one was Dr Raajrajeshwari Shiva Priya (*The Times of India* 2019a) and the other was Yogeshwari Katyan Tripathi (*The Times of India* 2019b).

30. Furthermore, in March 2016 the RSS leader Dattatreya Hosabale tweeted that "homosexuality is not a crime, but socially immoral act in our society. No need to punish, but to be treated as a psychological case" (Bacchetta 2019, 385).

31. Bacchetta has rightly pointed out that in contemporary times the equation that queer support comes from the left and queer repression from right political movements has to be properly reevaluated, because even the violence for queer-normativization should be taken into consideration (2019, 395).

32. Immediately after the successful 2019 Kumbh Mela she was asked whether she intended to enter politics. At that time she replied that, considering the support received by people in Allahabad, she would think about it, stressing that she would go with the one party who was to work for the welfare of transgender people (Mani 2019). This, however, did not happen; as we will see in the following paragraphs, Bhavani instead contested the election.

33. See Dixit (2019). In the same article an interviewee claimed that Bhavani, being a Dalit, took the bath during the Kumbh Mela *śāhī snān* in the evening, while Laxmi bathed in the morning. Such claims are completely false, and many photos online can testify against it; see for example DNA Web Team (2019).

34. Indeed, when Bhavani entered the *hijṛā* community, she converted to Islam also went to Mecca for the Haj pilgrimage, becoming a Haji.

35. For example, during the Covid pandemic Kineer Services has created connections with the Pune-based Villoo Poonawalla Charitable Foundation and the Apollo Hospitals to launch an initiative to ensure free vaccinations for the transgender community (Mascarenhas 2021).

36. This is the female section created inside the Juna Akhara to collect their female *saṃnyāsinī*s.

37. This label began to be used in the nineteenth century during the Hindu revivalism as a name for Hinduism to indicate the universality and "eternity" of the Hindu religion.

38. Rudert points out that although Gurumaa's stance "does not stand clearly on solely any one of the Indian dharmic traditions, nonetheless [it] draws on indigenous spiritual resources to effect transformation, rather than relying on so-called western feminism" (2017, 130–31).

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Cantonese Opera Troupes in Southeast Asia

Political Mobilizations, Diaspora Networks, and Operatic Circulation, 1850s–1930s

This article examines the transnational activities of the Cantonese operas that traveled constantly from native hometowns in Guangzhou and Hong Kong to ports and cities of Southeast Asia by using diasporic linkages and networks. By consulting Chinese local newspapers, oral histories, and biographies, I argue for an emic view that foregrounds diasporic mobility and diversity in the production of political awareness and operatic knowledge. The article negates the earlier colonial ethnographic gaze that constantly rendered Chinese immigrants and their operas as exotic, uncivilized, and primitive. Furthermore, the unique traveling experiences in Southeast Asia nurtured important Cantonese opera performers, whose "Nanyang fame" circulated back to the motherland and was greatly celebrated by domestic audiences. The article re-evaluates the operation of transnational networks formed and developed through opera troupes' political mobilizations, commercial tours, and the circulation of operatic aesthetics. By emphasizing a circular and transnational angle, this article gives agency to the performers and troupes that helped Cantonese operas to transform and take root in heterogeneous diasporic contexts.

Keywords: Cantonese opera troupes—1911 Revolution—opera tours—Nanyang fame

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Instigated by European colonialism and global imperialism, the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented volumes of Chinese overseas migration, which shaped the outlooks of the Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia. The need for cheap labor increased exponentially following the expansion of European colonies in Southeast Asia. In these alien colonies, Chinese immigrants were able to structure and mobilize themselves around different communal organizations channeled through native-place ties, lineages, and dialects (Li 1995; Kuhn 2008; Yen 2008). Accompanying the immigrants from southern China, opera troupes traveled overseas to perform for their fellow townsmen, who formed various settlements in Southeast Asia. They brought along with them various *fangyan xi / difang xi* (dialect or regional opera) performances, which constituted an important part of their identity, heritage, and social memory as rooted in a romanticized ancestral land.

Dialect operas belonged to the Chinese *xiqu* (classic operas) that evolved from ancient China and formed their own regional aesthetic styles distinguished by plays, choreography, and languages for singing and dialogue. Each speech or linguistic group brought its own dialect operas from its native place to Southeast Asian diasporas, with *Yueju* (Cantonese operas), *Chaoju* (Chaozhou operas), *Minnanxi* (Hokkien operas), *Hainan xi* (Hainanese operas), and *Hanju* (Hakka operas) forming significant parts of the diasporic Chinese everyday popular entertainment.[1] It has been widely held that Chinese dialect operas left impressive traces in Chinese temples, as they formed an essential part of the Chinese ritual ceremonies conducted for sacred occasions, such as deities' birthdays (Perris 1978; Tan 1980; Ward 1979; Sutton 1990). In Singapore, these ritual operas mostly took place in the vacant spaces either in front of Chinese temples or along the streets, therefore they are also referred to as "street operas" or are sometimes rendered with the local Malay term *wayang*s (Lee 2009).

In understanding the natal connection that sustained Chinese diasporic cultural practices, such as dialect opera performances, it is necessary to invoke Philip A. Kuhn's famous conceptualization of "corridor." By corridor Kuhn refers to a channel of connections that keep the migrant in a meaningful relationship with the old country, or old village, lineage, and province (Kuhn 2008, 49). It is the corridor that linked the diasporas and the places of origin in order to maintain one's Chineseness. Alternatively, Adam McKeown (1999) calls for a paradigmatic shift to address the fluidity and diversity of the Chinese diasporas by attending to issues of links, flows, and networks.

Scholars also employ the term "circulation" to argue for mutually constitutive multidirectional interactions among diverse diasporas. Such a focus has reshaped the understanding of diaspora networks in significant ways (Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). Plenty of works have proven how multidirectional networks built and developed by Chinese merchants, clans, speech-group associations, and lineages facilitated the flows of capital and the expansion of Chinese business across different territories (Nonini and Ong 1997, 3–36).[2]

More recently, there have been efforts to understand Chinese theater and performances through the lens of transnational cultural networks. In studying the Hokkien operas, both Caroline Chia (2019) and Josh Stenberg (2019) trace the operatic influences from multiple sites of cultural production that incorporate the Chinese native-place roots (southern Fujian), local diasporic practice (Indonesia, Singapore, and Taiwan), and regional circulation in Southeast Asia. Different from the migration routes of the Hokkiens, the demographics of the Cantonese immigrants would depict a contrastingly different pattern of cultural interactions along the migrant corridor of Guangzhou and Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Rim. Wing Chung Ng's work traces the transnational circulation of Cantonese theater troupes that traveled from Guangzhou and Hong Kong via Southeast Asia and finally to the Pacific Rim (Ng 2015). Due to the pre-eminence of Cantonese migrants in North America, Cantonese operas are also studied as important cultural heritage of Chinese Americans and key sites to examine their ethnic identity (Lei 2006; Rao 2017).

This article engages with such recent scholarship in transnational history and the cultural transformation in the Chinese diasporas through a historical study of Cantonese opera troupes in Southeast Asia from the 1850s to the 1930s. It starts with an analysis of early ethnographic descriptions about the sociocultural life of the Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia. I unpack the discursive constructs in early ethnographies that adopted enlightenment theory to cast Chinese opera performances as a primitive tradition: the Chinese community was pervaded by vices, which hence justified the need for colonial interference. Nonetheless, these accounts did give a glimpse of the everyday cultural practices of the Chinese immigrants and testify to the prevalence of Cantonese opera performances in Chinese diasporas.

Extant studies on Cantonese operas have argued for a global and migratory turn, whereby the operatic knowledge was transmitted through a transpacific network, encompassing San Francisco, Vancouver, New York, Honolulu, and Havana (Liao 2019, 280). Going beyond earlier scholarship, this article postulates that by conducting transnational opera tours from Guangzhou and Hong Kong to towns and ports of Southeast Asia, Cantonese opera troupes also generated operatic aesthetic innovations that in turn circulated back to the motherland. The circular angle defies the Sino-centric point of view that regards Chinese diasporas as passive recipients of the cultural influences from the center. It gives agency to mobile opera practitioners and revolutionaries, who helped Chinese performing art to thrive at the margins of the mother country. The one-way hierarchical cultural diffusion or dominance was henceforth replaced by a cross-cultural interaction (Manning 1996, 771–82).

Early ethnographic gazes

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, traveling officials, diplomats, and merchants sent by European companies, courts, and Chinese governments had shown a growing interest in writing about their encounters with Southeast Asia. These ethnographic writings, although implicated with Orientalist constructs, offered invaluable sources to recover the everyday life and cultural practices of the local Chinese immigrants. Importantly, these writings were preoccupied with the eminence of Chinese opera performances that were held frequently at Chinese communal occasions, such as festivals and ritual celebrations.

Europeans were particularly amazed by the dazzling opera performances. However, they could hardly make distinctions about the diverse regional genres as patronized by different speech groups. Charles Wilkes, Commander of the United States Exploring Expedition to Singapore in 1842, noticed that Chinese theatrical exhibitions were happening simultaneously in many places in erected open sheds. "The dialogue was in a kind of recitative with an accompaniment performed by beating with two small sticks on the bottom of a copper kettle of the shape of a coffee-pot. . . . The dresses of the actors were very rich, and the females were represented by males or boys." The combat scenes appeared to be most attractive, as Wilkes found them hard to be surpassed, either in muscular action or agility (Wilkes 1984, 15–16).

J. D. Vaughan (1825–1891), a colonial official who spent most of his life in the Straits Settlements (Singapore, Penang, and Malacca), had a more profound understanding of the Chinese community and their associated sociocultural life. He made several important observations specifically regarding Chinese theatrical performances in the colony. First and foremost, Vaughan made clear distinctions between opera performances staged for ritual purposes and secular entertainment. He called the latter ones "domestic plays" that were more intelligible and replete with fun. They were so splendid that not only Chinese liked to watch, but also sometimes Europeans would make up parties to visit the theater. Second, he made important comments about the traveling Chinese opera troupes, as he observed that "besides these fixed companies there are itinerant companies who perform on hastily erected stages before audiences who stand in the open air unsheltered from wind and rain" (Vaughan 1971, 86). Third, the religious function of Chinese opera performances seemed to be most straightforward to Europeans. As Vaughan pointed out, Chinese theatricals were always related to their rituals and religious functions. As he observed, in front of every Chinese temple there was a large flagged square surrounded by a high wall, in which temporary stages were erected for theatrical performances; Chinese gods were particularly fond of drama. The prominent Chinese merchant Zhang Fanglin (Cheang Hong Lim) had built a theater and presented it to the trustees of the Tian Fu Gong (Thian Hock Keng) temple for the performance of plays during festivals. The plays were enjoyed by Mazu (sea goddess) and her attendant deities through the gateway (Vaughan 1971, 58).

Early colonial ethnographic accounts were often permeated with Oriental constructs, and even worse, racial stereotypes that legitimized colonial administration to manage the immigrant populations. For instance, Chinese opera performances were always associated with an unruly and irrational space, where the Chinese audiences smoked, laughed, and chatted loudly. Like Vaughan highlights in his notes, "To a European, one or two visits to the theater suffice for a lifetime. The din, smoke, and foul air within are somewhat too much for his sensibilities" (Vaughan 1971, 86). These ethnographic constructs were to be understood as part and parcel of the enlightenment discourse that promoted rationality and modernity as represented by Western civilizations. In another account made by James Low, he interpreted Chinese ritual opera performances in light of the primitive tradition pertaining to many ancient Western nations (Low 1972, 300). Casting the Chinese operas in an ancient past as being the antithesis to modernity and progress, European travelers' accounts reinforced the colonial representation in which the Chinese theatricals, just like the Chinese immigrants themselves, were cast as uncivilized, irrational, and therefore inferior to European culture.

In 1887, the prominent Qing official Li Zhongjue visited Singapore for two months and wrote a detailed account about the place and its peoples, known as *Xinjiapo fengtu ji* (A description of Singapore in 1887). By then, it was clear that Singapore had a dominant proportion of Chinese immigrants, totaling 86,066. Among them, the Cantonese diaspora ranked the third largest with a population of 14,853, whereas the Hokkiens were the most numerous group (24,981), followed by 22,644 Teochews (Li 1947, 4). Li made special mention about the lively opera performances that were staged in the Chinese section of the colony. "There were both male and all-female troupes performing in Chinese playhouses. Four playhouses were located at *da po* [big town], whereas there were one or two in *xiao po* [small town]. Most of the performances were Cantonese operas, with occasional shows of Hokkien operas and Teochew operas." Adjunct to Chinese playhouses were prostitutes, gambling houses, restaurants, and inns that together catered to the daily needs of Chinese immigrants (Li 1947, 12–13). In contrast, in describing the colonial presence in Singapore, Li Zhongjue was very affirmative toward the British infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools, and museums (ibid., 14). Around the 1930s, the Chinese merchant and intellectual Song Yunpu made a similar comment based on his close encounter with the Chinese community in the British Straits Settlements. According to Song, Chinese opera performances all converged in the area densely populated by the Chinese immigrants and their brothels and gambling houses. Apart from being greatly favored by many diasporic Chinese, these places were seen as unruly, dirty, and full of danger (Song 1930, 60).

The nineteenth-century violent clashes with European imperial powers forced the late Qing government to look up to the West as a model for self-awakening. Enlightened intellectuals in China ardently subscribed to Western ideas of rationality, progress, and science as a recipe for China's modernization. As scholar Yuen-sang Philip Leung comments, the ethnographic accounts by Chinese intellectuals were more of a "gaze," constantly othering local Chinese diasporas so as to initiate self-reflection and self-evaluation about domestic struggles in China (2001, 431). For both European and Chinese travelers, Chinese operas were imbued with in-group fighting by secret societies, gambling, prostitution, and opium smoking. They were portrayed as incompatible with Western rationality and therefore justified the need for colonial administration. To make Chinese operas compatible with the colonial framework, laws were applied to change the structure of Chinese playhouses, which by the early twentieth century had made them resemble European architecture (Liu and Phillips 1988, 27). One such example was Li Chun Yuan (Lai Chun Yuen), located at the center of Chinatown in Singapore. In 1897, the owner of Li Chun Yuan invited the European architect Regent Alfred Bidwell—who also contributed to the building of the Raffles Hotel and Victorian Theatre—to turn the three-story Li Chun Yuan playhouse into Palladian style, resembling architecture in the London metropolis (Zhang 2021a, 29).

Performing revolutions and nationalism

Early colonial ethnographies reinforced the impression that Chinese dialect operas were part of primitive rituals with little real-life significance. Such a rhetoric substantiated social Darwinist thought, which represented the race and culture of the native peoples as backward and uncivilized. However, utilizing local Chinese newspapers dated in the early 1900s and oral histories made by traveling opera performers, I propose an emic point of view to understand the untapped significance of Cantonese operas for China's struggle for modernity and national awakening. The operas were, first and foremost, harbingers of political movements from the homeland to the diasporas. Because of their popularity among illiterate migrant populations, Chinese nationalists used dialect operas to propagate nascent political awareness and modern Chinese nationhood to the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it was the Cantonese opera troupes that acted as the messenger of Chinese revolutions and nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Their being able to tour the revolutionary theatricals from Guangzhou and Hong Kong across the South China Seas to towns and cities in Southeast Asia not only attested to the historical entanglement of China and Southeast Asia but also revealed the transnational dimension of the presumed ethno-linguistically bounded notion of Chinese nationalism.

The alliance that brought nationalistic politics, Chinese diasporas, and opera performances together could be traced to China's Taiping Rebellion of the 1850s. The overt participation of Cantonese opera performers in the movement drew an unprecedented suppression of the Cantonese opera performances by the Qing government. As a result, many opera practitioners fled to Southeast Asia by venturing beyond the vast South China Sea. Later on, when Sun Yat-sen launched a menacing wave of anti-Manchu revolutions in Guangzhou at the turn of the twentieth century, many Cantonese opera practitioners again supported the revolutions by forming a new kind of organization called *zhishiban* (patriot troupe). One of the most well-known *zhishiban* that traveled to Southeast Asia was the Zhen Tian Sheng troupe (Strike the Heavenly Voice). In 1908, the death of Emperor Guangxu and the subsequent nationwide funeral required all entertainment, especially operas, to be halted. Therefore, Zhen Tian Sheng set out on an opera tour in British Malaya in the name of raising funds for the flood relief in South China (Chen 1983, 295). Ostensibly the Southeast Asian tour was for charity purposes, yet underneath it was to propagate revolutionary ideas and conduct political mobilization among the Chinese diasporas.

Such a deliberate cover-up was necessary to circumvent colonial censorship and also to ward off the harassment of reformist groups led by Kang Youwei (Yen 1971, 58–59).

Zhen Tian Sheng's opera tour was definitely political. Its political tone was made evident by the fact that a dominant proportion of its performers were revolutionaries who ardently supported Sun Yat-sen's party Tongmenghui (United Revolutionary League) (Feng 2009, 339). Furthermore, the troupe was closely associated with Sun Yat-sen's overseas mobilization for the 1911 Revolution. Sun himself had greeted the troupe members when the troupe was performing and propagating revolutionary dramas in Singapore. During the important meet-up with Sun at Singapore's Wan Qing Yuan (Sun Yat-sen Nanyang Memorial Hall),[3] many performers readily participated in the oath-swearing ceremony to join Tongmenghui in Singapore (Xie 1983, 244; Feng 2009, 339). Additionally, Cantonese opera performers participated in the frontline of the revolutionary struggles in various ways. Some troupes used their diasporic mobility to transport armaments for the revolutionaries; for example, their opera box was used to store weapons and could be carried around under the nose of British colonial surveillance (Xie 1983, 245).

Sun Yat-sen himself attributed special importance to the role of diasporic Cantonese opera troupes in circulating revolutionary ideas and promoting nationalistic sentiment. Zhenxiang Jushe (Truth Drama Society) formed in Penang had long been supporting Sun's revolutionary activities in British Malaya. In 1922 Sun had a private talk with the members of the troupe, instructing diasporic Cantonese opera performers to continue promoting ideas of the "three principles of the people" among the diasporic Chinese.[4] Sun told performers that *youling* (opera actors) should not be seen as ignorant commoners coming from low social stratas, as they had been in the past. Now they were enlightened fighters just like those revolutionaries and indispensable parts of the success of the revolutions (Xie 1983, 244). Sun's statement clearly illustrated the marriage of Cantonese operas and Chinese national revolutions in the diasporas, blurring the boundary between opera performances and political mobilizations. Suffice it here to conclude that Cantonese operas and troupes in Southeast Asia were very much politicized, being used as a tool to mobilize political resources across the geographical boundaries for China's revolutions.

In terms of the performances, the defining feature of the plays was their strong nationalistic and revolutionary spirit. Plays such as *Jingke* (*Assassin*) were staged by Zhen Tian Sheng in 1908 in Singapore's Li Chun Yuan. *Xu Xilin Qiangshang Enmin* (*Xu Xilin Shot Governor Enmin*) was performed by a number of different *zhishiban* in Singapore, Penang, and Pontianak in Dutch Borneo between 1905 and 1910 (Yen 1971, 59). Plays as such were well known for scenes of violent assassination of Qing officials and emperors. They aimed to provoke radical feelings toward the ruling Qing government, further calling for armed action to overthrow the feudalistic Qing Empire.

More importantly, the routes and itinerary of Zhen Tian Sheng in Southeast Asia well illustrated how the Chinese national consciousness was actually propagated by a group of transnational performer-cum-revolutionaries. In a letter that Sun Yat-sen wrote to Zhuang Yin'an, the president of Tongmenghui in Rangoon (Burma), Sun made special mention of Zhen Tian Sheng and the relevance of its tours to propagate revolutions to the Chinese in Rangoon. The more interesting detail lay in how Sun recounted the itineraries of Zhen Tian Sheng's performing tours:

> Zhen Tian Sheng first arrived at Kuala Lumpur, then it headed to Seremban, from which it made such a reputation that other neighboring states all tried to get in contact with the troupe leaders to have it perform in their theaters. It continued to travel to perform in Taiping, Perak, and finally Penang, completing its tours in British Malaya. After it finished its performances in Penang, the troupe would head to Saigon, after which it returned to Singapore. (Xie 1983, 302)

Sun told Zhuang that he had seen the Zhen Tian Sheng performance in Singapore and was very impressed. He hoped Zhen Tian Sheng would finally make it to Rangoon to spread the revolutionary messages to the Chinese in Burma. Another local news outlet revealed additional details about the performing routes of Zheng Tian Sheng. On March 31, 1909, just when Zheng Tian Sheng was about to complete its tours in Southeast Asia—with a final performance in Singapore's Tong Le Yuan—it received an invitation from Bangkok, asking the troupe to continue its journey to Siam (*Le Bao* 1909). It shows that Zheng Tian Sheng's reputed fame in propagating revolutionary dramas had spread to the Bangkok Chinese community and was very likely to be well received by the revolutionary factions in the Bangkok side. By the time of its Southeast Asian tours, the overall revolutionary influences were surging in the Thai Chinese community. Between 1903 and 1908, Sun Yat-sen had visited Siam four times to mobilize overseas Chinese in Thailand to contribute to the domestic revolutions (Wongsurawat 2019, 21). Throughout these visits, Sun was able to garner support from local Thai Chinese businessmen and leaders. For instance, the respected Thai Chinese community leader and powerful magnate Zheng Zhiyong (Tae Ti Wong) had joined Tongmenghui during Sun's first visit to Bangkok (Murashima 2013, 154). Another influential figure in the local Thai Chinese community was Xiao Focheng (Seow Hoot Seng), a Malaya-born, British-registered Straits Chinese who moved to Siam in childhood with the support of his elite family (Wongsurawat 2019, 55). He became the head of the Siamese branch of Tongmenghui in 1908. After this, the revolutionary consciousness in Siam rose prominently (Murashima 2013, 154). It can be inferred that when Zheng Tian Sheng toured Malaya in 1909, the Siamese revolutionaries were eager to see Bangkok be part of its itinerary. It can likewise be inferred that the fame of Zhen Tian Sheng's tours in British Malaya had spread to Siam, fostering solidarity between revolutionaries in these two places. This was revealing about the existence and operation of the political network, which was reified in Zhen Tian Sheng's tours in Southeast Asia.

A close examination of the history of Zheng Tian Sheng in Southeast Asia unveiled a connected diasporic network that incorporated key nodal points, such as Bangkok in Siam, Saigon in French Indochina, and Rangoon in Burma. What can be inferred from these crisscrossed travel routes was that Zhen Tian Sheng benefited a great deal from the transnational networks cultivated by political mobilizations that connected distinct diasporic societies into meaningful relationships. The connections were not merely two-way—linking China and the Chinese diasporas—but weaved various Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia into a multidirectional pattern. Therefore, Cantonese opera troupes were both the constituent and the fruit of the transnational networks of Chinese nationalism. As Prasenjit Duara elaborates, "the modern nation-state seeks to deploy the frequently older, extraterritorial narratives of racial and cultural community to serve its own needs" (1997, 39). They were themselves "nationalists among transnationals."

In each locality, performance-related affairs including accommodation, tickets, and venues would all be settled by local contacts. These go-betweens usually came from local Chinese business elites, who had the personal connections and power to negotiate with the colonial government. Their status allowed them to mobilize local resources freely. Above all, these people supported Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary cause and its associated opera performances. For example, the debut of Zhen Tian Sheng took place on March 16, 1909 in Singapore. The performance venue was Li Chun Yuan, one of the most well-known Chinese theaters in Singapore. It staged the modern play *Meng Hou Zhong* (*Alarm Bell to Wake Up from Dreams*) to launch criticism about the vices (opium-smoking and superstition) prevalent among the Chinese diasporas (Huang 2019, 184). Significantly, the performance was mediated through the important local contact Lin Yishun (Lim Nee Soon). Lim was a prominent Straits Chinese merchant who had multiple investments in rubber, banking, and plantations. Moreover, he was an esteemed community leader who was particularly dedicated to Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary cause. When Sun established the Singapore branch of Tongmenghui, Lim was in charge of the local social affairs (Song 1923, 516). Therefore, when Zhen Tian Sheng planned a performing tour in Singapore, resourceful local mediators such as Lim would readily help to arrange miscellaneous affairs. Similarly, Zhen Tian Sheng's performing tour to Bangkok was also arranged by prominent Siamese Chinese businessmen (*Le Bao* 1909). According to a local news outlet, immediately after the performances in Singapore, Bangkok Chinese merchants had inquired about its itinerary details, including the name of the steamship to Bangkok, so as to welcome the troupe and arrange for its accommodations in local society (*Le Bao* 1909). Although the identity of this local contact is unknown, it is plausible to suggest that in disparate diaspora contact zones, Cantonese opera troupes' overseas tours were mediated through important local contacts.

Zhen Tian Sheng and many other *zhishiban* indeed played a significant role in awakening early modern Chinese nationhood among Chinese diasporas. Furthermore, what they generated was not merely enthusiasm and passion but also concrete funds and monetary donations, which were circulated back to the motherland to support the revolutionary causes. It is hard to calculate how much capital exactly these opera troupes collected from the audiences; nonetheless, local newspaper reports are helpful to make general suppositions. On March 17, 1909, after Zhen Tian Sheng completed its night show, it was reported that it collected more than $1,500 Straits dollars from the oversea Chinese (*Zhongxing Ribao* 1909). Reporters applauded the mass appeal of the performance by giving special attention to commoners' contributions. For instance, they noted that many vendors had made a great fortune from the night show by simply selling drinks to the audience. Nevertheless, they also contributed their income from the night to the revolutions. Such occasions were numerous, and together they formed a significant part of the revolutions in the motherland that should not be underestimated.

This also confirms the fact that Cantonese opera and opera troupes were deeply grounded in grassroots and working-class Chinese immigrants. Yen Ching-hwang argues, "for the member[s] of [the] upper class . . . because of their wealth and vested interests in maintaining the status quo, they were reluctant to antagonize the Manchu government, let alone to the support the movement in overthrowing it" (Yen 2008, 348). As Rebecca Karl puts it, "by virtue of its very form and history in China, opera could and did reach deeply into the largely illiterate masses" (Karl 2002, 45). Therefore, it would be plausible to infer that the majority of the audiences who fervently supported the revolutions came from the lower and middle strata of the Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia.

Performers, agents, and diaspora networks

Approaching the 1930s, Cantonese opera troupes and performers began to conduct more frequent opera tours in towns and cities across Southeast Asia. Different from their predecessors in the early 1900s, these opera troupes were part and parcel of the commercialization of Chinese theaters in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. They conducted performing tours in Southeast Asia, not through political networks but through the emerging transnational entertainment industry. In conceptualizing cultural mobility, Stephen Greenblatt (2010) advocates studying various "contact zones" where cultural goods are exchanged. In the contact zones, "a specialized group of mobilisers—agents, go-betweens, translators, or intermediaries—often emerges to facilitate contact" (251). I concur with Greenblatt by laying out key intermediaries that helped the troupe to negotiate with diasporic variables. Specifically speaking, mobile mediating agents (individuals and business enterprises) played a key role in forming a meaningful collaborative relationship with itinerant troupes (Zhang 2021b, 193).

The itinerant opera tours in the diasporas were so prevalent that special terms for Cantonese opera performers appeared in Southeast Asia. Veteran male performers who enjoyed stellar popularity were called *laoguan* (senior male performers), and their mobile opera tours were known as *youbu/zoubu* (itinerant tours) (Liu 1965, 172–79). Notably, Cantonese opera performers from Guangzhou and Hong Kong developed a distinguishable practice, namely to form a temporary cooperation with diasporic theaters and troupes. One prerequisite for such a practice was that these *laoguan* had already established a good reputation in the highly commercialized city centers of Guangzhou and Hong Kong (Liang 1982, 285; Lai and Huang 1988, 354–55; Huang 2012, 344–45). Diasporic theater owners and merchants usually devoured their fame and the high-caliber performances in order to attract more diasporic audiences into their theaters. It was this stellar fame that made their diasporic tours desirable. Additionally, local and diasporic troupes emerged that were able to garner resources, including second-tier and third-tier actors, musicians, and other relevant operatic personnel to form a stable operatic structure. In Singapore, for instance, there were two renowned Cantonese opera troupes, Pu Chang Chun and Yong Shou Nian (Liang

1982, 285; Lai 2001, 298). Their opera performances were mostly centered in the theaters of Chinatown neighborhood, including the very prominent ones, Li Chun Yuan, Qing Wei Xin, Qing Sheng Ping, and Tian Yan Stage. The opera performances were so popular and prevailing that local residents began to use *wayang*—a Malay term for street opera—to identify the surrounding streets as "Wayang street" (Liu and Philips 1988, 29).

Additionally, such diasporic mobility was very much dependent on the thriving trading agents who actively mobilized performers to the diasporic theaters. Mobile mediating agents played a very active role in connecting actors in native hometowns to diasporic troupes and theaters. There were numerous small-scale Cantonese opera troupes based in Guangzhou. During the busy season, opera performers would be convened to form a troupe to conduct performances. The rest of the time opera performers were mobilized to other adjunct places wherever there were good performing opportunities (Liu 1965, 172–73). The lack of bonded relationships made these small-scale opera troupe owners remain versatile and flexible in their operatic practice. They were always alerted to potential business opportunities in Southeast Asia; for example, they traded Cantonese opera performers from Guangzhou to diasporic troupes and theaters in French Indochina (ibid., 172–73).

For the theaters in Saigon-Cholon in the southern part of Indochina, diasporic theaters were connected to opera performers through one resourceful agent in Guangzhou: a man named Ma Jingtang. Ma's dominance in the trade of Cantonese opera actors from Guangzhou to the Indo-Chinese diaspora could not be separated from his transnational relationship built with his corresponding partner in Saigon-Cholon, namely his older brother Ma Daxiong. This older brother Ma was said to have run business in Cholon for a long time and was well connected with local secret societies. He often acted as the guarantor of opera performers to negotiate with local colonial authorities in Saigon (Liu 1965, 172–73). It was through his wide social connections that Cantonese opera performers were to find protection in Saigon. Therefore, it is plausible for us to argue that the trust that Cantonese opera actors had given to the big brother Ma must have also been extended to his corresponding younger brother Ma Jingtang on the Guangzhou side.

As the operatic connections between Guangzhou and Cholon were basically monopolized by Ma Jingtang and his brother, other diasporic theaters had to seek alternative connections in order to obtain fresh sources of opera performers. New ways of mobilizing performers had developed, not just along the corridor between native hometowns and diasporas (e.g., between Guangzhou and Cholon) but also among distinct yet connected diasporic societies (e.g., between Singapore and Cholon). Two Cholon theaters—the Tong Qing Theatre and the Da Tong Theatre—had successfully built important linkages with another key nodal point: Singapore. It is especially worth noting that the owner of Tong Qing Theatre in Cholon was a man named Lao Meijing, who was exactly the same person that used to run the Pu Chang Chun troupe in Singapore. While in Singapore, the Pu Chang Chun troupe was bought by the Singapore tycoon Yu Dongxuan (Eu Tong Sen) and was integrated into Yu's theater enterprise Qing Wei Xin. Being squeezed out of the Pu Chang Chun troupe, Lao Meijing found it difficult to establish a foothold in Singapore and decided to seek other opportunities elsewhere. Thereafter, Lao began to run troupes in Kuala Lumpur and finally the Tong Qing Theatre in Saigon-Cholon (Liu 1965, 172–73). More interestingly, the owner of Da Tong Theatre in Saigon-Cholon was a man named Cha Tairong, who turned out to be Lao Meijing's close partner in Singapore. Resembling the experience of Lao Meijing, Cha also had been running theater businesses in many other diasporic places such as Malacca. The success of the Tong Qing Theatre and the Da Tong Theatre in Cholon would not be possible without the connections that these two men had built in Singapore. This might well explain why the two theaters owned by Lao Meijing and Cha Tairong in French Indochina constantly mobilized Cantonese opera actors from the theaters in Singapore, instead of Guangzhou.

Furthermore, the identical experiences of these two men were revealing. Their careers spanned different localities including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Malacca and in the end converged in Cholon. For Lao Meijing and Cha Tairong, failing to do business in one place forced them to seek alternative connections with other diasporas, and this process enabled them to accumulate and diversify their operatic resources. It illustrates the kind of diasporic mobility that was embodied and practiced by opera performers, who saw movement in the region as the basis that sustained their livelihoods.

If these were important individuals who helped to mobilize actors and troupes at a transnational level, there were also endeavors made by more significant transnational enterprises that facilitated the diasporic circulation of actors and opera troupes at a much grander scale. When opera troupes were incorporated into their transnational business empires, the circulation of people, materials, and information became more outstanding. In particular, Yu Dongxuan's engagement in the transnational circulation of Cantonese operas was remarkable. As noted earlier, Yu had bought the Pu Chang Chun troupe and made it part of his theater business in the Singapore Qing Wei Xin theater. However, as a transnational tycoon, Yu's investment was far more than that. Like any rags-to-riches legend about successful diaspora merchants, Yu's father started his small herbal business in a mining town in Perak in 1879. Yu Dongxuan inherited his father's business and successfully made it into a well-known brand, Yu Rensheng (Eu Yan Sang), by launching branches across Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, and South China. Having accumulated great wealth, Yu later further diversified his venture in tin mining, rubber plantations, banking, remittances, as well as theaters. In his recent study of the rise of Cantonese opera, Wing Chung Ng has made a significant discovery of how this transnational operation of Cantonese opera theaters was incorporated into Yu Dongxuan's transnational business network in Singapore and Hong Kong:

> In December 1917, Qing Wei Xin [Heng Wai Sun] first appeared in the business account books of Eu Yan Sang in Hong Kong. An unidentified agent from the Singapore theater first drew $500 in local currency for an unspecified reason and then another $200 for lodging and ship fares. The following year, another agent, named Cai Ying, appeared, and he remained active as a local operative for Qing Wei Xin in Hong Kong through at least 1923. Based on the account entries, Cai's principal task was to take care of the logistics for new recruits under contract and to ensure their smooth departure. Actors coming through Hong Kong under his

> watch included Jinzhong Ming, Xiaosheng Quan. . . . As far as Cai's assignments are concerned, his responsibilities fell under three different areas. First, he arranged the itinerary of a recruit in transit through Hong Kong, including lodging, shipping tickets to Singapore, and safe passage of the actor's wardrobe and personal effects. He also prepared the required documentation for travel, such as visa papers, medical examination reports, any notarized legal document, and proofs of payment of customs. Finally, he was in charge of the disbursement of salaries. (Ng 2015, 143)

Yu's example allows us to catch a glimpse of the operation of transnational ventures and mobile agents that were essential in assuring a safe and smooth journey for Cantonese opera troupes to conduct overseas tours in Southeast Asia (Ng 2011, 445–60).

In spite of the Singapore-based tycoon Yu Dongxuan, the Shaw Brothers had led diasporic Chinese theaters to a golden era. Notably, the Shaw Brothers were crowned as the "kings of entertainment." From the 1930s, the Shaw Brothers began to acquire amusement parks in Singapore and later on expanded the network of amusement parks to the rest of British Malaya. Yet the investment in amusement parks was only one small part of their bigger canvas. According to an advertisement that appeared in the *Nanyang Yearbook* in 1939, the Shaws' business expansion in Southeast Asia included "developing movie markets in Southeast Asia, setting up film studios to produce Chinese sound movies, managing more than sixty theaters in different locations (in Malaya), operating amusement parks, selling equipment and accessories to sound movies and purchasing and distributing Western and Indian cinema" (Yung 2008, 137). It meant the Shaw Brothers were able to control the entertainment market by getting hold of multiple entertainment resources. Moreover, the resources generated from cinemas, theaters, and amusement parks were often interrelated. Business in cinemas and theaters overlapped each other and could be used in innovative ways to maximize profits. For example, the first Cantonese opera movie *Bai Jin Long* (*White Golden Dragon*) that was made and distributed by the Shaw Brothers in Southeast Asian cinemas was so successful that the main Cantonese opera actor Xue Juexian (Sit Kok Sin) was elevated to the number one stellar performer in the Cantonese opera circle. The Shaw Brothers quickly spotted Xue's potential and recruited him into their transnational entertainment empire. For example, Xue was exclusively sponsored by the Shaw Brothers to conduct diasporic opera tours, performing in their theaters and amusement parks across Malaya. The case illustrated here clearly exemplifies the cross-influence and the mutually reinforcing effects of movies and theaters under the Shaws' entertainment empire. It signaled another phase of development, contrasting with their predecessor Yu Dongxuan (Zhang 2021a, 39).

Incorporating opera performers and troupes into the transnational empire was not a new strategy; however, what distinguished the Shaw Brothers' transnational operation from their predecessors was the extensive network of amusement parks and theaters that acted as the key nodes of connection to circulate actors and troupes regionally and transnationally (Zhang 2121a: 39). Once a performer became part of their entertainment empire, he would be mobilized to any of the Shaws' theaters and amusement parks, for example from the Great World in Singapore to the Bukit

Bingtang Park in Kuala Lumpur, or to the Jubilee Park in Ipoh (Cheong 1996, 12). As Yung has summarized, "in order to provide a constant supply of new faces and fresh entertainment to the chain of amusement parks, local artists and troupes were absorbed into the company. They were either acquired or subsidized by Shaw Brothers to tour in the big cities on the Malay Peninsula, moving from stage to stage along the company's circuit of amusement parks and theaters" (Yung 2008, 143).

Returning with "Nanyang fame"

For earlier migrant generations, *Xia Nanyang* ("sail downward to the South Seas") was often described as a popular option that afforded great fortune and opportunity. In the eyes of domestic opera critics, Nanyang or Southeast Asia[5] was a propitious land yet artistically inferior and culturally ignorant compared to the modernizing mother country. Opera troupes from China set the high-quality benchmark that diasporic performers and troupes eagerly followed and adopted. In the 1930s Nanyang was increasingly portrayed as a place of openness and diversity, a land that could nurture many innovative opera practices. Specifically, Cantonese opera performers had long ago found the overseas diasporas much freer and a more accommodating place for innovation. So, instead of portraying the opera tours as a one-way dissemination, I argue for a circular process, which allows one to see new opera practices that not only thrived in the diasporas but also traveled back to the native place and stirred up great excitement. The life trajectory of the renowned Cantonese stellar performer Ma Shizeng (Ma Sze-Tsang) was illustrative to see how the Nanyang experiences shaped his performing epistemology and underlay the way he achieved his status.

In addition to the aforementioned *laoguan*, a new title emerged to refer to the opera performers who were trained in the diasporas and gained a reputation in Nanyang, rather than native hometowns. They were called *zhoufu laoguan* (senior male performer in Malaya), referring to those male performers whose activities were mostly concentrated on touring different parts of British Malaya. Ma Shizeng, one of the *zhoufu laoguan*, was a household name; he was a dedicated reformer, a talented opera performer, and, most importantly, a key innovator of Cantonese operas. Whereas many are familiar with Ma's artistic accomplishments, little was known about his experience in Nanyang before he became a household name. Examining his personal biography, this section reveals that his sojourn experience in Malaya and Singapore from 1918 to 1923 was a milestone in his operatic training and practice.

Unlike many great *laoguan* from Guangzhou and Hong Kong who received first-class treatment, Ma's first encounter with Singapore was not a fancy story. In 1918 the Qing Wei Xin theater in Singapore came to Guangzhou to recruit new faces. Together with ten other young apprentices, Ma was sold to the theater for only 30 Straits dollars; henceforth began his diasporic life and career (Ma 2016, 14–16). While working in Qing Wei Xin, Ma met the great master Xiaosheng Quan, who taught him a number of classic Cantonese opera plays. With the help of Xiaosheng Quan, Ma was then introduced to the Yao Tian Cai troupe to join a month-long tour in Genting in the western part of Malaya. After the tour, another troupe agent from Kampar in the Perak state of Malaya spotted Ma's talent and recruited him to tour

Kampar for another month. However, after the contract, Ma suddenly became jobless and tried to make a living by working as a street hawker and plantation miner. Such a difficult struggle was a common episode in the life history of many diasporic performers, who often found themselves both obsessed with diasporic mobility and troubled by the uncertainties and risks it brought along (Ma 2016, 14–16). Clutching at straws, Ma saw an opportunity when the Ping Tian Cai troupe from Penang happened to be performing in Perak. During his time in Ping Tian Cai, the great *laoguan* Liang Yuanheng was conducting his tour in Penang and joined the troupe for a co-performance. This great master Liang saw Ma's potential and soon took him back to Singapore as his apprentice; so began the turning point in Ma Shizeng's performing career (Ma 2016, 18–19). In 1923 Cantonese operas achieved full-fledged commercialization in Guangzhou and Hong Kong, whereby the opera circle was dominated by three rival troupes (each with their own stellar performers): Li Yuan Le, Ren Shou Nian, and Xin Zhong Hua. Ma was recruited into one of them, Ren Shou Nian, as a first-tier actor whose "Nanyang fame" was greatly admired and celebrated by the theaters in Guangzhou and Hong Kong.

Notably, Ma's Nanyang fame was deeply entrenched in his virtuosity in multiple roles and his ability to eclectically fuse and integrate operatic stunts from other genres. This operatic epistemology was shaped by a unique system of training that could only be found in Nanyang, and from the practice of *youbu/zoubu* (itinerant tours). As has been articulated earlier, traveling opera performers from Guangzhou usually formed a temporary cooperation with diasporic troupes. While in Singapore and Malaya, Ma had plenty of opportunities to perform with the famous traveling *laoguan.* For example, he learnt to sing *luantan* (operatic tunes in Peking opera) from the famous *laoguan* Kuang Xinhua, who joined the Yao Tian Cai troupe in Genting (Ma 2016, 15). While in the Ping Tian Cai troupe, Ma got the chance to co-perform the famous civil play *Dian, Chao, Fei, Han* (Crazy, Mockery, Decadence, Stupidity) with the first-tier actor Liang Shaofeng (who was also the playwright of the drama). Ma was also asked to perform multiple roles in the Ping Tian Cai troupe, becoming a versatile actor in both the female warrior, young scholar, and comedy roles (Ma 2016, 18–19). From the great master Liang Yuanheng in Singapore's Pu Chang Chun troupe, Ma learned the four bases in Chinese opera conventions, namely the *shou* (hand), *yan* (eye), *shen* (body), and *bu* (step) (Zhongguo xiquzhi 1993, 525). This cooperation system fostered the transference of operatic knowledge, expertise, and skills from different masters to the diasporic performers. It was challenging in a sense that one had to be familiar with new scripts, get to know about the acting style of the partner, and at the same time grasp every opportunity to learn artistic skills from them. When Ma finally was able to do all these stunts, the *laoguan* left for his next port of tour. Ma would be prepared to work with another traveling *laoguan*, who had new practices that Ma would have to learn to integrate into his own performing system.

However, when Ma returned to Guangzhou and first greeted the picky domestic audiences, it was an unhappy experience. Guangzhou audiences found Ma's self-invented singing style *Qi'er hou* extremely awkward and weird. It was a new and rare singing style that used a coarse and loud voice to imitate the wretched comedy roles, such as vagrants and beggars (Zhongguo xiquzhi 1993, 525). Whereas Nanyang

Chinese welcomed it for its hilarious effects, domestic audiences found it rough and did not suit their aesthetic habits (Chen 2007, 4). To attract the domestic audiences to come to his performances, Ma thought about performing original humor plays that he had created for the Nanyang audiences, such as *Guguai gongpo*, also known as *Jiayou rongbing* (*Weird Old Couple*). This was a play that exemplified the convergence of innovations drawing upon a wide range of opera influences during Ma's sojourn in Nanyang. In this play, Ma first utilized combat conventions from *jingju* (Peking opera), which was known by its northern-style martial arts. During his time in Singapore, Ma often encountered traveling *jingju* troupes from Shanghai, and he grasped every opportunity to learn *jingju* stunts from experienced performers (Chen 2007, 5; Ma 2016, 23). As it turned out, the traditional Cantonese audiences in Guangzhou were amazed by the fusion of northern-style martial arts that used spades and spears to fight and dance.

Cantonese operas had a definite categorization of role types, which were traditionally separated into *wenweusheng* (young civil-martial male), *xiaosheng* (young scholar), *wusheng* (bearded warrior), *zhenyin huadan* (young belle), *erbang huadan* (secondary young belle), and *chousheng* (comedian) (Rao 2017, 87). However, in this play, Ma broke down the rigid categories by allocating the comedy stunts to several other role types that included bearded warrior and young scholar. In such a way, the art of comedy roles was greatly enriched and diversified (Ma 2016, 24). As it turned out, the play *Weird Old Couple* offered Guangzhou audiences intense fighting scenes plus amusing comic stunts, helping Ma Shizeng to gain recognition from the domestic opera circle. His *Qi'er hou* was also accepted and became the signature of his opera art. Ma stood out and rose to prominence not only because he had acquired high caliber performing skills, but also because he embodied the kind of innovative spirit that was crucial to reform and refine the art of Cantonese operas.

From the 1930s, Nanyang, especially Singapore where Ma Shizeng was trained, began to present itself to the traveling subjects as a place of mobility, openness, and diversity. This unique Nanyang ecology nurtured many talented opera performers. Ma's rising career was a perfect illustration of how the mobility of the diasporic opera provided a different system of training and practice. In this system, performers were often exposed to a great variety of operatic skills and performing styles, which through a proper innovative cross-fertilization would become a signature art of diasporic performers. Versatile performing skills became the core of the Nanyang fame that the domestic opera circle began to crave.

Another important practice that stirred no small controversy in the opera circle in China was the *nannü tongtai* (co-ed performance). It was controversial, because the idea of separation of the sexes was not only deeply rooted in people's moral conception but also entangled with power and politics. Men and women were referred to as "binary categories of persons with complementary but separate roles to play in the household and in society at large. The 'inner' sphere confining women to the household, out of sight, was seen as a necessary counterpart to the 'outer' sphere where men moved about freely" (Mann 2011, 47). Females were not supposed to go to theaters, not to mention perform on the public stage. When actresses did appear on the stages in the early republican era, they were either thought of as inferior by artistic standards or unchaste representations of modern womanhood. Throughout the first two decades of the 1900s, laws were issued in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjing, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong to suppress the all-female troupes and male-female co-ed performances (Luo 2005; Qiao 2010).

However, on the overseas stages in Nanyang, it was totally a different scene. Opera actresses found Nanyang a much freer and more accommodating place for them. For example, *laoguan* Chen Feinong recollected that during his sojourn in Singapore, he learnt the skills of *tiannü sanhua* ("maiden in heaven showering flowers") from a *jingju* actress Shisan Dan. This performance was later popularized by Mei Lanfang on the international stage (Chen 1983, 6–7). Several actresses who later shined in the theaters of Guangzhou and Hong Kong all emerged on the stages of the Chinese diasporas, either in Nanyang or in American Chinese theaters. For example, Li Xuefang from the all-female troupe Qun Fang Yan Ying once toured with Ma Shizeng in America and was especially well received among overseas Chinese Americans (Zhongguo xiquzhi 1993, 520).

In 1936, the major entertainment magazine in South China *Youyou* drew domestic audiences' attention to the popularity of the co-ed performances among diasporic Chinese. It reported that huge profits were generated from the tickets sold every night by co-ed performances in Nanyang (Liyuan 1936). When diasporic troupes set out for their return journey to Guangzhou, news about their co-ed performances began to spread (*Youyou* 1936a). Their success was used by the Guangzhou opera circle to petition for the further lifting of the ban, helping the opera circle to break away from the traditional confinement imposed on the bodies of male and female performers (*Youyou* 1936b). To recapitulate, underneath the Nanyang fame was the notion of mobility and diversity that traveling performers had been practicing. Opera performers traveled frequently, met with different famous stellar performers, co-performed on different stages across Southeast Asia, and cross-fertilized them into the Nanyang version of the Cantonese opera art.

Conclusion

This article locates the transnational history of Cantonese operas in three prominent aspects, namely, political mobilizations around the 1900s, commercial opera agents and networks, and aesthetic innovation and circulation that culminated in the 1930s. Throughout the processes, multidirectional networks and linkages functioned dynamically to facilitate the transformation of Cantonese operas in both diasporas and the homeland. Much has been written about how social and political movements in China influenced Chinese diasporas through print capitalism that disseminated discourses of revolutions and nationalism. However, opera performances as an important means of cultural production that enjoyed wider appeal than newspapers, especially among illiterate immigrant communities, received less attention (Zhang 2021a, 177). The marriage between Cantonese opera troupes and Chinese revolutions further illustrates how ideas of nationalism relied on its antithesis in the transnationalism that popularized the ideas of modern Chinese nationhood. Moreover, Cantonese opera troupes' involvment in the political mobilizations for

China's national awakening also negated the early colonial ethnographic gaze that cast Chinese operas as purely irrational and primitive.

When it comes to the commercial opera tours in the 1930s, the diasporic networks functioned more effectively as opera troupes, and performers organized themselves in order to gather information, look for business opportunities, and negotiate with diasporic variables. Following these individual mediating efforts, there further emerged the earliest batch of transnational tycoons, including the Singapore-based Cantonese merchant Yu Dongxuan and the Shaw Brothers. Coming from different backgrounds, they each gave shape to distinct transnational operations, which helped to institutionalize the practices of transnational operatic tours by incorporating every procedure into their business empires, from recruiting actors, to providing direct transportation, to the offering of a ready Nanyang market. Such fresh operations illustrated the kind of multidirectional diasporic networks that were embodied and practiced by individual agents, tycoons, and transnational entrepreneurs, who all came to regard diasporic mobility as an essential way of life in this part of the world.

Additionally, thanks to the thriving commercial networks and the expanding entertainment market in the colony, there emerged a subtle but evident shift in mentality about the people conducting diasporic opera tours. Specifically, the unique diasporic ecology modified operatic practices in a way that they could speak back to the presumed "cultural center" of the homeland. For example, traveling Cantonese opera actor Ma Shizeng was known to return to homeland Guangzhou with a unique Nanyang fame after sojourning and performing in Southeast Asia for several years. The diasporic mobility allowed him to travel to different localities, accumulate diverse operatic resources, and integrate such diversity into his own performing system. It was such transnational experiences that made him the pioneer and innovator of Cantonese operas in China. By and large, zooming into the routes, itineraries, and networks developed by traveling Cantonese operas troupes and performers, this article reveals a circular and interactional process that bore witness to a crucial artistic transformation in the Sinitic heritage from the turn of the twentieth century to its golden era in the 1930s. Above all, the cultural and historical analysis that I have woven rightfully provides an alternative insider's view as opposed to the Orientalist constructs about Chinese operas made by European travelers and diplomats.

NOTES

1. Chinese operas in Southeast Asia were divided into several regional genres distinguished by different southern dialects as spoken by each linguistic or speech group. These included the Cantonese originating from the Pearl River Delta in southern parts of China; Hokkiens from southern Fujian province along the southeast coast of China; Teochews from the eastern part of Guangdong province; Hakkas, who resided in many different parts of Guangdong and Fujian; and Hainanese from Hainan province.

2. There is a growing literature in the cultural area that addresses multidirectional networks (Frost 2005; Dean and Zheng 2010; Chia 2020).

3. "Zhang Yongfu (Teo Eng Hock), a Straits-born Teochew merchant, bought the Villa in 1905 for his aged mother to spend her sunset years there, and accordingly renamed it 'Serene Sunset

Villa/Garden' (Wan Qing Yuan). When Teo later became entangled with China's republican revolutionary movement, he offered the Villa as a base from which to plan the overthrow of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of a modern republic" (Huang and Hong 2004, 66).

4. This is a political philosophy developed by Sun Yat-sen and was used as a governing principle of the Republic of China. The three principles are summarized as nationalism, democracy, and social welfare.

5. Nanyang literally means the South Seas, referring to the current-day geographical region of Southeast Asia. This term is often used by the Chinese immigrants to refer to their diasporic travels in places like British Malaya, the Dutch Indies, the Philippines, French Indochina, and Thailand. Here "*Xia Nanyang*" was the phrase often used by itinerant opera performers to refer to their overseas performing tours.

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“Living the Life of My Choice”

Lifestyle Migrants in Rural Japan Balancing between Local Commitment and Transnational Cosmopolitanism

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic at the time of writing this article (November 2020), the 2008 Lehman Shock, and governmental revitalization policies introduced by the Abe government have resulted in a rise in urban lifestyle migrants who relocate to rural areas across Japan for noneconomic reasons. This ethnographic article focuses on individuals in Tokushima and Shimane Prefectures. Critically questioning conventional notions of work and lifestyle, these individuals struggle to implement their ideal lifestyles in their rural environments that are often characterized by deeply ingrained local societal norms and values. Drawing on longitudinal fieldwork since 2016, I will examine three cases of lifestyle migrants who have chosen to pursue radically different careers. While they make great efforts to blend into the community that they have relocated to, they also refer to transnational features in their pursuit of experimental lifestyles. This multi-sited ethnography aims to explore the “power of the between” by Paul Stoller (2009) and the “potential of the liminal” coined by Vincent Crapanzano (2004) as my interlocutors courageously carve out original careers that are catered to their own needs, but also engage with the local community.

Keywords: Lifestyle migration—liminality—(im)mobility—subjective well-being—multi-sited ethnography—agency

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The ongoing pandemic has highlighted the excessive rigidity of corporate work in Japan, with the exception of IT ventures and international companies. According to a survey commissioned by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare between August and October 2020 with a sample of 3,788 companies (18.9 percent response rate), 34 percent responded that remote work has been introduced at their workplace or that the system of remote work does not exist, but there are employees who practice remote work. While politicians and entrepreneurs commit half-heartedly to enforcing remote work and more flexible modes of work in general, they most probably do not realize that their to-ing and fro-ing has already cost them dearly. Recent statistics by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications published in October 2020 indicate that more individuals have been leaving Tokyo than moving to the capital for four months in a row, with departures having increased by a striking 10.6 percent compared to one year before (NHK 2020). Many creative, highly educated individuals have made their choices and left corporate work or chosen to pursue new professional paths. Instead, they have relocated to rural areas in order to carve out careers that make more sense to them and facilitate sustainable lifestyles that permit more time with their family, more time for themselves, and more self-determination and freedom in the daily implementation of their work; in some cases, settlers strive for environmentally friendly lifestyles. Sustainability is meant in both a personal and environmental sense here. Ultimately, the stories that follow give us insightful examples to reflect on the limits of economic growth in what Hiroi Yoshinori refers to as "post-capitalism" (2019, iii).

In this study, I will explore the narratives and trajectories of three lifestyle migrants who I have followed since 2016. Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly have defined lifestyle migration as "the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer potential of a better quality of life" (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2). My main interest is to explore and reflect on how features that have conventionally been dismissed rather negatively as "in-between" tie in with migrants' satisfaction about their quality of life in their newly chosen places of residence. After all, all three migrants state that they are highly satisfied with their present life, despite the fact that they earn less than in their previous careers in urban areas.

My original plan was to go back to these field sites and spend more time with my interlocutors. However, the ongoing pandemic at the time of writing this article (November 2020) made this impossible. For this reason, I conducted online follow-up interviews on Zoom in October 2020 to see how my collaborators are doing since the last time I spoke to them and spent time with them in the field. The interviews lasted between 1.5 and two hours and were conducted in Japanese.

My own identity as a European researcher living in Japan may have facilitated rapport with my interviewees, as we shared many experiences, values, and interests. Thinking back, I remember the salty smell of the sea, the fragrance of fresh herbs cultivated in the garden of one of my interviewees, and the visceral if ephemeral nature of animated conviviality—memories that seem more distant now than ever in the midst of an extended global pandemic.

However, given these experiences of time spent together and shared space, it was much easier to relate to my interlocutors and inquire about intimate issues such as liminality and feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. I agree with Paul Stoller that engagement in long-term research helps scholars to "achieve even a modicum of ethnographic understanding given the complexity of social and cultural conditions in transnational spaces" (Stoller 2009, 59). Although my field may not seem transnational at first sight, I posit that the past experiences of my interlocutors make their practices and narratives intrinsically translocal, and in some cases transnational. Migrants have brought their favorite Scandinavian blankets to their rural homes; they continue online conversations with friends overseas and cook foreign dishes with local ingredients. Conducting follow-up interviews after four to five years allowed me to resume the conversation with my collaborators, drawing on a relationship of trust infused with humor and the memories of common time spent years ago while discussing ontological themes of great depth.

As a matter of fact, mobilities studies scholar Noel Salazar defines mobility "as an assemblage of movement, social imaginaries, and experiences of people on the move and their translocal linkages" (Acharya 2016, 34). Salazar's understanding of mobility as intricately related to connections beyond bounded sites naturally ties in with cosmopolitanism in the sense of "world citizenship" (ibid., 37). The idea that individuals could feel "at home everywhere" (ibid., 37) and "live a lifestyle founded upon traveling and measuring 'transnational value' through cultural contacts while void of cultural prejudice" (Kleingeld and Brown 2013, cited in Acharya 2016, 37–38) features in all three narratives discussed in the following section. In a similar vein, a relational understanding of place as argued by Doreen Massey is also salient in the following vignettes: "What defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself" (1994, 5).

In describing what they find appealing or lacking about their newly chosen place of residence, individuals invariably refer to places beyond, places that they have previously inhabited or visited. This echoes Pnina Werbner's interpretation of cosmopolitanism as "an ethical outlook and openness to the world that develops over time" (Werbner 2017, 32). As settlers draw on their cosmopolitan experiences, lifestyle migrants shape their places of living according to their needs and expectations. Their narratives shed light on the complex processual nature of blending in, sticking out, liking and disliking, and accepting a place. This understanding of place as lines of movement echoes Tim Ingold's "meshworks" that people make and remake through their movements (2007). The focus of this article on the ambiguity that arises from mobility also resonates with Blai Guarne and Paul Hansen's understanding of circulation as "an open-ended process that is shaped by tensions, contradictions and ambiguities that are represented, reproduced and sustained in the circulation process itself through which ideas, things and people are assembled" (2018, 3).

The state of being "in-between" has generally been depicted as a preliminary zone that separates actors into committing to a "sense of mutuality or of alienation" (Boccagni and Brighenti 2017). Rather than a binary, however, I suggest that migrants' narratives indicate an ongoing interplay of reciprocity and departure, or to use Aurora Massa's terms, "a pendulum that swings between mobility and immobility" (2021, 69).

Related to this, another aim of this study is to elucidate the intricate concurrence of (im)mobility in the daily lives, thoughts, and practices of lifestyle migrants. Liisa Malkki has written about "sedentary metaphysics" (1992), arguing that conventional understanding assumes sedentary lifestyles as the only way of life. Lifestyle migrants tend to be associated with the other end of the spectrum, namely permanent mobility. However, their narratives and trajectories contain subtle negotiations of sedentary and mobile features after their relocation to rural regions. In this regard, the findings of this article resonate with Jamie Coates's research into the tension between belonging and mobility in the divided subjectivities and mobile lifestyles of transnational Chinese migrants in Japan (2019).

This article is structured as follows: after examining the trajectories and narratives of three lifestyle migrants in two field sites in Western Japan, I will explore the common features and differences of the individual vignettes with regard to translocalism, cosmopolitanism, agency, and (im)mobility. A final section will reflect on how these episodes matter in the metacontext of lifestyle, leisure, and work of post-growth societies.

For this study, these three interviewees have been selected for their strong overseas relationships (through study, travel, and leisure) before their relocation and their work that is (for some, literally) grounded in the local community. Furthermore, I have known all three participants between four and five years, having had the chance to observe their long-term activities in the field.

Between mini-bonsai and stationary entrepreneurship: The fabulous world of Aki

"Rather than flowers I like dried branches, decorating with acorns . . . and it's also fun to look for stones" (*Hana yori kareta eda suki de . . . sore o kazattari donguri toka . . . ato ishi o hirou no mo tanoshii*) (interview, October 9, 2020).

Seven years ago, Aki relocated from Tokyo to a small town in Tokushima Prefecture with idyllic landscapes (see figure 1). Having grown up in a neighborhood of housing complexes in Chiba Prefecture, she remembers that she has had an interest in rural life from early on. In her childhood she felt that she could never roam about freely

Figure 1. Rural landscape in Tokushima Prefecture. Photo by Susanne Klien.

in nature because it was forbidden to pick flowers or other things. Life in Tokushima is enjoyable to her, because she can pick what she likes—branches, leaves, stones, acorns—and take it all home for decoration.

At the age of twenty-two she joined a one-year boat trip with the nongovernmental organization Peace Boat. After her return to Japan, she felt that she wanted to see more of her own country and joined farm stays in the countryside. She was impressed by rural residents habitually making and repairing a lot of things by themselves and specifically their skill to solve most of the problems in their houses and surroundings by themselves. Aki felt that she wanted to emulate that in the future. "I want to become a farmer, literally [the Japanese term means one hundred jobs, *hyakushō*] so that I can do all kinds of things by myself. Make stuff, repair things. Right now, I am not doing that. I can fix the window screen [*amido*]. I try to solve things by myself, but if I can't manage, I reach out for help. I guess this is why I buy more equipment than before" (interview, October 9, 2020). And it was back then that she started to think about her dream of having her own shop, working at her own pace, and cultivating her own field to grow vegetables.

During the first three years after her relocation to Tokushima Prefecture, she worked as a regional revitalization cooperation officer (*chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai*) for the local government.[1] The program has been highly popular with relatively young urbanites trying to start a second professional career. Working as a regional revitalization cooperation officer gave Aki plenty of opportunities to engage with the local community and think about what to do after the expiration of her contract. Three years ago, she managed to find the perfect place to realize her dream: she found a two-story house in the center of the town that seemed appropriate for opening her own stationery shop and lives on the second floor of the shop. In addition, she produces decorative miniature plants (*bonsai*) with a friend on Saturdays and one to two weekdays. In the mornings she engages in temporary work such as seasonal agricultural work.

"It's difficult to make a living from a stationery shop, so I have never planned on earning my income from that. I thought it would be good to have another job, so I got involved in the bonsai project. Now I am doing these two jobs and it's just right for me. I don't think I am the kind of person to work voraciously. . . . I prefer to work with a long-term perspective but in accordance with my own pace. If I have enough money to pay my bills that's OK. I don't have grand ambitions, I just want to do what I like. Sometimes I do short-term work to pay my bills" (interview, October 9, 2020).

The stationery shop is usually open for a few hours in the afternoon or evening, three or four days a week. Aki regularly updates the homepage of her shop to announce the opening hours for every week.

Aki narrates that this March, she helped with the harvesting of carrots. She laughs that it was physically exhausting as she had to pick and pack carrots into boxes from 6:30 am to the late afternoon every day. The most exhausting seasonal work she has done so far was packing tea leaves into plastic bags at the local farming association.

According to Aki, the fact that she can combine several sorts of work makes her highly satisfied with her present life. She says that she is very happy. If she just did her work in the stationery shop, she might get bored. At the same time, she laughs that there are times when she would like to decrease the amount of work she does. But generally, she takes on all work that she is asked to do if she thinks that she can do it.

Her problem these days is her lack of holidays—she never gets a break, as she also works on weekends. In addition to the multiple jobs she has taken on, she is actively engaged in the local traditional dance group, which meets several times a week in the evenings. Her deep engagement with the local community is also evident from the fact that she regularly goes for drinks with local residents. "I often go out with senior men who are the age of my father or older," she giggles (interview, October 9, 2020). This is not surprising, given that rural Japan has faced high levels of aging, with some areas having 30%–50% senior citizens. This demographic change is also evident in the daily scenery of rural towns (figure 2).

Another issue she mentions is the pressure to marry. At her age of thirty-five, rural residents often mention the topic to her or introduce potential partners. "It is

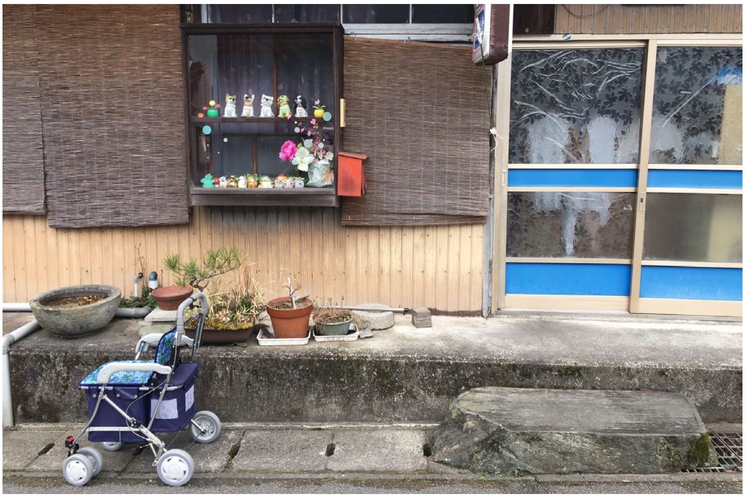

Figure 2. Signs of aging in rural Japan. Photo by Susanne Klien.

a bit of a hassle. But after all, there is no point if I don't think it is the right person. I just say, 'if the timing is right . . . in the future.' And there are a lot of people who get divorced. Apart from that I don't really feel any pressure here."

"I want to go to Costa Rica one more time . . .": Local commitment and translocal cosmopolitanism

Aki's eyes start gleaming when we discuss global traveling. She mentions that she once visited the Easter Islands for a whole month and was deeply impressed. She made local friends and was taken to a local banana farm. "I wish I could go to Costa Rica one more time, the nature there was fantastic. Nature here [in this local town] is amazing as it is, but there is no jungle here really [laughs]. Being here after a rain is incredible—just seeing these landscapes makes me so happy" (interview, October 9, 2020; see figure 3).

Like the majority of other lifestyle migrants I interviewed, Aki has plenty of overseas traveling experience and perceives her present local life in comparison with this experience. While Aki seems content with her present sedentary life and does not mention plans of overseas relocation in the future, she says that she would like to travel to Taiwan and other places for short-term trips. Her wide traveling experiences overseas as well as across Japan have made her confident that she could blend in and feel at home anywhere. Indeed her social skills, cheerfulness, and quiet but determined and industrious character have made her popular in the small town.

Yu's travels and quest for the good life: From publishing to fisheries

Having interviewed Yu in 2016 and having discussed his trajectory in previous research (Klien 2020, 50–51), it feels great to catch up in a follow-up interview conducted on Zoom due to the pandemic. Now forty-one, but looking more like he is in his mid-thirties, Yu has hardly changed and is still working for the local fisheries

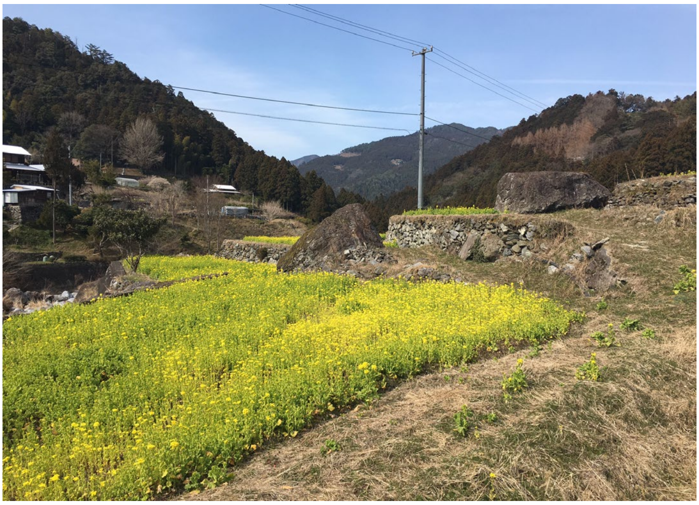

Figure 3. Verdant rape flowers against the background of the local "jungle." Photo by Susanne Klien.

on the remote island in Shimane Prefecture that he relocated to ten years ago with his family after having worked for a reputable publisher in Tokyo for 8.5 years. In 2019 Yu spent three months in the south of France with his family for vacation and study of local wines. It turns out that his new plan is to set up his own winery in the long term. He talks about visiting a well-known organic winery in Okayama Prefecture next month.

After their stay in France, Yu and his wife and two children traveled across the country to visit various friends. After their return to the island, he concedes that he felt that time has not progressed on the island (*anmari jikan ga susundeinai you ni miete tatta yonkagetsu*) and that the lack of things seems conspicuous, like the lack of public parks (interview, October 24, 2020).

Born in Yokohama, Yu has perceived his new place of residence in multilayered ways from the very start of his life there. On the one hand, he has made a strong commitment by choosing the option of working in the fisheries, as it involves sedentary work with local resources. On the other hand, he has always kept a keen eye on life overseas. Having spent a study stay in the US as a teenager, he embodies a natural flair for cosmopolitanism.

> For me, it does not really make a difference where I live. I have an ideal of how a community should be, what does this community look like. I have really understood the importance of things rooted in the soil. Until then I imagined it. But that does not mean that one has to be in that place forever physically speaking, since the relationship with the place continues. This is why I don't think it matters where one is to maintain this relationship. I get the sense that it is better to have several places like that . . . the number of friends also increases as a result. I think we could be happier if we had two places. (Interview, October 24, 2020)[2]

Yu's strong commitment to the local community evidently concurs with an inherently translocal outlook. After our initial interview four years ago, the friend who had introduced us and I were kindly invited to Yu's house. We were treated to a delicious meal, and I was impressed by the way he used fresh herbs from his garden to decorate the delicious local fish. Back then, his strong respect for the local community and local food and customs were hard to miss. And yet he also talked of how important it was for him to make sure that his children received an international education and mindset.

When I ask him whether he feels like an islander, Yu replies,

> I have a strong sense that I am . . . but how should I describe it. . . . I am someone who lives here, but I am not someone who was born here, so I am not a local . . . but personally, I don't think it makes much sense to distinguish people who were born here and who came here later. If one lives in a place, one becomes a member of that society . . . although I don't have a sense of belonging really. . . . When locals ask me whether I intend to bury my bones on the island [*hone o uzumeru*], I always say that I don't know. I have been asked this question right from when I moved here. I don't feel much stress here, the only thing that bothers me is that the speed of change is slow. I am not comparing it to other societies, but it just seems slow, relatively speaking. In this regard, it feels stressful." (Interview, October 24, 2020)

Whereas Yu states that his rate of satisfaction with his present life is high, he mentions his next big dream of setting up his own winery. The place is not determined yet, but he aims to make wine that fits the local food.

In other words, Yu is constantly reinventing himself in his quest for the good life. In his own view, his work as a publisher and his present work in the local fisheries association are not that different. While the means may be different, both revolve around communicating his values and ideals to his customers, hoping that they will consider them as something worthwhile. He hopes to use wines as a tool to communicate his values and ideals about how to live and his ideas about an ideal society. In his own words, "making sure that he is growing as a person is a constant source of positive stress" for him (*jibun ga seichō dekiteiru ka douka tte tsune ni motteiru positive na stress ka na*) (ibid.).

Yu describes his task of bringing change to the local fisheries. He mentions that the bluefin tuna has reached a dangerous limit, and yet Japan's measures to do something about this are way too slow compared to other countries. He indicates that communicating the merits of sustainable seafood to islanders is a big challenge. Throughout our entire conversation, Yu clearly approaches all issues simultaneously from a local and a translocal perspective. He may be one of the highly driven lifestyle migrants who seem satisfied with their decision to relocate to rural Japan; yet they are constantly seeking new opportunities to reinvent themselves in their insatiable quest for the good life.

"Fifteen seconds between my home and the office": Naoto's life on a remote island as luxury

"When I was running after the clouds, that was actually during work. It's a total red flag at the Japanese workplace to do that kind of thing [i.e., procrastinate]. Since I have the time to do that kind of thing, communicating things about the island to non-residents is something that is more than just a thing I have to do for work. I feel that I can do my work in a free manner."

Four years have passed since I spent time with Naoto, who is in his early thirties (Klien 2020, 108ff). Being my literal host during fieldwork on a remote island in western Japan, we shared the same accommodation, although we saw one another less than anticipated due to our intense (field)work commitments; we also met up in Tokyo at a relocation fair three years ago. "I still have no interest in Shimane Prefecture," he laughs drily at the start of our conversation. He looks unchanged, perhaps healthier. The follow-up interview reveals that his negative view of the island back then has been replaced with a quiet respect for the local community. I am surprised that Naoto, who used to make sarcastic jokes about everything and anything, now talks about his "reverence of nature" (*shizen o daiji ni to iu ka aijō o motte*) (interview, October 13, 2020). "I have started to engage with nature consciously through my work, so work and life are intricately related now." Naoto works for a culinary project that invites chefs from across Japan for a limited period of time to educate young individuals aiming to become chefs, using fresh local ingredients. Naoto is in charge of overall coordination, making sure that the exchange goes smoothly.

Having graduated from a top university in Tokyo, Naoto took on a corporate job in a well-reputed but traditional company. For him, the prospect of having the opportunity to work overseas seemed the big attraction, as he had spent several months in Moscow as a student. Once he joined the company, it turned out that overseas work did not necessarily mean working with the locals. Disillusioned, he quit his job—only to find that the new job an acquaintance had promised him did not work out at the last minute. Facing unemployment for several months, he remembers that he spent his time sitting on benches in public parks, intensively pondering what he wanted to do with his life. His dream was to move overseas and start a dairy farm in Hungary. However, now that he has spent five years on the island and is highly satisfied with his job, it turns out that he has postponed his plans to relocate to Hungary. He explains that in retrospect, he sees his relocation to the island as a mid-size risk that permits him to pursue his long-term plans. When I ask why Hungary, he concedes that there are personal reasons as he mentions a romance with a Hungarian girl in his student days. He also adds that in contrast to Western Europe, Eastern Europe seems to offer surprises.

Naoto did not have any personal connections with the island he has relocated to, but he applied for a vacancy as regional revitalization cooperation officer and got the job, which was limited to three years. After the expiration of the contract he started working on his ongoing culinary project. Naoto smiles, "You can call it a luxury, the way I work at present. If I come up with something I would like to do, I get the green light. Of course there is also pressure that comes with this. I am not sure whether there is a better job for now—of course I haven't looked for it, it would require a major effort" (interview, October 13, 2020). In addition to the considerable level of self-determination at work, Naoto mentions the fresh food he enjoys daily at virtually no cost as an added luxury. "I don't think that I could enjoy freshly made tofu and fish like I can do now anywhere else." He pensively observes that he is proud of having acquired skills to communicate with individuals coming from totally different backgrounds from himself, such as fishermen in the small village where he lives. He also points out his beautiful working environment: towering mountains in his back, a beautiful cherry tree right behind him, and the coastline nearby. He laughs, saying that it only takes him fifteen seconds to get from his house to his workplace (*Aruite 15 byō gurai . . . ima . . . sundeiru tokoro to shokuba*).

I vividly remember that the last time we talked he mentioned that he felt constrained by being on an island. Clearly, his feelings about the island have changed dramatically as a result of his food-related work that has drawn attention to the importance of nature in his daily life, something that comes as a first in his previously urban life. "What do I reply when locals ask me about whether I intend to stay on the island? I always respond that I don't know." His reluctance to commit himself for a lifetime also extends to the private realm. He chuckles impishly when I ask him whether he still has no interest in getting married, as we already discussed this four years ago. "When locals ask me, I just nod my head and say 'some day' and then move on to some other topic" (interview, October 13, 2020). Naoto concedes that he likes spending time by himself. Before, he shared his house with various interns, students, and other short-term visitors. He says that he has decided to keep the house just for himself as he is getting old at thirty-two. For his upcoming ten-day holiday in two weeks, he plans to do some camping by himself near a national park in Western Japan where he can see the island across the sea. "I haven't made any concrete plans yet," he chuckles. Previously, he usually spent his holidays seeing his family or friends in Tokyo and Osaka and using the time to see art museums and the like. This time, he says, he hopes to get more adventure and do something he has not done before.

Like Aki and Yu, despite his penchant for melancholic, reflexive solitude, Naoto says that he regularly drinks with local acquaintances and friends in the fishing village that he lives in. His capability to communicate with fishermen, his acquired taste for nature, his appreciation of the subtle changes of the season all indicate his deep, visceral, and intellectual engagement with and reverence of the local community and its values. At the same time, he also argues that short-term trips to other places provide him with precious opportunities to refresh his mindset and experience more diverse vantage points. "Since I can experience a pretty deep way of living on the island [*shima de kanari fukai ikikata dekiru kara*], when I go to urban areas there are so many feelings I get [*tokai ni ittara kanjiru koto mechakucha ōku naru*]. After having these feelings, I get back to the island and can put all of this into words—this is a cycle that I feel comfortable with" (interview, October 13, 2020).

Discussion

"While insiders may find it difficult to see the world from any point of view other than their own, a visitor may try out a plurality of perspectives without any personal loss of status or identity, because he is already marked as marginal, stateless and indeterminate" (Jackson 2005, 49). Michael Jackson's incisive concept of the "visiting imagination" of the outsider suggests that this mindset is a "way of destabilising habitual patterns of thinking by thinking his own thoughts in the place of somebody else" (ibid.).

Such oscillating perspectives are all evident in the three trajectories and narratives introduced in the preceding paragraphs. Coates argues, "Whether stuck between here and there, or socially embedded in 'here *and* there', migrants live in ways positioned between established or normative social orders" (2019, 37). Aki, Yu, and Naoto engage in vastly different activities, hold diverse values, and come from different sociocultural contexts. However, they all manage to juxtapose a deep local commitment with a strong cosmopolitan mindset that resulted from their previous overseas experiences during their student or gap-year days. Aki traveled around the world for one year; Yu studied in the US and just came back from an extended family vacation in France recently; Naoto remembers that his stay in Russia was a life-changing experience and has dreams of an overseas move and starting a dairy farm in Hungary in the future. Previous experiences of traveling, living, and working overseas have shaped their modes of thinking to such an extent that movement—both physically and in an abstract sense—permeates their narratives, imaginaries, and daily behavior. In this regard, all three settlers correspond to Simon Avenell's "locally informed yet globally sensitive" actors in his study of transnational environmental activism in Japan and beyond (2017, 9). This image of an interview site taken in an office in Tokushima Prefecture embodies the transnational mindset that features in the practices and narratives of many of my interlocutors (figure 4).

Notions of existing "in-between" have conventionally been associated with "restless movement" that is "here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth" (Bhabha 1994, 1) and hence have tended to be dismissed as a minus. However, the potential of the tension, or perhaps dynamics, of a constellation that involves here and there has not been awarded the attention it deserves.

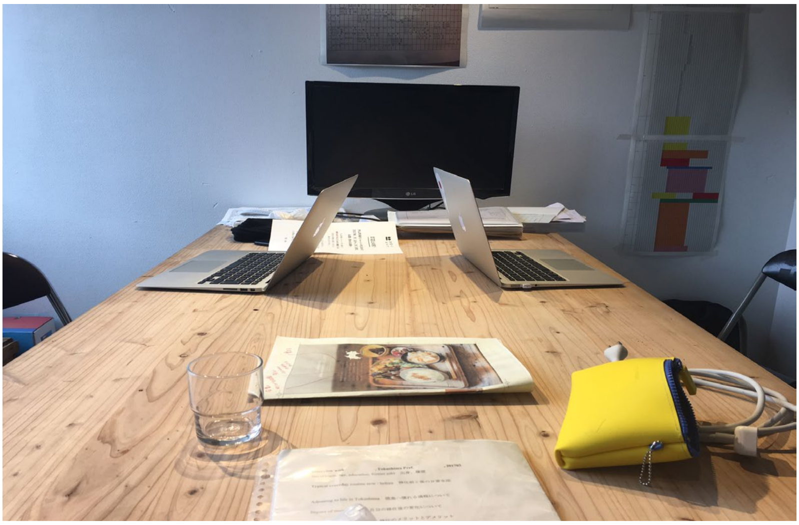

Figure 4. Urban settler's office in rural Japan. Photo by Susanne Klien.

Drawing on Paul Stoller's ideas about "the power of the between" (2009), these individuals confirm the potential of the liminal (Crapanzano 2003), as "the liminal offers us a view of the world to which we are normally blinded by the usual structures of social and cultural life" (ibid., 53 in Stoller 2009, 6). Liminality has often been associated with upheaval, discomfort, lack of belonging, and constraint. Yet, these cases indicate that Stoller's ideas of the liminal as "a space of creative imagination, of provocative linkages, of personal empowerment" (2009, 6) continue to be relevant. Naoto's episode of running after the clouds, Aki's leisure activity of picking wild flowers and collecting stones near the river, and Yu's usage of fresh herbs grown in his garden when cooking meals all indicate the creative use of natural resources that most local residents would not consider using. Yet, for my interlocutors, these small things constitute their personal treasures and are held in high esteem. Evidently, these small things are crucial factors that contribute to the subjective well-being of individual settlers and their satisfaction with living in rural areas. Ultimately, not only the practices of regularly using these things in their daily lives but also disseminating them on the internet through their social networks could be interpreted as a new take on the meaning of place through their eyes—shaping the place in accordance with their needs and preferences. Wild flowers and stones may be considered worthless in a small town that has plenty of them; however, from the point of view of someone who has grown up in a concrete housing complex near Tokyo with few plants around, these wild flowers are perceived in an entirely different way. These vignettes also illustrate the coalescence of diverse experiential temporalities and spatialities in migrants' practices and imaginaries and resonate with Caroline Pearce's "liminality as a way of life" (2013).

Aki may be the person among my three interlocutors who questions local values the least. Her long-term fascination with rural lifestyles and deep interest in tactile manual work in daily life clearly play a crucial role in her smooth acceptance of local habits. However, she shows resilience to imposed values of marriage and lifelong employment by carving out her own livelihood and spending her leisure time with a variety of friends, both local and newcomers, across generations.

Yu's initial mission to bring change to the local fisheries implies tasks and activities that are bound to meet with local skepticism in a deeply conservative fishing community. Not surprisingly, he mentions the challenges of making local fishermen understand the importance of sustainable fishing. While he refrains from explicit criticism, his observations about what he feels is lacking in the local community after coming back from France emphasize his strong underlying transnational perspective.

In a similar vein, Naoto has yet to abandon his long-held ambition to move overseas, despite his enthusiasm for his present lifestyle and work. Naoto seems to have converted his initial frustration about the boundaries of island life into a positive mindset by focusing on things hitherto unnoticed in his previous urban mode of life and making them part of his lived experience: cherishing nature, feeling alive, enjoying fresh food.

A strong passion for learning new skills beyond office work, reinventing oneself, and broadening one's perspective by acquiring the capability to approach things from different vantage points recur in all three narratives of my interlocutors. Despite their diversity, they share a salient interest in self-determination, freedom for extended self-reflection and incubation rather than following instructions by superiors, a predilection for constant self-growth, and ultimately living a lifestyle that they have consciously chosen and that fits them and their families.

In his poignant mobility studies manifesto, Stephen Greenblatt proposes that "mobilities studies should account in new ways for the tension between individual agency and structural constraint" (2010, 251). The experiences examined in the preceding paragraphs are without any doubt examples of lived agency, "the ability to exert one's will and to act in the world" (Boehm et al., 2011, 7). Interlocutors did not necessarily elaborate explicitly on issues of agency during our conversations; however, the topic featured in various ways.

It comes as no surprise that none of the lifestyle migrants introduced in this article have any regrets about their decision to relocate to rural areas and the radical changes this has brought to their lives. These narratives powerfully demonstrate the ongoing shift from postwar Japan with its focus on material affluence and economic growth to a post-growth society where individuals have started to depart from long-held values such as seniority, lifelong employment, and gendered societal roles in their quest to pursue lives that make sense to them rather than to their parents. In this sense, this study echoes Gordon Mathews's observation that "Japanese society as a whole seems notably more individualistic and accepting of individual difference than 30 and 40 years ago" (2017, 230–31). The narratives introduced here illustrate the emergence of lifestyles that allow a more flexible organization of work and life. Individuals' daily lives suggest that "living in a manner that involves living for oneself" (Nishimura 2009) is gaining ground in Japanese post-growth society. All three migrants have relocated to rural regions in order to engage in activities that are in tune with their personal values and their individual and their families' subjective well-being. Entrepreneurship in one's thirties, working in fisheries without any previous related experience, continuing to live as a single despite being in one's thirties—these are all trajectories that involve surprise, challenge of societal conventions, a sense of adventure, and the courage to pursue the paths they have chosen regardless of the pervasive normativity of *sekentei*, namely what others may think.

At the same time, however, all three migrants seem well versed in ensuring good relations with local residents in their communities. Naoto regularly goes for a drink at his neighbors' houses in the same hamlet he lives in, just as Aki does, who seems highly popular for drinking outings in the small town she has moved to. Yu hints at the limits of what is feasible on a remote island; yet he is passionate about the importance of sustainability in fishing and continues to make attempts to assert change.

In other words, I contend that we need to be more careful in ascribing agency to lifestyle migrants. Greenblatt has astutely argued that "it is important to note that moments in which individuals feel most completely in control may, under careful scrutiny, prove to be moments of the most intense structural determination, while moments in which the social structure applies the fiercest pressure on the individual may in fact be precisely those moments in which individuals are exercising the most stubborn will to autonomous movement" (2010, 251–52).

Two of my three interlocutors introduced in this article have used the *chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai* (regional revitalization cooperation officer) program by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (*Sōmushō*) designed to attract urban residents to rural regions to promote regional revitalization. Clearly, these three settlers have weighed their decisions carefully before making these significant lifestyle changes. Aki mentioned that she was shaped by images in lifestyle magazines showing newcomers engaging in farming, living in beautiful wooden houses, and having their own shops (interview, October 9, 2020). Whereas the narratives discussed seem to be permeated by a strong drive for agency and self-determination, their trajectories contain a complex interplay of individual agency and structural constraint. Ironically, two of the discussed lifestyle migrants joined a program envisaged by elite bureaucrats in their pursuit of more self-determination. If we scrutinize their narratives more closely, we find numerous hints of newcomers' process of negotiation with what Greenblatt refers to as "the sensation of rootedness" (2010, 252). Yu states that he does not believe in commitment to only one locality, as he believes that commitment to several places makes more sense socially. Naoto elaborates on the meaningful cycle of living deeply on the island and going for brief trips to other places for a change of perspective. Aki clearly perceives daily life in the small town that she has relocated to in global terms as she compares the local woods with overseas landscapes on her previous travels that have left a deep impression on her.

All three cases illustrate a strong cosmopolitan outlook—an approach that transcends rootedness not only verbally but also through practice in daily life: Naoto's running after clouds during worktime; Yu taking a three-month holiday in the French fashion, despite his status as a corporate employee in the deeply conservative fishing sector; and Aki's entrepreneurial activities and self-determined independence, despite her youth. Interestingly, all three do not deny locality through their cosmopolitanism; on the contrary, they are strongly committed to and on good terms with the local community. Yet they clearly transcend their locality both physically and otherwise. This inherent enmeshment of local and cosmopolitan elements constitutes a powerful and empowering mechanism that clearly confirms the "potential of the liminal" (Crapanzano 2003; see figure 5).

This enmeshment of local and cosmopolitan features also brings us back to the concurrence of mobility and immobility discussed at the start of this article. All three lifestyle migrants are deeply satisfied with rural life yet also openly point out what they consider deficiencies. All three pursue careers that are distinctly sedentary as they work with local resources of various kinds. Nevertheless, they approach these careers from nonlocal and/or global points of view. By doing so, they manage to tailor jobs that entail both dedication to the local community as well as transcendence beyond it, both in a physical and abstract manner.

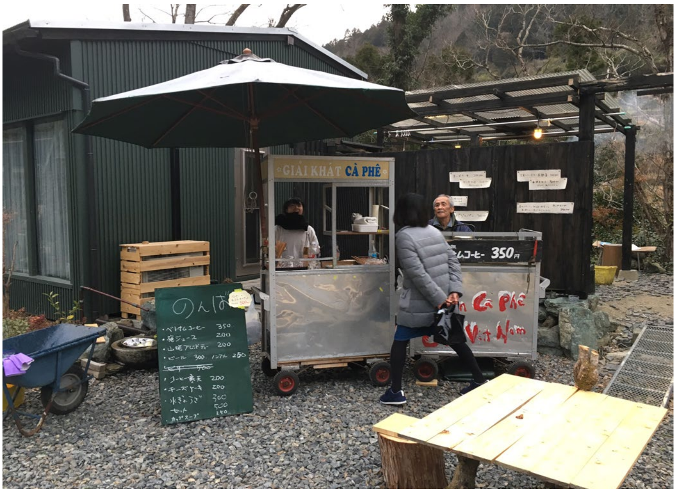

Figure 5. Encountering a Vietnamese coffee stall in rural Japan, an example of local and cosmopolitan enmeshment. Photo by Susanne Klien.

Finally, the narratives presented in this article imply a deconstruction of the conventional notion of rurality. All three lifestyle migrants introduced in the article refer to a coalescence of rural and urban; local and translocal/transnational; emic and etic; present, past, and future; here and there. John Traphagan argues that "rural Japan is a social and geographical space in which the binary juxtaposition of rural and urban, rustic and cosmopolitan really do not have a great deal of meaning from an analytical perspective, even while people living in those areas may continue to think and talk about the differences between life in the cities and in the countryside" (2020, 238–39). The trajectories, narratives, and practices of newcomers outlined here confirm Traphagan's observation, as they have revealed a profoundly hybrid, multilayered, and often conflicting open-ended process that is exposed to constant circulation between mobility and immobility, local and global, past and present, here and there.

Outlook

Last but not least, the ongoing pandemic could accelerate interest in moving to rural areas. The Lehman Shock in 2008, the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, and an increasingly precarious job market have already resulted in more interest in rural moves as a viable option for many. Recent statistics indicate that one out of four corporate workers are pondering a move due to the shift to online work. In August 2020, the CEO of Pasona Group Inc., a recruitment agency, announced that it will move its headquarters and 1,200 of its employees from Tokyo to Awaji Island off Kobe in Western Japan. Whereas this move met with diverse reactions ranging from enthusiasm to skepticism, it may indicate an imminent paradigm shift in centralized Japan.

This large-scale change in the way work is organized may indeed enforce the more positive idea of "communities of hope" (*kibō shūraku*), as one of my interlocutors put it (Klien 2020), rather than the pervasive negative notion of "marginal village" (*genkai shūraku*) coined by sociologist Ono Akira to denote a community with two-thirds of its residents over sixty-five years old (2008). Against the background of the ongoing pandemic, this new generation of cosmopolitan urbanite settlers who bring together hybrid elements of rural and urban in their daily lives outlined in this article are bound to create a lasting impact on understandings of work, leisure, and lifestyle in contemporary Japan. This may eventually result in shifting associations of rural Japan from places with limited perspective, work, and prospects to places that offer opportunities as "experimental grounds" (Klien 2020), both professional and private, and quality of life for those creative enough to grasp them. In other words, rural regions may be associated with agency rather than with constraint in the future, if in the multilayered meanings portrayed in this article.

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Notes

1. Funded by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, this program started in 2009 to provide incentives to relatively young individuals to move to "structurally disadvantaged

areas." In 2009, there were only eighty-nine officers as compared to 3,978 in 2016 and 5,359 in 2018; 39.4 percent are female. In terms of age range, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the majority are in their twenties (29.6 percent), thirties (37.7 percent), and forties (22.7 percent) (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2020).

2. *Hitotsu wa doko de mo ii sumu basho doko de mo iin da kedo . . . community no katachi ni risō ga atte . . . sore ga nandarō na . . . aa sō iu ka . . . tochi ni nezasu koto no daijisa ga kotchi ni kite kara wakatte . . . sore made wa sōzō dake dattan de . . . sono tochi ni butsuriteki ni zutto iru tte anmari imi nai to omotte . . . kankeisei ga tsuzuku node . . . dakara un . . . nandarō na . . . dono basho de mo soko no basho ni nezashite ikitai to omō . . . tabun fukusū ga atta hou ga nantonaku nandarō . . . tomodachi no kazu mo nibasho da to nibai ni naru shi . . . sochira no hō ga shiawase na no ka na tte ki ga shimasu.*

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Paintings, Painters, and Patrons

Institutional Interventions in the Lives of Cheriyal Paintings

In the early 1980s, the All-India Handicraft Board developed an interest in Cheriyal paintings as part of its initiatives to sustain Indian handicrafts. The Board's intervention increased the paintings' visibility and initiated the institutionalization of the Cheriyal painting tradition. In this process, painters adapted their practice to new forms of patronage beyond the local community, particularly museums and the handicraft market, and incorporated new techniques, iconography, and style. In examining various case studies of Cheriyal painting commissions, this article argues that Cheriyal paintings have dynamically adapted to social and cultural changes, particularly to changes in patronage since the 1980s. It further argues that institutions invested in Cheriyal paintings and folk arts and crafts from India, with the intention to ensure crafts' sustainability, have constructed and disseminated a rhetoric of disappearance while encouraging innovation and developing new forms of patronage.

Keywords: Folk painting—heritage—institutions—narrative—performance—tradition—south India

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In the early 1980s, representatives of the All-India Handicraft Board (AIHB)—now Development Commissioner (Handicraft)—came to Cheriyal (also spelled Cherial [*ceriyāl*]), a large village in Telangana, about 120 miles north of the state capital named Hyderabad. They visited a group of painters known as Nakashis (*nakāṣi*) in the plural, from their caste name Nakash (*nakāṣ*), also known as *citrakār* (image-maker) in other parts of India. At that time, the Nakashis' activity mostly revolved around painting local temple walls, making temple *mūrti*s (statues), and painting long scrolls on canvases unfolded during storytelling performances in the nearby villages.

The AIHB, a Government of India institution under the Ministry of Textiles in charge of developing the handicraft sector, came in with a series of initiatives and schemes to expand the craft practice, ensure its continuity, and improve the financial sustainability of such family-centered activities. One initiative was to nominate Nakashis for award competitions in order to gain state and national recognition, something that was happening elsewhere in India as well. The Nakashis also received funding to train men outside of their caste in Cheriyal painting's traditional techniques, to ensure the tradition's continuity and eliminate unemployment among other communities. Most importantly, the AIHB encouraged and commissioned the Nakashis to produce paintings in a smaller format; namely, on canvas and as wooden figurines, to sell as part of India's handicraft and tourist market schemes. Because Cheriyal was the last village in which Nakashis were painting scrolls at the time of the AIHB's visit, the painting tradition was simply identified by the village's name, filling government records as "Cheriyal paintings." This term is still used today.[1]

The Board's intervention essentially increased the visibility of these paintings, which began institutionalizing the Cheriyal painting tradition and defining the heritage(s) they represent. The sidelining of performance and the emphasis on this tradition's material culture permitted their entry into museums and the handicraft market. Further commercialization to sustain the tradition transformed the scrolls used for storytelling performance into smaller paintings for museums and home decoration, craft commodities, and a wide range of derivative objects and meanings. Cheriyal paintings today—scrolls, smaller paintings, or craft objects—bear the marks of these institutional interventions.

This article is about Cheriyal paintings and their institutions, and therefore the "worlds" (Bundgaard 1999) or "lives" (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) they inhabit and how these have come to shape the heritage they represent. It describes how institutions have played out in Cheriyal painting's visibility and sustainability. The institutional frameworks and environments in which these artistic works exist are multiple and serve as a methodological tool for understanding folk art practices from India, for they are often found in local communities, museums, private collections, or the handicraft market simultaneously. Helle Bundgaard's work (1999), for instance, looked at the Odishan *paṭṭa* painting tradition not only from within the framework of the local communities that produced them, or as ritual practice, but also from the point of view of private collectors, state institutions, awards, and the market, a methodology that influenced my own on study of Cheriyal paintings. In the context of Cheriyal paintings, these "worlds" are the local communities of Telangana that initially commissioned, produced, and consumed such aesthetic works. But there are also new patrons that have emerged since the 1980s, consisting of craft institutions, museums, NGOs, award schemes, private commissioners, and the now very prominent tourist and handicraft market, which I will present and explore in the following sections.

If institutional initiatives such as those created by the AIHB were—and still are—instrumental to the discovery, conservation, revival, protection, and promotion of local craft heritage, they have often done so by introducing, perpetuating, and maintaining a distinct rhetoric of disappearance concerning the tradition in question here. I therefore present Cheriyal painting as a resilient tradition that has become transformed through its adaptation to changes in patronage. However, I also describe how this rhetoric of disappearance has played an essential socioeconomic role in the sustainability of the painting tradition. I also describe what continuity and innovation look like for Cheriyal paintings and their makers.

As an art historical investigation based on ethnographic collecting methods, this article looks closely at the materiality of painting to discuss how changes in patronage, transformation, institutionalization, and the presentation of Cheriyal heritage(s) unfold. On the one hand, it is about identifying the features of a living tradition best named as Cheriyal because it represents what the paintings are today, encompassing at the same time the past and present of the tradition, its heritage, and heritage-to-be. On the other hand, it explores how institutions define imagined Cheriyal painting heritage(s)—whether that of Cheriyal, of Telangana, of south India, of India or Hindu, Indian, rural, vernacular—allowing the generic term to develop ambiguously, largely dependent on the institutions invested in its discovery, preservation, and promotion.

The three core chapters of my doctoral dissertation, submitted in the field of Art History in 2017, have provided the material and informed the arguments presented in this article. Most of the research was empirical in nature. I present here some of the first-hand data that I collected between 2014 and 2015, while conducting fieldwork in Cheriyal, Hyderabad, Warangal, within various Indian museum institutions, and through interviews with the Nakashi painters both in Cheriyal and Hyderabad. The first section provides a short description of Cheriyal paintings' oldest known function as scrolls used in the performance of local caste narratives, how the paintings are made, what they look like, and their particularities, all of which formed the basis onto which institutionalization developed. Each subsequent section steps away from the performed scroll to propose case studies that illustrate other emergent dimensions of the painting tradition. The first one deals with scroll paintings and wooden figurines identical to those used for performances but commissioned solely for museum collections acquisition and to document the "disappearing" heritage of Telangana. The second set of examples is made up of paintings that remain highly narrative as Cheriyal scrolls are, but that now vary in format and subject depending on the regional and religious affiliation of the commissioning institution. The third section explores paintings sold within the handicraft market, for which the name Cheriyal, as well as the color conventions used to produce the objects, still associates them essentially with a past (or "dying") tradition. These three case studies represent the contemporary and concurrent heritage(s) of Cheriyal paintings. They also illustrate changes the tradition underwent since the 1980s, when handicraft and museum institutions began intervening into the formation of its heritage. These two new environments have provided the paintings with new meanings inasmuch as they served these institutions' goals.

The Cheriyal scrolls

In the new southern Indian state of Telangana and some parts of neighboring Andhra Pradesh, itinerant storytellers recite local caste genealogies using scroll paintings on cloth as visual props for their performances. This is the oldest function known for Cheriyal scroll painting, for they were originally intended to narrate caste genealogies as a form of social memory construction through the creative use of oral history. Unlike other regional art forms from India, the Cheriyal scrolls—also known as Deccani scroll paintings in previous scholarship—benefitted from later and lesser scholarship on the subject. Bengali visual folklore, for example, has received earlier and comparatively more attention than other living traditions of the country. Like Cheriyal paintings, the Bengali *paṭ*s are scrolls storytellers unfold during the performance of sung narratives. People started collecting *paṭ*s as early as the 1930s (Ghosh 2000, 176). And even though Jagdish Mittal began collecting Deccani scrolls around the same time, the earliest scholarly mentions of Cheriyal painting in the literature have come from Kay Talwar and Krishna Kalyan's *Indian Pigment Paintings on Cloth* for the Calico Museum (1979); and Jyotindra Jain, Aarti Aggarwala, and Pankaj Shah's edited volume for the National Handloom Museum (1989). Jain's *Picture Showmen* (1998), especially, extensively discussed Indian performance traditions that utilized visual aids to support storytelling for the first time. The volume gathered essays on the Bengali *paṭ*, the Rajasthani *phaḍ*, the Paithani *pothī*, and two pieces on Cheriyal paintings as well. This landmark publication paved the way for the Cheriyal tradition to join the ranks within broader scholarship concerning the so-called "lesser-known" artistic practices of India. The same year, Kirtana Thangavelu submitted her thesis on Cheriyal painting, the first and only extensive research project on the subject. In 2011, Anna. L. Dallapiccola brought together various scholarship contributions on *Indian Paintings: The Lesser-Known Traditions*, therefore continuing Jain's efforts to increase scholarship on the subject. The volume included

Thangavelu's (2011) essay on the oral and performative dimensions of a painted scroll from Telangana. And in 2014, Jagdish Mittal finally published reproductions of his rich collection of scrolls. Later, Chandan Bose published an anthropological dissertation in 2016.[2] I myself then followed in 2017 with a dissertation coming at the subject from an art historical perspective.

Traditionally, the making of a scroll painting follows a strict and conventional patronage system that involves three groups of people: the patrons and audience of the performance, the performers, and the painters (Thangavelu 1998, 383). Scrolls are considered sacred and preserved by the performers, handed down from father to sons until they are no longer in useable condition, making the commission of a new painting a rare occurrence.[3] Each performing group is associated with a series of patrons to whom they owe their livelihood by performing their respective genealogical narratives. Each group, therefore, performs in a fixed set of villages. Patrons all come to visit the Nakash caste in Cheriyal when they wish to commission a newly painted scroll, however. According to Mittal (2014, 22), there were several other painting centers apart from Cheriyal in the past. When the AIHB initiated their revival, however, Cheriyal was the last center left in Telangana where Nakashis continued to make performance scrolls.[4]

Today, however, a journey to meet Cheriyal painters would often begin at a suburban house in the urban hub city of Hyderabad, a bustling metropolis now known for its information technology sector. The efforts of the AIHB, NGOs, and other craft-related programs have succeeded, and the eldest and most awarded Cheriyal painter Vaikuntam Nakash, along with his wife and two sons, shifted his residence to Hyderabad in 2013. They now live and work in a more spacious, bright, and comfortable set up, far more accessible for customers or researchers who are likely to visit. Only a few painters represent the Cheriyal painting tradition today. There are six full-time male painters, three of their wives, and four of their sons who also work or study alongside them, as well as two families of assistants. Four of these male painters and their families live in Hyderabad, while only two live in Cheriyal with the assistants. The location that owns the GI (Geographical Indication) tag since 2010 for this "endangered" painting tradition therefore only hosts less than half of its practitioners and representatives today.[5]

The narratives originally depicted on the scrolls are known as *kula purāṇa*s, from *kula* (clan) and *purāṇa* (old).[6] Such narratives are the founding legends of clans and castes, and it is these communities who commission the performances associated with the paintings. The patrons are the local occupational castes of the region, such as the weavers (*padmaśāli*), toddy tappers (*gauḍa*), or cow herders (*golla*), for instance, who all belong to Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Castes (SC) classifications devised by the British during the colonial period. Patrons and performers belong to the same caste, but performers are ranked as a sub-caste of their patrons, which means that patrons hold a higher status. Service and duty bind both together in the sense that performers earn their livelihood from performing for their patrons, while patrons must support the performers, even when patrons do not schedule a specific event. Each performing group is hereditarily assigned a number of villages where their patrons live and where they may perform within a socially sanctioned geographical system known as *mirāśi*. Thus, a performance troupe cannot perform for other patrons or in other villages, except those defined by the *mirāśi* system.[7]

Depending on the community's myth, the origin of the patron's occupation goes back to the necessity for a particular deity to receive that caste's service. A sage or hero intervenes to link the gods' needs for service to the emergence of the caste that will provide the needed service. For instance, Bhavana Rishi is the sage founder of the weavers in Telangana. Bhavana Rishi, the weaver of the gods, came into existence after the deity Shiva needed clothes to wear. The caste's genealogy thus unfolds through a series of events that connects the gods, sages, heroes, and weavers together into one metaphorical fabric, eventually validating the existence of the community and their profession.[8]

The size of the scrolls varies. A completed scroll painting rarely exceeds ten meters in length, either horizontal or vertical, and it is always divided into horizontal registers within the entire configuration, as seen in figure 1. Every scroll painting used for performances shares a similar style. The entire narrative is divided into registers and then subdivided into scenes, making the whole scroll a complex structure of scenes to trigger the performers' memory. Decorative borders visually frame these structures. The distinct red background is a common feature of all the scrolls, accompanied by bright colors for figures and decorative details in order to create a heavy contrast between the pictorial elements of the composition. Figures are mostly depicted in side-view and circled with a black line. Performances take place in the local village center, alternating between recitation, singing, and worship. A performance usually lasts four to five nights. Some audience members may be seated far away from the stage upon which the scroll is placed, so visual support provided lends added texture to the oral narrative as well.

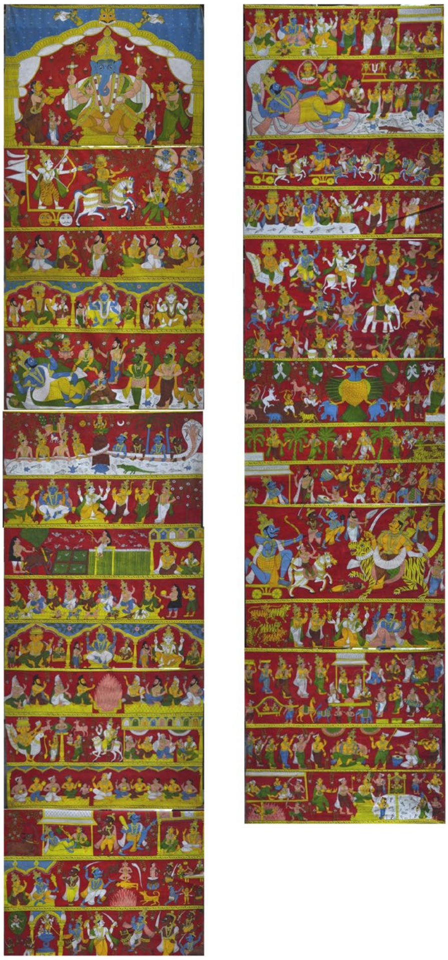

Figure 1. Markendeya Purana, c. 2000, 91.5 x 915 cm, watercolor on canvas. Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

The performers—not the painters—decide the scenes to be depicted during a genealogical recitation. For the entire duration of the storytelling event, the painting remains a visual support for the narration of these genealogies. Several details of the patrons' profession may also be depicted regularly throughout the scroll. For instance, in a scroll prepared especially for the weavers, one can see a great variety of different patterns on the clothing of the characters depicted on the surface of the scrolls. The king's pillows and curtains are also ornamentally painted to represent the patterns woven by the caste in question. Similarly, in a scroll for the toddy tappers, there would be toddy (palm) trees depicted everywhere on the scroll. These motifs differentiate the narratives and signify the patrons, even though they may be unknown to the audience and unnecessary for the performers.

Cheriyal paintings as scrolls for performances display a distinct continuity over time. Looking at several scrolls of the same narrative across a wide chronological range would highlight how little the changes are over time. It is possible, for instance, to observe the visual evolution of the *padmaśāli purāṇa* scrolls, since we have scrolls ranging from 1625 to the 2000s (Da Fonseca 2019).[9] Such a historical exercise leads to the conclusion that apart from minor and incremental changes, the scrolls remain mostly identical to the extent that painters themselves call it a "copy" (ibid., 113). This understanding of identicality depends on the understanding of the painters and performers, but not isolated to the Cheriyal painting tradition. For instance, Kavita Singh (2011, 117) observed a similar situation with the *phaḍ* paintings from Rajasthan, scrolls painted on cloth that are also used in storytelling performances. The *bhopā*, performers of the *phaḍ*, refer to a new scroll as *chapnā* (printing), which implies reproducibility. Cheriyal painters do not necessarily know the narrative they depict on these scrolls for performers, because they may use an old scroll that they "copy" to make a new one. As with the Rajasthani *phaḍ*, the scroll's fixity, in depiction and narrative, is a choice that supports the painting and the performance's functions. Such fixity, however, functions differently on the *phaḍ* and the Cheriyal scrolls. The same figure depicted on the *phaḍ* may be used as several characters in the oral narrative, making the scroll an *aide-mémoire* rather than a strict illustration (Singh 2011, 116). Like the *phaḍ*, Cheriyal scrolls are *aides-mémoire*, but the necessity for such fixity is primarily due to their function of recording the patrons' genealogical narratives. The scrolls are, in fact, the actual genealogical certificates of the patrons, and the performances mark the process through which the caste group reiterates its legitimacy (Da Fonseca 2019, 132).

The disappearing heritage of Telangana, India

The tradition's oldest known scroll is dated 1625 CE from an inscription on the back. It is preserved in Jagdish and Kamla Mittal's collection in Hyderabad.[10] Their private museum houses the largest collection of such scrolls, with most of the pieces in the collection dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[11] Prestigious museum collections—such as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad, the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad, and the Crafts Museum in Delhi—all serve as repositories of other scrolls from the same period.[12]

The scrolls described in the preceding paragraphs received the Handicraft Board's attention in the 1980s to form the base for institutions to construct imagined Cheriyal heritage(s) over time. These scrolls are gradually disappearing. Patrons have changed professions or, at times, moved away from their villages. Performers thus had to find other sources of income. To this end, some have taken up other professions. As for painters, they receive less and less commissions these days for performance scrolls. Lack of patronage has thus forced them to paint about a wide range of other themes nowadays. This situation has encouraged museum institutions to archive and document the tradition's disappearing features. The long, narrative scroll for performances may, under such circumstances, represent the Nakashi community's heritage, Telangana's legacy, or rural India's more broadly construed. The perceived pressing need for preservation resulted in several Indian museums commissioning lengthy narrative scrolls identical to those used for performances, but which never circulated among performers. The museums discussed here are the Telugu University Museum in Warangal, Telangana, DakshinaChitra in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, and the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (IGRMS), known in English as the Indira Gandhi National Museum of Humankind, which is located in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. Unlike the prestigious international museum collections that collected antique pieces, these museums commissioned new scrolls. The material features are more or less the same, and the scrolls are equally long, with registers divided into scenes, red background, and contrasting colors, just as they would be on scrolls that would have circulated among performers and be seen by audiences during narrated events. Like the originals, it would take three to six months of intense labor to complete one. The subject matter remains the same as well—local castes' genealogical narratives—with a preference for two narratives, the *kāṭama rāju kathā*, and the nearly extinct *padmaśāli purāṇa* that I mentioned briefly earlier.

If these museum institutions all share an interest in documenting Cheriyal painting, each displays its orientation. The Telugu University Museum chose to commission a scroll of the *kāṭama rāju kathā* (figure 2). The *kathā* (story) is Katam Raju's narrative. He is the hero-founder of the *golla*, a pastoral caste of the Telangana and Andhra Pradesh regions. The performing community is known as Madaheccu.[13] The particularity of Katam Raju's story is that storytellers use different props in their performances. It could be a scroll, a cloth hanging, a set of wooden figurines closer to the puppetry tradition, or even masks. At the Telugu University Museum, the newly commissioned scroll hangs in the gallery along with an older one, this time collected from performers, and with a set of figurines and masks. The museum belongs to the folklore department of the Telugu University, Warangal Campus. Its collection is small but condensed. It documents the local folklore of Telangana in the form of artifacts, photographs, and tools, but with an ominous focus on the numerous "disappearing" performance traditions of the region. It is the curated product of research conducted at the university, while its orientation is academic and anthropological. The newly commissioned scroll, in this context, is a representation of Telangana's continuing folk heritage, both tangible and intangible.

Like the Telugu University Museum, DakshinaChitra in Chennai has commissioned a scroll and a set of wooden figurines of the hero's *kathā* (figures 3 and 4) for what it has called its "cross-cultural living museum of art, architecture, lifestyles, crafts and performing arts of South India" (DakshinaChitra Museum n.d.). The open-air museum documents the cultural production of southern Indian states in the form of a large village setting. Each house or hut hosts a series of artifacts representing a state's contemporary cultural production—mostly craft and artisanal practices.

Somewhere in between the Telugu University Museum's anthropological display and DakshinaChitra's village setting, the IGRMS in Bhopal commissioned in the early 2000s a scroll of the *padmaśāli purāṇa*, displayed in figure 1.

It is the story of the *padmaśālī* caste. The IGRMS, Museum of Humankind, utilizes an anthropological orientation, coupled with an insistence on historical documentation, thereby resulting in ancient artifacts from vanished traditions and more recent materials mixed together in chronotopic display frames. The main difference between these three museums lies in their geographical scope. The first two display regional heritages, whereas the IGRMS displays the heritage of India more broadly conceived. Bhopal is the state capital of Madhya Pradesh, home

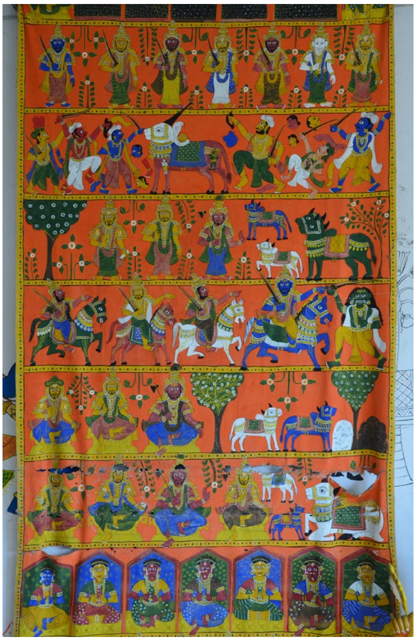

Figure 2. Katam Raju Katha, c. 2000, watercolor on canvas. Telugu University Museum. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

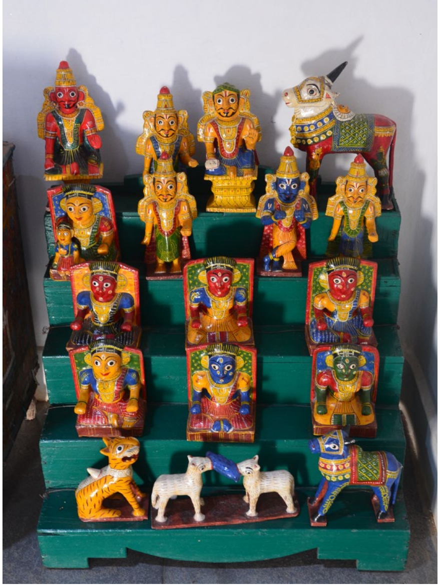

Figure 3. Katam Raju Katha, *c.* 2000, painted wood, DakshinaChitra. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

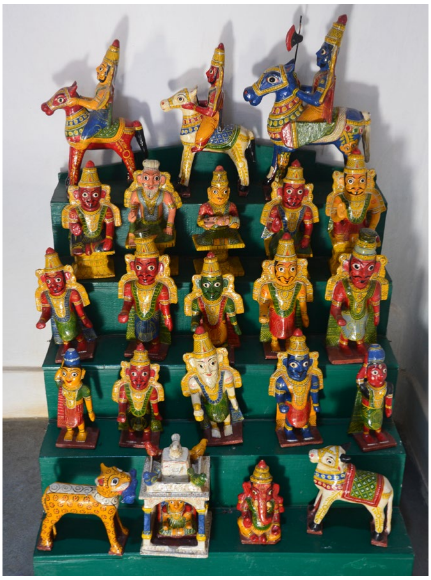

Figure 4. Katam Raju Katha, *c.* 2000, painted wood. DakshinaChitra. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

to a large number of surviving vernacular practices, many of them "tribal" in nature, a designation that carries romanticized symbolic value in the region. The city is also relatively close to Delhi, and, being home to several museum institutions unique to the country, such as the Bharat Bhavan, the Tribal Art Museum, or the very well-maintained State Museum, it is an attractive weekend destination for residents of the nation's capital.

Though this article's scope does not permit me to expand more on each of these museums' orientation, these three examples may be considered together for the type of Cheriyal paintings that their respective curators and administrators have chosen for their collections, as well as for the heritage these paintings have come to represent. Dialogically the material features of the Cheriyal tradition are attached to certain institutional discourses. Here we have examples of Telangana (a state), South India (a linguistic family region), and India (a nation) that encompasses the other two. All three are based on attempting to preserve and revitalize heritage through the commission of newly made objects representing the old, rather than through the actual acquisition of historical pieces. DakshinaChitra and IGRMS's mimicry of village settings insists on associating craftsmanship to rurality and bringing what they define as authentic rurality to the museum.[14] The other important point is that the traditional scroll for performances—the tangible and intangible heritage of Telangana—transforms into a refurbished, ongoing practice in a new institutional context as it becomes a curated object in the three museum collections. The Cheriyal painting tradition, therefore, receives museum validation not only through the valuation of ancient pieces, as is often the case with museum institutions of "universal outreach" (Flynn 2012), but also through the contemporaneity of the tradition.[15]

Following the museum institutions' orientations or biases presented in the preceding paragraphs, the scroll for performance comes to represent the disappearing, yet contemporary, Telangana, south Indian heritage. However, this bias in favor of one particular artistic tradition has sidelined other types of paintings produced by the Nakashi craftsmen who make and transmit the type of Cheriyal heritage documented and produced in these museums. There are a variety of other formats, props, iconographies, and functions that paintings produced by Cheriyal painters include, representing other aspects of the local, vernacular traditions belonging to yet other heritages. The following case studies illustrate these diverse forms of Cheriyal paintings, supporting the argument that Cheriyal painting is a patron-sensitive tradition: patrons mainly define what Cheriyal painting represents.

Regions and religion

The set of paintings discussed in this section follows the Cheriyal visual conventions but differs in terms of iconography, function, and discourse. This set depicts lengthy narratives laid over a canvas divided into registers and scenes, with a red background and contrasting figures. Unlike the scrolls used for the performance of *kula purāṇa*s, however, these paintings have been acquired or commissioned to illustrate the discourses of one institution—a museum that supports the politics of Hindutva that has taken India by storm in recent decades.

The example that will be discussed here is a set of ten panels of the *Ramayana* produced for the Ram Katha Sangrahalaya, a museum located in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, which is the town in northern India believed to be the deity Ram's royal headquarters, based on the epic narrative (figure 5). The Ram Katha Museum is a small provincial museum established in 1996 as part of a cultural institution in place since 1988, which promotes the story (*kathā*) of Ram, the epic's divine hero. The museum collects and preserves antiquities that relate to his narrative.[16] It is an archaeological museum that displays both prehistoric and historical evidence of Rama's relationship to the town of Ayodhya. The museum is located inside the Tulsi Smarak Bhawan. The Government of India built it in 1969, and it is now under the jurisdiction of Uttar Pradesh's Cultural Department. There is a hall for prayers, meetings, and religious discourse in its premises; a research institute called the Ayodhya Shodh Sansthan (Ayodhya Research Institute) established in 1986; and a library. Performance of the *rāmlīlā* (theatrical presentation of the *Ramayana*) takes place there every day.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Ayodhya was a place of intense communal violence in India revolving around a controversy focused on the so-called the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement concerning the disputed birthplace (*janmabhūmi*) of Lord Rama, or Ram in the vernacular. The conflict was over a disagreement about a religious site, Ayodhya, then a mosque within it called the Babri Masjid, which was built during the Mughal period. The central question was whether the mosque was built over the spoiled remains of the exact place where the Hindu deity was born. In 1992, Hindu fundamentalists destroyed this sixteenth-century Muslim place of worship in order to reappropriate the site. On November 9, 2019, the Supreme Court of India ordered

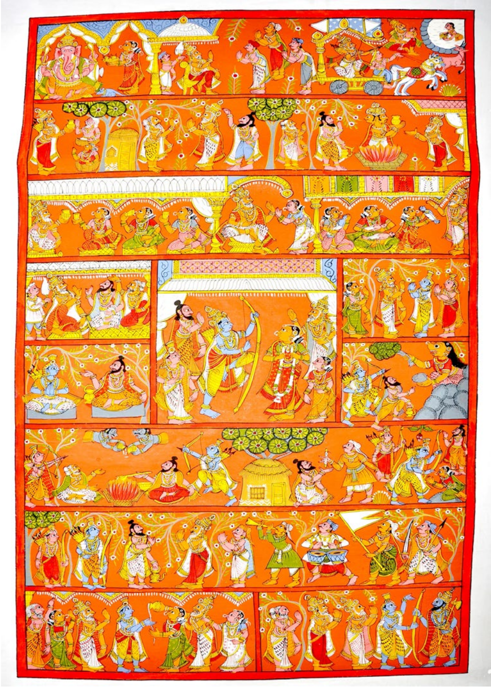

Figure 5. Panel 1 Ramayana, Rama and Sita's wedding, Vaikuntam Nakash and family, 2013, watercolor on canvas. Ram Katha Museum Ayodhya. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

the disputed land to be handed over to a Hindu trust and permitted the construction of a temple at the site where the Babri Masjid once stood.[17] In reality, the conflict is much more complex and dates to the earlier communal violence around a similar religious disagreement over sacred sites in Ayodhya in the mid-nineteenth century. Tapati Guha-Thakurta (2004) proposed a complete chronology of the conflict under the critical eye of the role of heritage in this religious dispute. In particular, she discussed the court case that followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid and called for archaeological evidence to support Hindu fundamentalists' claims over the site.[18]

In this context, the presence of a museum dedicated to Rama's story in Ayodhya is certainly no coincidence. It is safe to assume that the museum and its dedication to the *Ramayana* contribute to the museum's support of powerful Hindutva politics and, in this case, the building of Ram's temple on the site of the former mosque. When I heard about this museum for the first time in 2014, I assumed that it was promoting one version of the *Ramayana* and that the museum had commissioned a Cheriyal painting to illustrate it. I expected to look at each episode and search for particular events or narrative plots to support Ram's story and its political agenda. I expected this version to ascribe a special status to Ayodhya, following the museum's alliance to the Hindutva ideology it supported.

While looking into the commission process, however, I realized the significance of this set. The museum curator explained that he regularly traveled to the Rajiv Gandhi Handicraft Bhawan in Delhi, where all state handicraft emporia are clustered together. There, he searched for craft productions that narrate or relate to the *Ramayana* in a broad sense and acquired pieces for the museum. He encountered the *Ramayana* set on one of his trips to Delhi, displayed in the Lepakshi Emporium. Working closely with the Development Commissioners' Office (Handicrafts), the state emporia have become the first marketplaces that bring together the handicrafts of each particular state for sale at a centralized location within the capital. At that time, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana shared a network of emporia called Lepakshi, founded in 1982.[19] The Development Commissioner of Handicrafts in the southern region managed it. These emporia function as showrooms divided into sections where one can find all the handicrafts that a state has to provide. They are generally supplied with fresh objects regularly and have numerous showrooms across the country.

For this set, the museum did not ask the painters to produce specific episodes of the *Ramayana*, because it did not directly commission the paintings. The set was already made, destined to any customer visiting the Lepakshi Emporium. The museum thus acquired the Ram *kathā* set by chance. Vaikuntam Nakash, who painted it, did so following the narrative he had always known since his childhood in Telangana. It is important to note that the *Ramayana* as understood in its mainstream northern Indian version was never part of the genealogical narratives depicted on the Cheriyal scrolls that circulated during performances. Only the *addaṁ purāṇa*, the genealogy of the Telangana barbers (*maṁgali*), contains some episodes of the *Ramayana*, isolated and inserted into the patron's genealogy to validate the caste group's existence through its connection with the main Hindu deity Ram. However, along with the *Mahabharata* and the *kṛṣṇalīlā* (sports of Krishna), the *Ramayana* is the most popular mythological narrative representation of Indian—understood as Hindu—culture within India, but even more particularly abroad. For this reason, the subject is prevalent among artifacts sold to tourists in the handicraft markets as representative of authentic, yet selective, Indian culture.

The Ram Katha Museum exhibits objects related to the *rāmkathā* (story of Ram), collected from everywhere in India. One finds *kalamkārī* (hand- or block-printed) cotton textiles as well as puppets from Andhra Pradesh and the Deccan more generally, masks from Kerala, Tanjore paintings from Tamil Nadu, and Varanasi dolls. The museum also exhibits materials from the Thai, Cambodian, and Indonesian versions of the *Ramayana* alongside other local artifacts, supporting further the broader span of a national Indian/Hindu epic in the form of the *Ramayana*. In this context, introducing a Cheriyal *Ramayana* to the museum collection is not to assert one specific version of the epic, but to bring together all of the diverse vernacular versions of the text from India and beyond, with the underlying logic being that the story's vast diversity is definitive proof of its validity. The diversity of Ram's story is disseminated through its variety of narrative and visual forms, rather than an ideal type based on a hypothetically constructed original. The museum's agenda could thus be to display and communicate an awareness of the *Ramayana*'s wide appeal throughout the country, including places as remote as Cheriyal in Telangana.[20]

The museum, I observed, has devised three prerequisites to support Ram and his *kathā*'s historicity: multiplicity, authenticity, and contemporaneity. The *rāmkathā*'s multiplicity is presented as a token of its validity first. Then, India's most remote and rural areas are depicted as repositories of authenticity, including places like Cheriyal, where the *Ramayana* also circulates. Finally, contemporaneity certifies the continuing validity and relevance of the Ram narrative cycle. According to this logic, craft emporia, which are relays of the central government's numerous handicraft boards in each state, can thus ultimately provide multiplicity, authenticity, and contemporaneity through the various regional development commissioners. The promotion of a traditional and seemingly disappearing Indian culture has become the number one priority of these institutions. In that sense, both the museum and the craft emporia dialogically contributed to maintaining Cheriyal painting's association with a traditional, not to mention fundamentally Hindu, India. The process just described may thus intentionally ignore other features that do not necessarily support the nationalistic master narrative that the government wishes to disseminate intentionally.

The style of the Ram Katha Museum painting is significant, too. Looking at the balanced distribution of episodes on each panel and evenly over the ten panels, it is clear that the Cheriyal painters competently master the depiction of the lengthy narratives, here as in other paintings. When I discussed this specific skill with the painters, they insisted on having chosen and mastered a miniature style. This "miniature style" is something that Cheriyal painters have repeatedly mentioned with great pride to qualify their most refined works. Paintings usually proposed for award competition and those receiving the awards are almost systematically in the miniature style. Here, the miniature style translates literally as a very small depiction of figures within lengthy narrative panels. Craftsmen all over India recognize this style as the most prestigious and refined genre of painting, undoubtedly following the long art historical construction of miniature painting as one of the highest forms of artistic expression in the South Asia region.[21]

This example of a miniature-style *Ramayana* displayed at the Ram Katha Museum in Ayodhya is significant for several reasons. The choice of a miniature-style Cheriyal *Ramayana* indicates that the tropes of "miniature" and the "*Ramayana*," which both play an important role in the creation of a homogenized version of pan-Indian culture, have slipped into the Cheriyal tradition. What is suggested is a drifting away from regional depictions of Telangana heritage to the representation of a unified national image of India based on a Hindu icon. Pika Ghosh, regarding the Bengali *paṭ*, locates the early interest for the tradition in the inspiration Bengali folklore represented for modernist artists of the Bengal School, who turned to the vernacular as a counter to European influences and as a starting point for envisioning a national Indian culture (see also Korom 1989, 2010). Such nationalism has evolved and, since the 1990s, increasingly taken the form of right-leaning Hindutva politics, for which craft and folklore—including the Bengali *paṭ* but also Cheriyal paintings—now represent an Indian identity defined solely in Hindu religious terms. In contrast with a Nehruvian notion that envisioned the nation in terms of "unity in diversity," such an example of the absorption of regional specificities into the national imagination clearly illustrates the Hindutva project that has been unfolding since the 1990s in India, which the Ram Katha Museum supports.

My first example also highlights the capacity for Cheriyal painters to adapt to changes in patronage. In this case, the Ram Katha Museum did not directly commission the painting, but the Lepakshi Handicrafts emporium did. With commercial interests, the new patron requested that the painting be the *Ramayana*, a subject that Cheriyal painters had never actually depicted entirely before. The emporium also requested that the painting should be ten panels of equal size, easier to display or store than the single ten-meter-length canvas Cheriyal painters usually make. This format was new to the painters as well. Finally, the emporium did not impose the miniature style; instead, Vaikuntam Nakash adapted to the patron's specifications in format and subject by responding with a style he deemed fit to the prestige and financial reward of a commercial commission of this scale.

Cheriyal visual culture and its authentic innovations

At the dawn of their revival, Cheriyal paintings were essentially a scroll painting tradition. As already explained earlier in this article, they functioned as a well-regulated local folk practice that involved several communities, all bound together by service and duty, and all apprehending fixity through the legitimizing function of the paintings and their accompanying performances. Since the 1980s, the Handicraft Board's intervention and the overwhelming presence of national and state patronage "canonized" the fundamental features of Cheriyal paintings characterized by a predominance of red, the heavy contrasts between colors, and the distinctive thick black lines. These visual characteristics now form stylistic codes followed by each painter and transmitted rigorously as the tradition's visual tenets. At the same time that the canon was being fixed, institutional interventions also managed to increase the visibility of the tradition among patrons outside of the traditional contexts within which such aesthetic works circulated. They paved the way for many changes, among which are a favor for smaller objects, the use of ready-made watercolor or even acrylic instead of natural pigments, the depictions of shorter narratives, as well as the inclusion of pan-Indian mythological themes and village scenes instead of the local caste *purāṇa*s that only a few can decipher.

The previous paintings presented in this article have demonstrated the importance of institutional discourses in constructing heritage and the responsiveness of Cheriyal painters to changes in patronage. There are many other types of Cheriyal painting, however, applied to other media. For instance, objects such as key chains (figure 6), masks, sari paintings (figure 7), and decorative ceramic plates now take part in what we could call Cheriyal visual culture. One may also find masks and wooden figurines (figure 8), as smaller versions of those that used to be a part of the performance tradition. The handicraft market commercializes them at state emporia or private outlets; they also serve as interior decoration, privately commissioned or bought in lifestyle stores. The primary colors of these objects remain the bold red, yellow, and green hues that are also used on the scrolls, usually punctuated with decorative borders. When the objects are two dimensional, they are also organized as registers or individual scenes, following Cheriyal painting conventions. The production remains handmade, but assistants or the masters' wives and children produce them in large numbers, much like an assembly line in a factory. Cheriyal cloth paintings that are sold within the handicraft's scene are handmade in large numbers as well. The mass-produced ones follow Cheriyal painting conventions, but they have shrunk noticeably in size to be portable. Moreover, they now depict mainly popular pan-Indian Hindu subjects, particularly the *Ramayana* and the *kṛṣṇalīlā*. On rare occasions, one may find the depiction of what Cheriyal painters commonly call a "village scene" (figure 9). These scenes depict one or several characters engaged in farming or village life activities. They are meant to represent the "authentic" version of India, which is to say rural and agrarian. Such pastoral motifs and scenes are derived from the persistent legacy of Mahatma Gandhi's romanticization of Indian crafts and village life that has informed marketing strategies since India's independence in 1947. In this context, Cheriyal craft as a whole plays a metonymic role for the production of an authentic Indian heritage. To accomplish the task of creating imagined authenticity, the audience or buyer must be convinced that the products are made by hand in a rural context, even if mass produced by the hundreds in Hyderabad or elsewhere.

The study of Cheriyal paintings that I have presented here locates it within that body of existing scholarship that considers living traditions as resilient and adaptable to changes in patronage (Jain 1997, 2019; Korom 1989, 2011; Bundgaard 1999; Hauser 2002; Venkatesan 2009; Singh 2011; Chatterji 2012; Bose 2019). However, the history of crafts and decorative arts in India has not always promoted traditions as contemporary and adaptable to changes. During the colonial era, for instance, art historians such as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1909) or Stella Kramrisch (1968) adopted a preservationist approach to craft, design, and vernacular practices, following the conviction that craft's value lies in a past that must be salvaged at

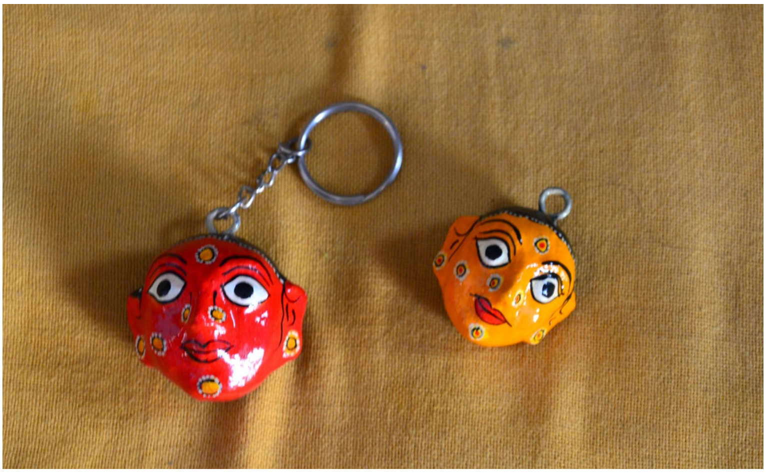

Figure 6. Cheriyal keychain, Sai Kiran Nakash, 2014. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

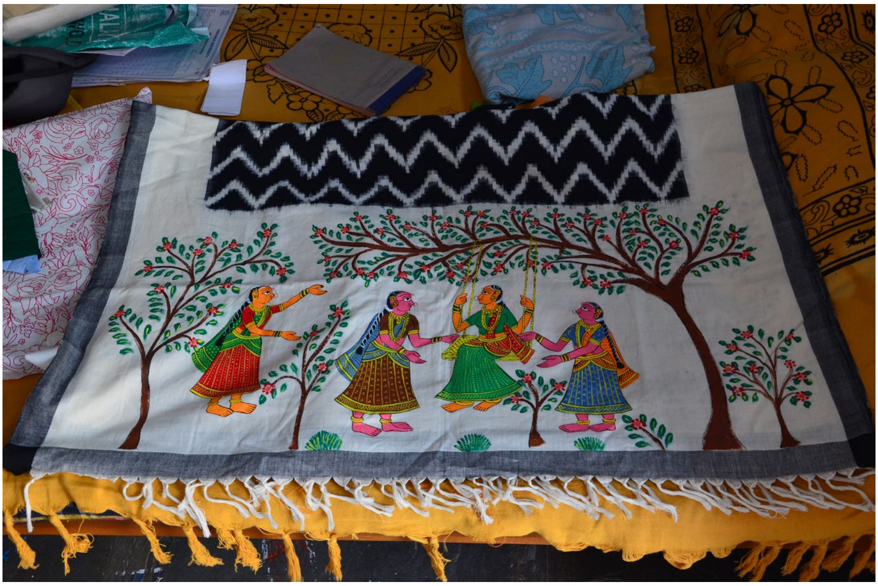

Figure 7. Village scene, 2015, watercolor painting on canvas. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

all costs. Modernity was seen as a threat to craft traditions that disappeared due to industrialization, mechanization, and urbanization. It is only later with post-Independence thinkers and institution makers—such as Pupul Jayakar, founder of the Crafts Museum in 1956, and K. G. Subramanyam in the 1960s, with his musings on the "living traditions" of India—that the dynamic and creative potential of craft and folk traditions developed. In particular, Jyotindra Jain's extensive work on what has now come to be known as "lesser-known" traditions since the 1980s led to the publication of interdisciplinary monographs that brought art historical concerns to the study of visual folklore. Trained as an anthropologist, Jain developed an empirical approach to visual folklore that looked at the makers, reception, and continuity that permitted an understanding of visual traditions' contemporaneity. Until today, his work considers

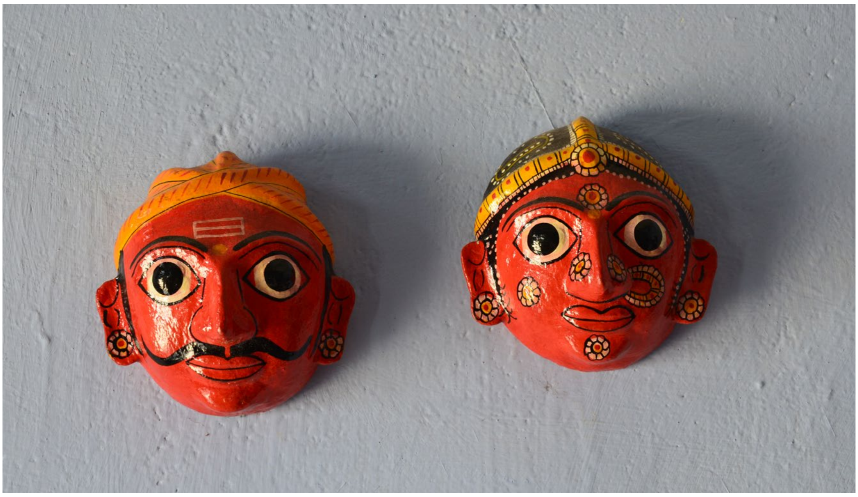

Figure 8. Cheriyal masks, 2015, painting on coconut shell. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

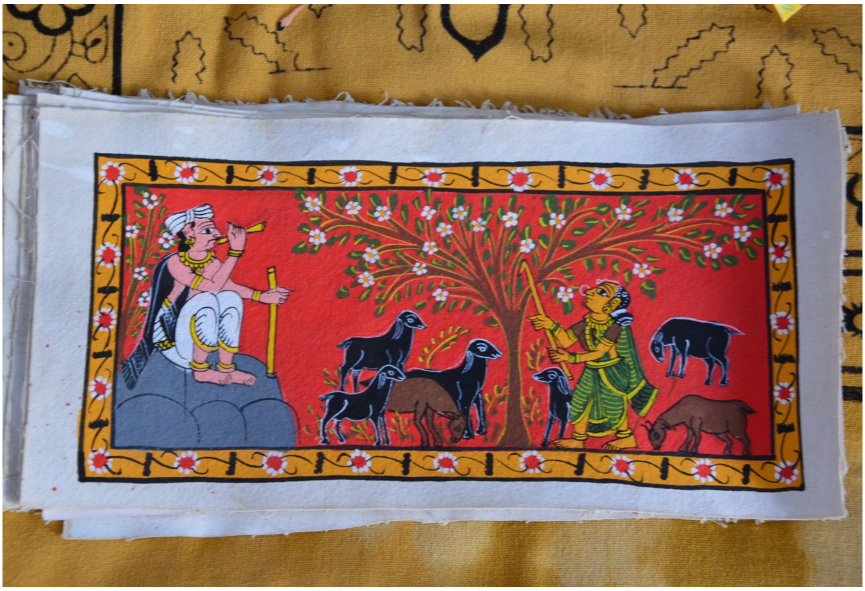

Figure. 9. Village scene, 2015, watercolor painting on canvas. Photograph by Anaïs Da Fonseca.

equally the features of a tradition that disappeared and those that transformed over time, something that has also inspired my approach to contemporary Cheriyal paintings.

The impact of institutional intervention on folk painting practices in India has been discussed most extensively in the context of the Bengali *paṭ*, particularly regarding changes in iconography (Chatterji 2012; Korom 2006). For instance, NGOs have been instrumental in iconographical changes as well as contextual uses of scrolls (Korom 2011). The *paṭ* tradition continues to depict mythological stories as it used to, but it also illustrates AIDS or family planning campaigns devised by these NGOs. Because the Patua (*paṭuẏā*) painters and performers of the Bengali *paṭ* (scroll) tradition used to be mostly itinerant, going from village to village seeking alms in exchange for their storytelling, they would ensure the spread of NGOs' development and health messages to the most remote and rural parts of the region. Changes in Cheriyal painting iconography are not quite as innovative. Except for "village scenes," the painted subjects remain primarily religious even today. What the nationalization of patronage did, however, was to increase the exposure of Cheriyal painting. It expanded possibilities for commissioning politically charged Cheriyal paintings, such as the *Ramayana* in Ayodhya discussed in the preceding paragraphs. Such examples of the nationalizing tendencies that have impacted Cheriyal painting always highlight Hindu iconographical motifs, thereby anchoring them in the religious realm.

Cheriyal paintings and Bengali *paṭ*s may depict scenes of the *Ramayana* or the *līlā* of Krishna, but these have also become common subjects for most of the country's visual folk practices like *paṭṭa*s from Odisha, *kalamkārī*s from Andhra Pradesh, or Madhubani paintings from Bihar. Each of these traditions initially had its specific local subjects and functions. Their commercialization took place through the same shared handicraft platforms, state retailers, and museums, which contributed to homogenizing iconography, something discussed by Hauser (2002) and Korom (2006) with regard to the Bengali *paṭ* tradition, by Bundgaard (1999) concerning the Odishan *paṭṭa*s, Hart (1995) in the context of Madhubani paintings, and by myself (2017) on Cheriyal paintings. All these have now become popular depictions of Hindu subjects, particularly the *Ramayana* and the *kṛṣṇalīlā*, serving the political construction of a joined Hindu heritage for India.

All of the painting traditions discussed here today bear the marks of institutional intervention, interventions that constructed heritage to be displayed in front of us, the viewer. They have responded dynamically to the interventions that I described, such as replacing local rural- and community-based patronage with state patronage, or introducing assistants or middlemen into the traditional structure of production. This article has demonstrated that contemporary Cheriyal paintings can be conceived as objects transformed into ten-panel miniature sets, masks, and key chains while still remaining an integral part of the tradition, just as much as they once were scrolls used for the performance of caste genealogies. Each type of painting described in this article represents an aspect of Cheriyal painted production. The consideration that I gave to institutions in this article was intended to support an understanding of Cheriyal painting as being variegated, adaptable to changes in patronage.

Conclusion

When one hears about Cheriyal paintings for the first time, it is often through the rhetoric of disappearance, a Victorian preservationist attitude that still lingers over most of the handicraft and handloom master narrative in India even today. Indeed, within the Cheriyal painting tradition, this discourse relies on the slow disappearance of one aspect of the painting style, which is also its oldest function: that of being a scroll used for performances of local caste genealogies. Government institutions and NGOs disseminate this discourse that painters themselves carry forward by following the more authoritative words of governmental powers like the arts and crafts institutions that intervene into the daily affairs of artisans and craftspeople. However, the artists nonetheless understand the significant financial potential of governmental interventions, which makes them appealing. A perceived "disappearance" or even decline in such a tradition should not be seen as a death knell, for commercialization has opened up a whole new range of iconographies, styles, and techniques, which has allowed for stimulated innovation among younger painters who are emerging on the arts and crafts scene.

The changes are significant. They make one question the criteria that define what a "folk" tradition may be (Korom 1989). But they also force us to ponder when a distinct tradition begins becoming something else. They further question whether changes such as the ones I pointed out in this article—and innovation in general—are inclusive elements of the tradition in question and to what extent they define its parameters. More importantly, how would changes introduced through intervention interfere with the construction of a community's own self-perceived heritage? My study of Cheriyal painting answers only part of the questions raised here in locating changes and innovations not as indicators of decline, but rather as the dynamics that exist and function at the heart of the tradition to guarantee survival and continuity over time. It is essential to understand the Cheriyal painting tradition—and probably many others, such as those mentioned comparatively in passing—as a malleable cultural entity that maintains its survival through the agency of its purveyors themselves. They are the ones who have managed to deploy a natural form of adaption that allows for developing a resilient capacity to retain their heritage by nurturing a few visual consistencies, despite the massive changes that their tradition is undergoing in the face of modernity and globalization. The study of Cheriyal paintings thus reminds us that "tradition" is also a dynamic space of social and cultural changes, and these changes play an equally important role in the construction of a craft's heritage.

AUTHOR

Anaïs Da Fonseca is an associate lecturer in history of art at University College London. She received her PhD in history of art at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2017. Her research and teaching focus on modern and contemporary art from South Asia; the history of craft, design, and "folk and tribal arts"; and the politics of culture and heritage in South Asia. She is also interested in the phenomenology of contemporary art making, and in the Europe-India-Africa trade and movements of skills since the 19th century. She is currently completing a co-edited volume on the transcultural practice of artist Prafulla Mohanti, *The Dancing Hands: Life and Works of Prafulla Mohanti* (forthcoming 2022).

NOTES

1. The (hi)story of Cheriyal paintings' revival was narrated to me on many occasions by Nakashi painters, the then-district commissioner of the Handicraft Southern region, and the marketing director of the Lepakshi Emporium (the retail platform of the District Commissioner for Handicraft, then known as Andhra Pradesh), while doing fieldwork in 2014–15. However, nobody

gave an exact date for the beginning of the AIHB's intervention, yet they all agreed to locate the first training program in Cheriyal during the early 1980s.

2. Bose's 2016 dissertation was converted into a book in 2019 titled *Perspectives on Work, Home, and Identity from Artisans in Telangana: Conversations around Craft*.

3. Performers of *kula purāṇa*s in Telangana are strictly male; hence, a scroll transfers from father to son, or the nearest male descendant.

4. Mittal (2014, 22) reports that the late Venkatramaiah revealed the presence of painting centers in four of the eight districts of Telangana: Warangal, Karimnagar, Nizamabad, and Adilabad.

5. In the 2000s, the Nakashi painters grouped into a cooperative and handed in an application for Geographical Indication (GI), an intellectual property rights system used in India to recognize the geographical location or origin of a particular product (for more on the GI tag, see Kadhir 2013). A GI tag was granted to "Cheriyal painting" in 2010, now legally binding the painting practice to the geographic origin to which it is attributable, Cheriyal. Thus, it is now protecting the tradition from potential imitators or people claiming hereditary authorship to Cheriyal painting from outside that locality.

6. For more on *kula puraṇa*s see, for instance, Das (1968, 141), Ramanujan (1993, 101–20), Sadanandam (2008), Subbachary (2003), and Thapar (1992, 1996).

7. In exchange, patrons support performers through donation, either in rupees, clothes, or grains, according to Sadanandam (2008, 157).

8. Da Fonseca (2019) details the *padmaśāli purāṇa*'s narrative.

9. The article focuses entirely on the concept of replication in the Cheriyal painting tradition.

10. Mittal dated the scroll 1625, using an inscription located on the backside of the object. The inscription indicates 1944, the year in which the scroll changed hands, which means it had been produced sometime before that.

11. Mittal (2014) reproduced each of the scrolls from his collection in his publication.

12. Images of these scrolls have been reproduced in the following publications: for the British Museum, see Dallapiccola (2010); for the Calico Museum, see Talwar and Kalyan (1979); and for the Crafts Museum, see Jain, Aggarwala, and Shah (1989).

13. The English name is derived from the Telugu *manda hecculu*, a sub-caste of the Gollas. *Manda* means group and *heccu* suggests "exaggeration," to which the plural suffix *lu* is added. Members of this group are known for their extravagant, heightened, or magnified tales.

14. Boccardi (2019, 7) defines authenticity "in the context of heritage conservation . . . as a condition that should be met in order to validate a statement of cultural value or significance." In the context of Cheriyal paintings at IGRMS and DakshinaChitra, the rural village setting bolsters the construction of authenticity meant to support an already existing claim for cultural significance.

15. Eighteen museums across the world signed the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums (2002) to declare that their particular mission as a "universal" collective of museums makes the retention of objects acquired long ago crucial for the interests of all peoples. For more on the definition of a universal museum see Flynn (2012), Prott (2009), Wilson (2002), and Miller (1974).

16. This conjecture is based on a personal discussion with Avinash Kumar, curator of the Ram Katha Sangrahalaya Museum in Ayodhya that was conducted on June 23, 2014.

17. In return, it granted five acres of land to Uttar Pradesh Sunni Central Waqf Board to construct a mosque.

18. Guha-Thakurta's chapter on the subject looks at the role of archaeology and history as academic disciplines in the conflict. As the dispute was going on in court, archaeologists and historians from both sides called for archaeological evidence to support or counter the case of a razed temple—or more broadly a Hindu religious shrine—under the mosque. Guha-Thakurta denounces the misuse of this evidence to corroborate mythological fact about Ram's life and, therefore, the misuse of archaeology as a discipline to ironically support certain religious beliefs.

19. Until 2014, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were one single state of India called Andhra Pradesh, of which Telangana was a region. Between 2014 and 2017, Lepakshi Handicrafts represented both states. Since 2017, Lepakshi Handicrafts continues to represent Andhra Pradesh, while Golconda Handicrafts now represents Telangana.

20. Across two publications about the *Ramayana* (1991, 2001), Paula Richman and her contributors first establish the varieties of the epic and the possibility of constant retelling without an actual original. *Questioning Ramayanas* assumes the multiplicity of the epic and further questions its motives across time and space.

21. I encountered this attitude when discussing competence and skill with painters from other folk traditions, particularly with the *paṭṭa* painters from Odisha and the Bengali *paṭ* painters.

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Contested Devotion

The Praise of Sufi Saints in Three *Māla Pāṭṭŭ*s

This article examines three Sufi devotional songs (*māla pāṭṭŭ*s), from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, from the Mappila Muslim poetic corpus (*māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ*) of Kerala, India. Close examination of the Mappila song literature provides information and historical detail about a community for which there are limited noncolonial sources. More specifically, an examination of the content, poetic features, and changing mediums and performative contexts of these particular *māla pāṭṭŭ*s foregrounds the Mappila community's multivocal and complex religious development and history. The article also highlights the ways in which the process of folklorization is both transforming Mappila songs into commodities and simultaneously keeping the *māla* songs available via the internet, thus preserving these practices as cultural heritage and a living practice.

Keywords: Kerala—*Māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ*—Mappila Muslims—Sufism—
Arabi-Malayalam—devotion—folklorization

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> Know that this *māla* will attract the highest virtues.
> Because of her greatness, sing her praise with respect.
>
> (Excerpt from the *Nafīsat Māla*)

The Mappila (*māppiḷa*) Muslim community in the south Indian state of Kerala is a result of the travels of Muslim Indian Ocean traders, intermarriages, and conversions from local populations. Among their artistic contributions is an extensive song literature known as *māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ* (literally, Mappila song). *Māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ* uses a linguistic mix of Arabic and Malayalam (known as Arabi-Malayalam) and integrates a variety of literary themes and structures. For example, the many sub-genres of songs, usually loosely organized by topic or form, include sweeping ballads or story songs (*kissa pāṭṭŭ*), songs written in the form of a letter (*kattŭ pāṭṭŭ*), love or wedding songs (*kalyāṇa pāṭṭŭ*), songs sung during the religious festivals that often honor Sufi saints or the memory of *śahīd*s (martyrs) who died in various battles known as *nērcca*s (*nērcca pāṭṭŭ*), and devotional songs (*māla pāṭṭŭ*). The *māla*[1] songs are often about Sufi saints or other important Islamic figures or martyrs within the Islamic tradition. The earliest datable *māla pāṭṭŭ* is from 1607 CE, and modern *māla*s are still composed today (Karassery 2000). *Māla pāṭṭŭ*s (as well as other genres of *māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ*s) are rich sources of information about a community for which there are limited or scattered noncolonial sources.

This article examines and compares three Sufi devotional *māla pāṭṭŭ*s. Each song functions as a kind of hagiography, praising the power and knowledge of three different saintly figures: Abdul Qadir Jilani, the founder of the Qadiri Sufi branch; Ahmad Kabir al-Rifa'i, the founder of the Rifa'i Sufi branch; and Sayyida Nafisa, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. These songs describe the figures, their histories, and their miraculous interventions in the lives of their devotees. In particular, this comparison offers insight into the religious diversity, multivocality, rivalries, and concerns within the Mappila community.

The first part of this article will briefly examine the general literary background and features of the *māla* songs. The second section will examine the *māla*s themselves, including their form, style, content, common thematic and linguistic patterns, areas of difference, and competition. The final section will discuss the songs' historical significance, the power and problematic nature of the saints with regard to "correct" Islamic belief and practice, and changes in the performative lives of the songs. These changes in performance practices direct our attention toward intersections between religion, politics, and community identity as well as the process of "folklorization" that is changing the way the songs are currently being performed and preserved. Thus, these songs not only reflect historical circumstances and concerns but also help create (through their recitation, memorization, reproduction, and rejection) a variety of identities within the Mappila community. Though academic interest in *māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ* and *māla*s is increasing, there is limited scholarly work on them in English. Therefore, an introduction to some of the basic characteristics of *māla*s will be useful to get a sense of the genre before zeroing in on three particular examples.

Literary background and general characteristics of *Māla Pāṭṭŭ*s

The *māla* tradition contains a variety of works, themes, and contexts, but for this discussion I wish to focus on the general characteristics of *māla*s praising Sufi saints.[2] The earliest extant (and datable) *māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ* is the 1607 *Muḥyiddīn Māla*,[3] written in praise of the Sufi Abdul Qadir Jilani. It is one of the poems discussed in detail in this article. In the song, the emotional tones echo that of the works of the sixteenth-century poet Tuñcattŭ Rāmānujan E̲luttacchan, known in English as Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan. Ezhuthachan, considered among the greatest of Malayalam poets and "the father of modern Malayalam," wrote intensely devotional poems, including retellings into Malayalam of the great Hindu epics such as the *Adyatma Rāmayaṇa*. It was in this literary milieu that the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* was composed, and a similar devotional tone is adopted in the song as well as in subsequent *māla*s, many of which tend to use the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* as a general template. The content of the Sufi *māla*s includes brief details of the saints' birth, education, initiation, miracles or powers (*karāmāt*), enemies, and death. Usually some information about the creation of the song is given, such as the author's name and/or the date of composition. These songs have a semiformal structure; they generally (but not always) tend to have one *iśal* (tune or rhythm) that continues throughout the entire song and briefly summarize incidents from the saints' lives, often in a single couplet. This is different from other types of Mappila songs that may contain several tune changes and have long, elaborately described scenes.

*Māla pāṭṭŭ*s' *iśal*s were sometimes adopted from those of well-known songs (Piḷḷai 1998, 151). When new tunes were created, they were often adopted by other authors, resulting in a repertoire of *iśal*s that could be drawn from to use for a new song.[4] The reproduction of *iśal*s produces interesting resonances. For example, many *māla*s adopt the *iśal* of the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, including M. N. Karassery's modern secular song *Bashīr Māla*, written in praise of the famed Malayalam novelist Vaikom Muhammad Basheer; by using the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*'s *iśal*, Karassery's song suggests that Basheer should be viewed as a literary "saint." This may also be why other *māla*s often use the same basic structure and/or *iśal* of the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*: to musically associate similar numinous qualities with other saintly figures.[5]

*Māla*s tend to feature a fairly strict first- and last-letter repetition rhyming scheme, are replete with consonance and assonance, and are usually written in couplets. They begin with a traditional invocation to God, Muhammad, and his family and end with a section called an *iravŭ*, or "begging," that asks the Creator to have mercy on the composer and his many mistakes made in the work. Sometimes they also have a prayer (Arb. *du'a*) of the *ṭarīqat*, or Sufi branch, with which the figure is affiliated, appended to the end of the work.

Performance practices, functions, and melodies

Although it is difficult to know how or in what context the *māla*s were initially performed, scholars note that they have customarily been sung in a variety of ritual contexts, such as festivals, religious gatherings, and as a part of domestic rites (Miller 1976, 243). For example, women may sing the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* without musical accompaniment after *maghrib* (sunset prayer) for the well-being of the household (Kunhali 2004, 21; Muneer 2016, 429–30). In addition to their role in ritual contexts, *māla*s were often used for educational purposes and formed part of the traditional education of much of the community until the 20th century. Students would memorize and recite the Quran and the *māla*s in their elementary religious schools, known as *madrasa*s. An old marriage custom required the groom's female relatives to question the bride about her education before the engagement; she was supposed to reply that she knew the Quran and the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* (Kunhali 2004, 100). This indicates the importance of the song for the household in general and women in particular, who were generally thought of, at least by the twentieth century, as the main consumer, and prime memorizer, of the *māla* songs (Kunhali 2004, 21).[6]

*Māla*s also served to put Sufi concepts such as *quṭb* (literally "axis," referring to the Sufi spiritual leader of an age) and other technical vocabulary "into comprehensible forms" (Kunhali 2004, 91). Since it was considered meritorious to write, sing, copy, memorize, or hear *māla*s, their production and use in a variety of contexts was assured. In the next section, I look closely at some of the poetic elements and content of the three *māla*s: the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, the *Rifa'ī Māla*, and the *Nafīsat Māla.* I compare these for several reasons: first, these were among the few *māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ*s that were available as individually printed, modern, color booklets at bookstalls in and around Calicut, Kerala when I was there in 2010 and again in 2011–12. Second, several contacts recommended them to me as important songs in the genre. Third, they are about different Sufi saints, are from different time periods, and elucidate different community concerns.

The songs

Māla 1: Muḥyiddīn Māla

The *Muḥyiddīn Māla* was written by a *qāḍi* (judge) named Muhammad Abdul Aziz in 1607 CE. Qādi Muhammad was a local judge and Islamic scholar who was born in Chaliyam near Calicut in Kerala and received his education under Abdul Aziz Makhdum in the town of Ponnani, known as the Mecca of Kerala. The *Muḥyiddīn Māla* is his only composition in Arabi-Malayalam, but he wrote many pieces in Arabic, including the poem *Al Fathul-Mubin*, written between 1579 and 1607 CE. *Al Fathul-Mubin* describes a battle between the Hindu ruler of Calicut, called the Zamorin, and the Portuguese over a Portuguese factory that was built on the Beypur river at Chaliyam. The Mappila community supported the Zamorin (in fact, the poem is dedicated to him) and describes the unity of the Muslims and *nāyar*s (a group of traditionally martial castes) against the Portuguese at this time (Kurup 2006, 76).

The *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, however, is a completely different kind of composition.[7] The *māla* is a hagiographical account of the life of the aforementioned *shaykh* named Abdul Qadir Jilani, founder of the Qadiri order of Sufis, who also goes by the title *muḥyiddīn* (reviver of the faith). Jilani was born in 1077 CE in the area of Jilan in Persia (modern-day Iran), received his spiritual training in Baghdad, started proselytizing in 1131 CE, and died in 1165 CE; his family heritage extended paternally to Hassan, the elder grandson of Muhammad, and maternally to Husain, the younger grandson—thus traditionally branching from both lines back to the Prophet himself. Jilani was a philosopher, scholar, and an author of both poetry and prose, such as the prose discourses of the book *Futūḥ al-Ghayb* (Revelations of the Unseen) (Taṟamēl and Vaḷḷikkunnŭ 2006, 28; Malik 2018, 4–7).

The author of the text gives his sources for the details of Jilani's life at the beginning of the work, which include the Arabic hagiography *Bahjat al-Asrār* (*The Splendor of the Mysteries*, a biography of Jilani) and a section from the aforementioned *Futūh al-Ghayb*. He describes the exalted status of the so-called "saint of Baghdad," his fame, and his immense knowledge:

> By the grace of the Possessor of the World, the One[8]
> He [Jilani] was born into the family of Muhammad
>
> He was born into the greatest of all families
> He was famous everywhere
>
> He came from his father as a leader
> His fame fills all seven skies
>
> He saw the seven skies simultaneously
> He holds a kingly position among the angels
>
> He has the sea of *sharī'a*[9] on (his) right
> The sea of *ḥaqīqa*[10] on (his) left
>
> Above the sky and below the earth
> His fame spreads like a flag

Jilani's exalted position as the highest of all the Sufi saints is emphasized as other *shaykh*s, angels, and even the holy *qāf* mountain acknowledge his preeminence:

> "Due to God's blessing, my leg
> Stands on the shoulders of all the *shaykh*s," he said[11]
>
> At that time, the Angels said "truth"
> The created ones covered their heads
>
> Then all the *shaykh*s on earth
> Gave low bows

Qāf[12] and the encircling sea[13]
And the land of Gog[14] bowed their heads

Jilani's life is surrounded with various stories of his mystical powers and prowess. Annemarie Schimmel writes that he was "probably the most popular saint in the Islamic world, whose name is surrounded by innumerable legends that scarcely fit the image of the stern, sober representative of contrition and mystical fear" (1975, 247). These legends likely contributed to the popularity of his stories and his *māla* in Kerala as well as elsewhere in the Islamic world. Many of these tales are alluded to in the work. For example, one couplet refers to the story of how Jilani came to be known as "*muḥyiddīnc*." One day, Jilani aided a beggar on the road. After caring for him, the man revealed himself as the Islamic religion itself and gave him the title of *muḥyiddīn* (or *muḥyī ud-dīn*), "reviver of religion" (Schimmel 1975, 247). In the song, this is alluded to in one couplet:

By the order of the One, the Owner, the Root
Muḥyiddīn is his name, called by *dīn* himself![15]

Another couplet refers to Jilani's truthfulness: before he left his childhood home his mother sewed forty gold pieces into his robe under his arm and admonished him to always tell the truth. Shortly thereafter he was captured by a band of thieves who did not find the hidden coins when they searched. One asked him if he had any money, and he responded, "Yes, under my armpits." The thief laughed, thinking it was a joke, and walked away. The same thing happened again, until finally, the leader came. He, however, took Jilani at his word and tore open his robe, finding the gold. Astounded, the leader asked him why he told them about the gold at all. The saint said: "I promised my mother I would always tell the truth." Hearing this, the leader broke into tears and all the thieves repented and changed their ways. The *Muḥyiddīn Māla* refers to this story with the following couplet:

When his mother told him, "Don't tell a lie!"
He gave his gold to a thief.

In addition to his virtues, the song refers to stories of Jilani's *karāmāt*: in one story the *shaykh* revives a chicken from its bones; it then runs around praising Allah, Muhammad, and Jilani himself (al-Jīlānī 1992, xxxvii). The couplet summarizes this as follows:

When he told the bone of a chicken, "Cluck!"
It immediately clucked and flew.

Other couplets speak of a variety of supernatural powers. For example:

When they put before him a wrapped parcel
He knew what it was, before untying a knot

The impaired child, he restored
The unimpaired child, he impaired

He is one who put life into dead bodies
He made a dying elephant well

> When walking in the deep darkness of night
> As he walked he used his finger as a palm-leaf candle.[16]

Beyond the mentioned physical powers and abilities, he is able to aid his followers spiritually. The song proclaims that he will be able to save his disciples from hell, help them on the Day of Judgment, and aid them from afar in times of adversity:

> Your children, in the circle of (my) eyesight
> They will go to heaven, this Allah promised [lit., gave him]
>
> During the day of killing and destruction
> I will catch them in my hand

God himself has promised to take care of the disciples of Muhyiddin, holding them in his hand and bringing them to heaven. Further, Muhyiddin promises to never abandon his followers in their times of need:

> During times of adversity, if they take hold of me
> I will always take hold of them, he says
>
> Those who take hold of me should not fear anything
> I am their security, he says

The song assures followers or potential followers that his goodness is enough to help those who follow him, even if they are not perfect, and that he is available to them for any problem or condition that they may have:

> All children are like their very own *shaykh*
> All my children are like me, he says
>
> If my children are not good
> I am always good, he says
>
> If you ever, in any way, pray to God
> Pray to God through me, he says
>
> Those that call me for any problem
> I will answer without hesitation, he says

In addition to its basic content, the *māla* uses poetic and grammatical forms that are subsequently mimicked in later *māla*s. It has local, vernacular conventions that were common at the time, such as abbreviated prepositions and rhetorical flourishes such as long /ī/ sounds that have no meaning. Influences from at least two other languages are evident in the poem, including a variety of Old Tamil vocabulary and Sanskrit, similar to other Malayalam works of this time period. The only feature that might render this work difficult to understand by a non-Muslim of this time would be the Arabic/Islamic vocabulary, often specific words without adequate counterparts in Malayalam; for example, *ḥaqīqa* (supreme truth or absolute reality), *shari'a* (Islamic law and moral code), and *'arsh* (throne of God). Other times, it is clear that particular words are used for poetic effect, such as assonance, consonance, or rhyme.[17] For example, God is referred to as Allah (Arabic), *ēkal* (Malayalam, literally "the one"), *nāyan* (Malayalam, literally "leader"), and *avan* (Tamil/old Malayalam, literally "he"). Qādi Muhammad also uses grammar creatively. For example, *awlīyā'*, the correct plural form of the Arabic word *wali*, meaning "friend (of God)," is used in one line, while in another the singular form of *wali* is given the Malayalam plural ending to create the Arabi-Malayalam hybrid "*walikaḷ*."

The *māla* has a structure in which many couplets end with the termination "*avar*/*ōvar*." This final termination is used to make a verbal noun such as "he who listens," "he who saw," "he who said," and so on. This allows for a consistent structure and rhythmic pattern that also continually emphasizes the subject of the song. In addition to end-letter repetition, the song also uses first-letter repetition and alliteration consistently. One can see, for example, such repetitions in the following couplet:

> *kuṟavuḷḷa paitale nannākkayum ceytŭ*
> *kuṟavillāpaitale kuṟavākki viṭṭōvar*

For first-letter repetition, occurring at the beginning of each line, the consonant /k/ is repeated, and patterns of alliteration occur in the use of /ḷḷ/, /ll/, /k/, and /kk/ sounds. The final word, *viṭṭovar*, uses the *ovar* termination that is repeated consistently throughout the song. In this way Mappila poets used structure and vocabulary creatively in their compositions for poetic effect and emphasis.

The main portion of the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* ends with the date of composition and the metaphor of "stringing" the *māla*:

> In the 782nd year of the Kollam era [1607]
> I prepared this *māla* in 155 lines
>
> Like pearls and rubies strung together
> I tied this garland, Oh people! (Kunhali 2004, 27)[18]

Many authors play with the Malayalam meaning of the word *māla* as "garland," as Qadi Muhammad does here. The use of the word as a metaphor for couplets that are strung together like flowers or precious stones into a necklace is particularly beautiful and has a long literary history. Further, in this metaphor whoever "wears" it—recites or sings the poem—will receive merit.

The *māla*, as well as the figure of Jilani, has been very influential within the northern Kerala Muslim community and so popular that different authors have used the same name, *iśal*, and subject matter for their own compositions (Miller 1976, 289). Subsequent *māla*s adopt the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*'s poetic elements, content, and *iśal*, including modern songs, such as the aforementioned *Bashīr Māla*. The *Rifāʿī Māla*, discussed next, adopts many of the same literary conventions used in the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* but is slightly different in key ways.

Māla 2: Rifāʿī Māla

Similar to the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, the *Rifāʿī Māla* is a devotional and hagiographical composition written by an anonymous composer in 1782 CE. The song praises Ahmad Kabir al-Rifa'i, the founder of the Rifa'i order. He was born in 1182 CE in what is now Iraq (Trimingham 1998, 37). Unsurprisingly, the language and the verses resemble those of the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, and the claims made of Rifa'i are similar to the ones made of Jilani. Rifa'i is identified as an exceptional member of the Prophet Muhammad's family, the "family of Hashim":

> By the grace of God, The Only One, The Owner of Love
> He was born into the family of Hashim
>
> From sunrise to sunset he is the most excellent
> He shows the Prophet in a beautiful light

Like the figure of Muhyiddin, Rifa'i is descended from Muhammad and is a credit to him. The song also tells us that his specialness was marked even by his short time in the womb:

> He was born from a pregnant stomach in 6 months
> The virtuous mother asked, "Who is it?"
>
> "Is it a son or a daughter?" she asked at that time
> They answered, "An honorable son, Aḥmadul Kabir"
>
> God called to him, "O Kabir!"
> People will call (on) him happily

The song also notes that God himself spoke to Rifa'i, thus reiterating his resemblance to the Prophet, his exceptionality, and his knowledge. His spiritual knowledge is also his aid in understanding the physical world, and are both remarked upon in the song:

> Without my notice, a blade of grass in this world
> Cannot (become) green, he says
>
> The secret of /*ḥa*/ and the secret of /*mīm*/ (letters of the Arabic alphabet)
> I am fated to know, he says

The mention of *ḥa* and *mīm* invokes the forty-first verse of the Quran, also known as *Sūrat Fuṣṣilat*. It is first of the four chapters that require the prostration of believers and powerfully relays God's omnipotence, the Quran's power, and the idea of accountability on the Day of Resurrection. The two letters are also central in the spelling of the name of Muhammad, supporting the *mīm* and the *dāl* that begins and ends his name. In this couplet, all of these resonances—omnipotence, power, the ability to aid a person during the last days, and a foundation for Muhammad himself—are invoked and subtly linked to the figure of Rifa'i.[19]

Further, "*ḥa*" and "*mīm*" refer to a combination of letters included in the category called the *muqaṭṭaʿāt*, which includes letters that are written before certain verses of the Quran. Because the meaning is unclear, these letters are seen as divine secrets known only to God or, as in this case, spiritually evolved figures. This kind of esoteric, mystical knowledge is a common characteristic of Sufi saints but, when compared to the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, is indicated by more technical Arabic/Sufi terms throughout the text of the *Rifāʿī Māla*. For example, one couplet uses the term *yaqīn* three times:

> "At the knowledge of certitude and at the vision of certitude
> And at the real certitude am I," he says[20]

Yaqīn means "certainty" or "certitude" and is the pinnacle of the various *maqām*s (stations) by which the path of *walaya* or sainthood is fulfilled. Schimmel notes, "The station of sincere *ʿilm al-yaqīn* leads further to *ʿayn al-yaqīn*, 'vision of certitude' or 'essence of certainty'—the station of the Gnostics—until it is consummated in *haqq al-yakīn*, the 'real certitude' or 'reality of certainty,' which is the place of God's friends" (1975, 141). The *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, by contrast, positions Jilani in the same way, using different vocabulary. For example:

> "*Jinn*s and *in*s and angels
> I am the *shaykh* above all of these," he said
>
> "All the *wali*s and *quṭb*s
> They are children in my house," he said

This verse places Jilani above everything and everyone: *jinn*s, people, angels, *wali*s, and *quṭb*s.[21] It does not, however, use more technical Sufi vocabulary. Because the *Rifā'ī Māla* uses many such terms, the overall content of the song feels thematically more esoteric or religiously sophisticated than the earlier *Muḥyiddīn Māla*. The abundance of technical terms in the *Rifā'ī Māla*, compared to the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, could be due to a combination of factors. Written 176 years after the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, it is possible that Sufism was much more widespread by this time, and thus there were more people who understood the vocabulary. Alternatively, the *Rifā'ī* was perhaps written with a much more specific audience in mind than the relatively less technical *Muḥyiddīn Māla*.

Possibly one of the functions of the later *māla* was to woo followers from the Qadiriyya to the Rifa'iyya, or at least assert the superiority of Rifa'i over Jilani. The song (as well as excerpts from the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*) suggests that there may have been competition between various Sufi orders at this time. The *Rifā'ī Māla* not only contains numerous statements that extol the greatness of Rifa'i and his lineage, but it also flatly states that anyone outside of the order will be destroyed. The poem proclaims, after a long section of couplets describing Rifa'i and his powers and relationship with God,

> All the people who do not follow my *ṭarīqat* (branch)
> They will be utterly destroyed[22]

Further, some of the content of the *Rifā'ī Māla* suggests that the two orders were competing directly for followers. Consider the following excerpt:

> "Khāja (Khoja) Muhiyiddīn's *murīd*s (disciples)
> Boarded a ship and went," he said
>
> When the water ran out, the world's people said,
> "Pray to Kabir for water"
>
> When they all prayed for water
> He turned salt water into fresh water

When Jilani's followers needed fresh water while at sea, they prayed to Rifa'i (Kabir), rather than Muhyiddin, and received it. Further, the song says that his progeny will survive and be protected, while those of other *wali*s will not:

> "The descendants of the *wali*s will be cut down
> My descendant will not be cut down," he says

Clearly, the song is arguing for the effectiveness and power inherent in Rifa'i and those who follow him. It is not unusual for a Sufi song to claim the ultimate greatness of the saint about which it is composed. Interestingly, it also appears to be positioning the order against other competing orders that may have been proselytizing or seeking patronage from the same population. This is something not unheard of in the area. V. Kunhali also interprets lines from the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* as indicating competition between Sufi orders in Kerala at that time; he also notes that competition between Sufi groups continues throughout the twentieth century (2004, 15, 66–67).

The *Rifā'ī Māla*'s poetics are similar to the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*'s: most couplets end with *aver*, thus emphasizing the subject of the song while also providing a repetitive structure and rhythmic pattern. First- and last-letter repetition are used fairly consistently, and alliteration and assonance are used whenever possible. Similarly echoing the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* is the inclusion of the date of composition toward the end of the song:

> In 957 *kollam* era
> I stitched this *qiṣṣa* in 158 verses
>
> As I stitched I mixed pearls and diamonds
> I stitched this excellent *māla*, oh people!

Stylistically, the *Rifā'ī Māla* draws heavily from the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, echoing the earlier work in rhyming patterns and other poetic elements as well as content and the location of information within the song. This suggests that the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* remained significant enough that other orders borrowed some of its popularity and numinous sheen by mimicking elements in their own songs, even as they competed for followers. The *Rifā'ī Māla*'s more forceful argument for the Rifā'ī order above all others and the presence of more technical vocabulary, intelligible to those already familiar with Sufism, suggests that the people who were the intended audience for the song likely already had a familiarity with Sufism. Thus, the *Rifā'ī Māla* reflects a community with an established Sufi presence. The *Nafīsat Māla*, however, is slightly different from the earlier works, possibly due to the history of the figure herself. It also may simply reflect a disparate set of community needs.

Māla 3: Nafīsat Māla

The *Nafīsat Māla* is written about Sayyida Nafisa (also known as *Nafīsa Bīvi*), the great-granddaughter of Hassan, one of the grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad that was previously mentioned (Schimmel 2003, 32). She was born near Mecca, but as an adult moved to Cairo with her husband, where she lived for the rest of her life, teaching students and performing miracles. Upon her death in 824 CE, a mausoleum was built in her honor that remains a popular pilgrimage spot. During the Middle Ages, the sultans themselves would throw grand celebrations in the Citadel of Cairo for her birthday (Schimmel 2003, 32).

The song and Nafisa's attributes are similar in many respects to those of both Jilani and Rifa'i. She is a member of the Prophet Muhammad's family through Fatima (a characteristic of most Sufi saints), with special knowledge and powers; according to one Egyptian author, Nafisa is the highest model of female piety (Hoffman 2000, 117, 124). This piousness and attention to correct behavior is spelled out clearly in the *Nafīsat Māla*:

> Many of the Sustainer's orders, like the 5 pillars,
> She followed correctly, continuously, and daily

It notes other devout behavior:

> During the daytime she fasted completely
> At night, without sleep, she was always praying

It also establishes her as a properly married woman, with an (almost) equally gifted husband:

> And her husband, who performed the *ḥajj* 20 times, had great virtue
> [He] received the greatest status among the lineage of the prophet

When she moved to Egypt with her husband, the people of Egypt recognized her high status and sanctity and grew to love her very much (Hoffman 2000, 130, 138):

> To all the people of Egypt, the most grace and blessing
> God gave through this *bīvi* (lady of rank)

As with other Sufi figures, her *karāmāt* is of particular interest in the song. A variety of miracles are ascribed to her, such as curing the paralysis of a small girl. This is described in the following section:

> To all the people of Egypt, the highest grace and blessing
> God gave through this *bīvi*
>
> In that way: the body of a Jewish daughter
> Was completely limp; her strength was gone
>
> Her relatives sprinkled the resident *bīvi*'s bathing water on her
> When it touched her, her illness disappeared
>
> Like that, the great pain left; full health was restored
> She compassionately gave comfort to the whole family
>
> Perfectly with their tongue they said *shahāḍa*[23]
> They became certain, and with their hearts believed [in] Islam

Not only does merely sprinkling the bathing water of Nafisa heal the girl, but also the proof of her power causes the entire family to convert to Islam. According to the song, healing is something that Nafisa does quite often for her followers. For example, the author Nalakatthu Kunni Moydin writes the song after Nafisa healed his son of a terrible fever that caused swelling in his mouth. He also describes other instances of Nafisa intervening in health crises, including healing oxen after the owner tied coins to their horns as an offering to her. In Kerala, her *māla* is sung in order to give women an easy childbirth, and although this is a characteristic attributed to several *māla*s, in the *Nafīsat Māla* her ability to help women in childbirth is explicitly mentioned several times, and especially recommended for women who have long, painful, or complicated labors.

Other miracles are described as well, such as how Nafisa helped a poor widow with four daughters who lost thread that they spent eight days spinning:

> Listen further to the subject of *bīvi*'s greatness!
> An old mother with children was heavy inside
>
> In sadness she cried and beat her hand on her chest
> With confusion and sadness in front of *bīvi*
>
> She came [to Nafisa], in dire straits, and said, "I have four
> Unmarried daughters, we are orphaned
>
> We spin thread day and night in order to survive
> Like that, for eight days we spun thread together
>
> Then I took and tied them and put them on my head
> Humming I walked to the nearby market
>
> After entering and quickly selling it, with the price that I would get
> I could divide into two shares exactly
>
> Half was for food and with the other half
> I decided to buy cotton
>
> When I was walking a bird snatched the bundle of thread
> From my head and left, O my pearl!"

The story continues that there was a group of people on a boat that suddenly got a leak and began to fill with water. They cried out to *bīvi* for help, and, at that moment, a bird flew overhead with the bunch of thread. The people used the thread to plug the hole and it saved them and the boat. When they returned, they went straight to Nafisa and gave her five hundred pieces of silver, which she passed on to the impoverished widow. Thus, Nafisa is also blessed with the power to save people from dire circumstances, which she uses to directly work in the lives of her followers. Other stories similarly tell moving stories of aid that she gave to people, often resulting in their conversion.

Nafisa is credited with substantial scholarship and keen intelligence. Called the "gem of knowledge," she studied with Imam Shaf'i, the founder of one of the four orthodox schools of Islamic law (Schimmel 2003, 32; Hoffman 2000, 124). He even asks for her intercession when his health declines and, when he is on his deathbed, requests that she perform his funeral prayers (Hoffman 2000, 133). Details such as these that document her scholarly accomplishments are recorded in the song alongside her many miraculous works.

Toward the end of the poem are two couplets that echo the earlier *māla*s:

> Know that this *māla* will attract the highest virtues
> Because of (her) greatness, sing (her) praises with respect[24]
>
> If I, Nalakatthu Kunni Moydin, have faults
> And afflictions, please pardon me, and give me into her custody, O Allah

Nalakatthu Kunni Moydin composed the *Nafīsat Māla* sometime from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Beyond the year of his death in 1917 CE, not much is known about the author, including the exact date of the song's composition

(Muhammadāli 2007, 40). The song follows in the same style of earlier *mālas*; however, it uses poetic features such as end rhymes that emphasize the subject of the sentence, first- and last-letter rhyming patterns and alliteration, and it is composed in a single tune throughout. As in the previous songs, her authority and power are emphasized, and she too is called a *quṭb*, a title reserved for the highest Sufi figure in an age, someone who has a direct connection to God:

> To aid in discernment [she] received the position of *quṭb*
> She grew in insight and glory, and the presence of God increased

The *Nafīsat Māla* diverges in some aspects from the other *mālas*. There is very little comparison to other saintly figures; instead, descriptions of specific miracles (and particularly healings) are given in detail along with attestations to her piety and scholarly knowledge. I posit that this is mainly due to there being no particular Sufi branch associated with Nafisa and therefore no direct competition. It is tempting to read a gendered element here, in which men are accorded power as a primary characteristic while women's piety is emphasized. However, in addition to her pious behavior (praying, fasting, remembering God—all behaviors followed by male saints also), Nafisa has considerable spiritual power and scholarly knowledge. Her interactions with Imam Shafʿi point to these clearly. Further, as Jennifer Heath notes concerning the status of women in Sufism, "Women were among the very first in Islam to emerge as ascetics, saints, and mystics, and it is here, more than any other context, that they have participated and received acknowledgement on an equal basis with men" (2004, 151). Ultimately, it is unclear if the differences between the songs are due to the existence of Sufi orders tied to Jilani and Rifa'i but not Nafisa, or to some other element that I neglect in this article. The song closely follows well-known Egyptian stories (Hoffman 2000) about Nafisa, rewritten to conform to *māla pāṭṭŭ* genre, although emphasizing healing above all else. As mentioned earlier, the *māla* ends with a short list of several instances in which Nafisa resolved health issues when petitioned, including that of the author's son. Ending the main portion of the song with these examples emphasizes Nafisa's role as healer. It also indicates the concern with help, especially the healing that made Nafisa so popular. I will return to this theme in the following section, which provides a broader discussion of inter-community differences, concerns, and changes in the performative contexts of the *mālas* today.

Saints' power, contestation, and transformation

As the songs analyzed in the previous section indicate, Islam and Sufism in Kerala have never been monolithic institutions; there have been multiple Sufi leaders, orders, and groups in Kerala as well as differences and debates between Muslim leaders and groups. Competition between Muslim religious orders certainly took place in South Asia (for example, see Green 2004, 222, 232–35) generally and in Kerala more specifically. For instance, Sebastian Prange examines Zayn al-Din al-Malibari's *Fatḥ al-muʿīn*, a sixteenth-century Arabic commentary on Islamic law written in Malabar, and finds that it warns readers of the dangers of seeking mystical insight without proper training. This implies that there were people in the area doing exactly that and that there was competition between Muslim authorities in the area (Prange 2019, 248–51). Kunhali also notes the likelihood of early disputes among followers, based on his examination of the *Muḥyiddīn Māla*. My analysis supports both his and Prange's suppositions. Further, there is considerable evidence of later disputes between Muslim contingents in the region (Kunhali 2004, 13, 15, 66–68). For instance, in the nineteenth-century disputes known as the Kondotty-Ponnani *kaitarkkam* (factional controversy) the accusations and debates that occurred between the two groups appear quite serious. Religious scholars associated with Ponnani issued *fatwa*s (legal opinions) against the Kondotty group, condemning them as infidels and apostates, and forbade their community from interacting with the Kondotty group. For example, the Ponnani scholars banned their people from entering the Kondotty mosques, being buried in their graveyards, eating the animals they butchered, and intermarrying with members of the Kondotty faction (Randathani 2007, 49, 53–60).

The so-called Mappila Rebellion of 1921 also had an effect on the identity of the community, both from within and without. An unsuccessful uprising against the British government by pockets of Mappila peasants, who were non-landowning agricultural workers, left the Mappila community in turmoil. Thousands of Mappilas had been killed, and scores more were either executed, imprisoned (either temporarily or for life), or deported. Further, the uprising left food scarce, internal infrastructures destroyed, and agriculture interrupted (Miller 1976, 148–50). There were also repercussions concerning the identity of the Mappila community, including the very public characterization of them as uneducated and uncivilized. The establishment of the British Malabar Special Police, which was organized in order to prevent further uprisings, emphasized this stereotype (Miller 1976, 146, 152–53). Words such as "shameful" or "ignorant" were often used when describing the community.[25] Mahatma Gandhi himself described the Mappila community as "cruel" and as having gone "mad" (Devji 2005, 73). Islamic reformers in Kerala wrestled with community issues that they saw as both inappropriate and hindering the progress of the Muslim community (Miller 2015, 37–41; Menon 2018, 264–66). Like reform movements in other parts of India, so-called "folk" superstitions and practices, lack of modern education, and the corruption of local Islamic religious leaders were pinpointed. This led to theological, educational, and political reform movements in Kerala (Miller 2015, 93–126, *passim*). Such reform movements continue today with diverse opinions concerning correct theological positions and ritual practices.

One example of the ongoing tension that exists there is the status of the Sufi saints and the *māla*s that praise them. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella relate that during one of their research trips they found that various offerings to saints were seen as traditional Sunni practices that tended to be juxtaposed against modern, reformist tendencies (2008, 323). "Sunni" in the Kerala context refers to those who follow local, traditional Islamic practices, often contrasted with the progressive *mujāḥidīn*s (spiritual warriors), now associated with an organization called the Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen (KNM). Concerning this dynamic, the Osellas note that, "Kerala reformism follows another of the commonly recognized patterns: an urban, educated middle class waving the stick of reformism at rural, lower-class Muslims who stand accused of straying from the path of 'true Islam'" (2008, 323). They include a quote from a KNM member that is worth reading in full:

> Islam has been polluted by false knowledge. People are kept in ignorance and superstition so that priests [Sunni clergy] can fill their bellies and keep control, justifying their existence. You can read in Logan's book [Malabar Manual] about the pitiful condition of Muslims in 19th century Kerala. People were not allowed even to learn Malayalam script—it was considered *haram*. Ignorance leads to superstition and other un-Islamic practices. When in crisis, people call the name of Sheikh Moihudeen. You may have heard of the Moihudeen *mala* in his honour. Women especially read the *mala*, and they believe they will get merit from doing so. He might have been a great man, but this is *shirk*. People praying to saints, prostrating in front of their *jarams* [tombs] is forbidden. The Prophet himself did not want to have a grave! People go to shrines asking saints for help or miracles, but only God can help.

In some quarters, then, petitioning saints is associated with "ignorance, superstition, and uncouthness" (ibid., 338). This is reinforced not only by Kerala reform movements but by a migrant labor force (especially Muslim workers) that travels to the Gulf for work and brings back not just money but ideas about what "real" Islam looks, or should look, like.[26]

The crux of the issue is the petitioning of saints, seen by some as *shirk*, or the worship of anyone or anything aside from God. Saints have long been an important and powerful part of the Muslim world in Kerala, and although Muḥyiddin, Rifa'i, and Nafisa were popular Sufi figures, they were far from alone. Muslim saints performed functions similar to that of other South Asian holy figures, and Mappilas have called both Muslim and non-Muslim saints *awlīyā'*, which, as noted, is the Arabic plural form of *wali*, a friend of God. Prange notes the elision of "categorical difference" between Muslim and non-Muslim figures in popular piety (Prange 2019, 243) that occur as distinctions become unimportant in the face of urgent requirements. When disaster strikes, practicality overrides theology, and the important requirement then becomes the ability to help.

Traditionally, the saints were believed to command *jinn*s, entities who would fight for the saint or help them to perform a variety of miracles, including healing (Kunhali 2004, 110; Karassery 2001, 44). In *Mudpacks and Prozac*, Murphy Halliburton describes some of the healing therapies used today at the mosque/shrine complex named Beemapalli that is located in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, where a Muslim holy woman named Syedu Shuhada Maheen Abubacker—popularly known as *ammā* (mother)—and her son are interred. People of all traditions come for treatment, including praying, eating jasmine flowers, and drinking the water (said to have healing properties) that comes from an underground spring on the property, especially during the female saint's annual *'urs*, or death anniversary (Halliburton 2009, 78–79).[27] Many saints offered practical help for urgent circumstances such as healing, protection, and miraculous intervention in the past but also continue to do so in the present. I speculate that the *Nafīsat Māla* remained popular due to the song's emphasis on healing, even though Nafisa claims no dedicated followers in the form of an independent order.

The *māla*s were seen as extensions of the saints' power and were believed to have protective functions by their very presence, and so people unable to read the script would keep copies in their homes for protection or auspicious effect, much like one would use an amulet. Reciting *māla*s was believed to benefit an entire household, including basic needs such as food, curing sickness, and filling wells (Kunhali 2004, 112; Muneer 2016, 429–30). Certain *māla*s were associated with particular benefits: the *Cherusīti Taṅṅaḷ Māla*, for instance, was sung for forty-one days in order to allow a barren woman to conceive (Kunhali 2004, 113–14). Moreover, the *Rifā'ī Māla* is sung as protection from burns and snakebites, which echoes ritual practices in the Rifa'i order, which is known for the austere corporeal practices of its members (Randathani 2007, 41; Taṟamēl and Vaḷḷikkunnŭ 2006, 25–27).[28] As noted, the *Nafīsat Māla* specifically details Nafisa's ability to heal and help women in childbirth multiple times in her song.

If the purchase of printed versions of the *māla*s is any indication, then the perceived numinous quality of them (for protection, good fortune, or healing) may be on the decline. Certainly the production of materials in Arabi-Malayalam script is slowing down, partially because with the rise of general education in Malayalam, the need for such materials for educational purposes has decreased (Miller 1976, 289–90). On the one hand, at the publishing house of C. H. Muhammad and Sons in Tirurangadi where I purchased a bundle of Mappila songs, many of them dry and brittle with age, I was told that they were going to stop producing the Arabi-Malayalam text because no one reads the script anymore. Many of the songs, such as the older *māla*s, are often impenetrable to those unfamiliar with Arabi-Malayalam's vocabulary, colloquialisms, and archaic grammatical forms. On the other hand, books of mixed collections containing both Arabic *mawlīd*s and Arabi-Malayalam *māla*s printed in Arabi-Malayalam script are available at local bookstalls.

The *māla*s are still performed in certain venues, but newer Mappila songs are being written that are much more comprehensible to a modern Malayali audience, although connoisseurs and scholars lament the loss of technical skill, traditional forms, and deeper religious meaning (Neṭiyanāṭŭ 2009, 24).[29] This points us toward the most recent transformation that Mappila songs in general have undergone, a process of commodification for the purpose of mass consumption that scholars such as Frank J. Korom call "folklorization" (Korom 2006, 11). Some Mappila songs are immensely popular in other formats; radio stations play both modern film songs and classic songs, and new Mappila "pop" songs continue to be written and published in cheap booklets in Malayalam script. Compact discs of many kinds of songs (including the *māla*s discussed here) are also available in northern Kerala (although difficult to find in the south). Multiple televised singing competitions focused solely on Mappila songs have aired, such as the long-running show named Patturumal that is aired on Kairali TV. Hundreds of songs and performances can be found on YouTube.

However, efforts are being made in Kerala to preserve older materials, including the *māla*s, other Mappila songs, and prose Arabi-Malayalam texts, as the cultural heritage of the community under investigation here. The written or printed texts are preserved at cultural centers that have libraries and programs for the promotion and conservation of Mappila literature and arts. One example is the Mahakavi Moyinkutty

Vaidyar Smarakam, a government-funded cultural center established in Kondotty in 1999 to memorialize the great poet Moyinkutty Vaidyar (1852–92 CE), which houses a folklore study center, reference library, and museum. It hosts festivals and seminars and has published several books on Mappila songs. The library specializes in Arabi-Malayalam works, striving to collect and catalogue such texts that are gradually disappearing. In a fascinating turn, there are YouTube videos of the old *māla*s (including the ones on which I have focused here) that teach Arabi-Malayalam script alongside the *māla*s to people by presenting the Arabi-Malayalam script on the screen and highlighting each word as it is sung. Folklorization, then, may be a process that in the end contributes to the preservation of the traditional usages of the songs, contested or not, since it provides access to them for a larger audience via the internet. This is reminiscent of Valdimar Tr. Hafstein's remarks concerning "heritagization" and "folklorization." Hafstein writes "the current heritagization of social practices is the latest phase in the long term infusion of folkloristic perspectives, knowledge, and concepts into the public sphere as part of society's reflexive modernization" (2019, 128). Not only a logical modern development, folklorization (sometimes seen as a problematic issue) can go hand-in-hand with the safeguarding of intangible heritage (Hafstein 2019, 143).

In conclusion, a close reading of these three *māla pāṭṭŭ*s points our attention to and provides rich historical details about possible shifts and complexities within the Mappila community of Kerala, from voices within the community. Moreover, the songs point out the diverse viewpoints that coexisted (and still coexist) within the Kerala Muslim population, and thus reflect the diversity, flexibility, and contestations that exist within religious communities in general. Although the *māla pāṭṭŭ*s may inhabit an ambivalent cultural space, this study suggests that this ambivalence is nothing new. Although their numinous qualities may be, generally speaking, deemphasized as their cultural value becomes foregrounded in cultural centers, cultural performances, and the commercialization of newer Mappila pop songs, the process of folklorization is also making the traditional *māla*s available to a larger audience than ever before and thus not only preserving the songs but also reflecting and possibly (re)constructing and revitalizing Mappila identities and practices.[30]

AUTHOR

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Notes

1. The most obvious etymology of the word *māla* is from the Malayalam/Sanskrit meaning of “garland,” which many authors play on in their poems (e.g., “stringing the garland”). However, some scholars contest this etymology. For example, Bālakṛṣṇan Vaḷḷikkunnŭ and Umar Taṟamēl, well-known Mappila song scholars, write that in the Mappila context, *māla* is derived from the Arabic word *mawlīd*, which refers to the birthday celebration of Muhammad and other saintly figures. Although they maintain that it has a different etymology, they do not deny a literary connection to other Malayalam literary works such as the tenth-century *Mukunda Māla* or the Niraṇam poets’ *Bharata Māla* of the fourteenth century (see Taṟamēl and Vaḷḷikkunnŭ 2006, 25). Hussain Randathani considers *māla*s to be “Sufi devotional songs.” The *māla*s do (mostly) contain the same information as *mawlīd*s—birth-related miracles, general miracles, biographical information, and so on—but they are distinct in structure, language, and function (see Randathani 2007, 40). It is interesting that the origin of the word is debated.

2. For example, the *Kottupaḷḷi Māla* describes a young man named Kunni Marakkar who leaves his own wedding in order to rescue a Muslim girl from Portuguese abductors. He dies in the attempt, and his body is cut into seven pieces and thrown into the sea; miracles take place at the sites where his limbs wash ashore (Dale 1980, 49). Other *māla*s focus their devotion on important figures in the Islamic historical tradition, such as the *Fatima Bīvi Māla*, the *Siddīq Māla* (in praise of the first Caliph, Abubakar Siddiq), and the *Maḥamud Māla* in praise of the Prophet.

3. *Muḥyiddīn Māla* is the Arabi-Malayalam script version of the song’s transliterated spelling; the Malayalam script version spells it *Muhiyiddīn Māla*.

4. The *Muḥyiddīn Māla*, *Rifā’ī Māla*, and *Nafīsat Māla* all traditionally have different tunes, but the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* and the *Rifā’ī Māla* are similar enough in rhythm that they can easily be sung to the same tune.

5. Not all *māla*s follow this format. For example, Moyinkuṭṭi Vaidyar’s *Kiḷatti Māla* differs in several ways from these *māla*s. Vaidyar is widely considered the “great poet” of Arabi-Malayalam literature; he even has a memorial center named after him, to which I refer in this article’s conclusion.

6. Although the relationship between gender and the *māla* literature is not a focus of this article, I plan on exploring it in future research.

7. P. K. Yasser Arafath theorizes that the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* was the first literary work written in Arabi-Malayalam script. See Arafath (2020, 529).

8. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted. I used both the Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam version for the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* and the *Rifā’ī Māla.* The *Nafīsat Māla* was translated solely from the Arabi-Malayalam version. These are all modern booklets, with no publication date; see the reference list for more publication information. When transliterating, I used the Malayalam version when available for ease of transliteration, as there is no standard system of transliteration for Arabi-Malayalam script. I owe a debt of gratitude to many people for helping with my translations, including Sara Jasmine Muhammad, M. N. Karaserry, and M. R. Unnithan.

9. Islamic law that deals with daily life.

10. Mystical knowledge; supreme truth or absolute reality.

11. That is, he is head and shoulders above all other Sufi leaders. This is a derivation of a famous line attributed to Jilani: "This foot of mine is on the neck of all the saints." See Malik (2018, 15).

12. It refers to a remote, mystical mountain in the Islamic tradition.

13. It is known as *baḥr muḥīṭ*. In Arabic, it is written as *al-baḥr al-muḥīt*, but the articles have been deleted here, probably to preserve the *iśal*.

14. The Arabic term, *ya'jūj*, is written with the Malayalam word for land (*nāṭŭ*), so is the "land of Gog." Gog and Magog, or *ya'jūj* and *ma'jūj*, are mentioned in both the Quran and the Bible. It is uncertain whether they are persons, groups, or lands, but it is clear that here it refers to a land. They are generally perceived negatively, as unbelievers or the lands of unbelievers. The full couplet reads as follows: *kāphmalayinnum bahaṟumuhīttinum / yaujūj nāṭṭinnum talane tātticcōvar.*

15. *mūlam uṭayavar ēkal aruḷāle / muhiyiddīn ennupēr dīntān viḷiccōvar.*

16. Interestingly, Rabia of Basra is also credited with being able to make her fingertips glow at night (see Schimmel 2003, 35).

17. This is a practice continued in many Mappila songs. For example, the *Nafīsat Māla* uses both Arabic and Malayalam words for "death," and it uses both Tamil and Malayalam verbs meaning "to speak."

18. In order to calculate CE, add 825 years to the Kollam date. The two couplets are:

> *kollam eḻunūṯṯi eṇpatti raṇṭil ñan / kōrttenimmālane nūṯṯanbattañcummal*
> and
> *muttum māṇikyavum onnāyi kōrttapōl / muhiyaddīnmālēnekōrttēn ñān lōkare.*

The "stringing" of the song as well as the mention of pearls and rubies strongly alludes to the literary language *maṇipravāḷam*, a word that translates to "rubies and coral," which is a hybrid mixture of Sanskrit with Malayalam. The poet is suggesting his composition—a mixture of Malayalam and Arabic—is similarly literary.

19. Thanks to Akbar Hyder, who drew my attention to these allusions.

20. *ilmulyakkīnilum ayinulyakkīnilum / hakkulyakkīnilum ñānannŭ connovar.*

21. *Quṭb* literally means "axis" or "pole" but refers to a Sufi leader with a direct connection to God, who may or may not be known to people. There is believed to be only one per generation. It is sometimes translated as "pivot."

22. *enṟe tvarīkhattil tuṭarātōrkkokkeyu / ēṯṯam musībattavarkkennu connōvar.*

23. The statement that is used for conversion to Islam, considered to be one of the five pillars of faith: "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God."

24. The word *adab* refers to the system of Muslim etiquette.

25. For example, "The most shameful of the symptoms of the failure of this alliance were the Moplah riots when an anti-imperialist agitation, originally inspired by the *Khilafat* movement, got out of control and its nature changed in the hands of ignorant mobs to a fratricidal and inhuman massacre of its own Hindu allies" (see Ahmad 1964, 268). Similarly, Murray Titus wrote in 1929 that the Mappilaas were "bigoted and ignorant as a class, and have given trouble from time to time by their fanatical outbursts, the last and most serious of all being in 1921, when they carried on a real rebellion. They endeavored to set up a Muslim kingdom, and perpetrated forced conversions among the Hindu community" (Titus 1990, 40).

26. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella caution us against putting too much emphasis on Gulf influence on Islamic reform in Kerala, instead insisting that it be situated within the larger history of Kerala reform movements that stretch back to the middle of the nineteenth century (2008, 330–33). They also note that although there may be some continuities between the *mujāḥid*s and Gulf reform movements, the former are well aware of the differences between their practices and those of Wahhabi reformism, such as the use of Arabic in sermons (the *mujāḥid*s prefer the vernacular) and women's access to mosques (which the *mujāḥid*s allow, but both Wahhabis and Kerala Sunnis generally do not) (ibid., 332).

27. Interestingly, there are no *māla* songs associated with Beemapalli; additionally, Muslims in the southern areas of the state are not identified as "Mappilas," for they use family names instead (Kunhali 2004, 45).

28. It was reported as early as the eleventh century that Rifa'i followers "rode on lions," ate live snakes, and walked on hot coals. Other practices of Rifa'i followers included piercing cheeks with sharpened iron skewers, which is practiced by some in the Muslim community in Kerala even today (Bosworth 2012). See also Trimingham (1998, 38–39). For a description of similar practices in Gujarat, see Van der Veer (1992, 554).

29. I was also told by several people that most modern songs that go by the name of *māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ* are at best poor imitations and at worst not *māppiḷa pāṭṭŭ*s at all.

30. For a similar observation, but with regard to the way that reciting devotional texts such as the *Muḥyiddīn Māla* forges a pious disposition, see Muneer (2016, 427, *passim*).

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Moving the Living and the Dead

The Power of Bronze Drums in Contemporary Ethnic China

The bronze drum in Asia has long been regarded as a form of antiquity and a cultural relic of the bronze age, representative of cultural groups found in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar's border region. Through a close examination of bronze drum culture among the Baiku Yao ethnic minority of northwest Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, in southern China, this article reveals the constitutive role drums play in contemporary social and religious life. This article draws on eight years of ethnographic data and builds on a material culture studies analytical framework to describe the sacralized life of the bronze drum. Through a ritualized anthropomorphic metamorphosis, the bronze drum is said to become a constituted member of the Baiku Yao community and hold sacred power to bridge the human and spirit worlds during funeral ceremonies. This article analyzes the symbolic dimensions of the bronze drum as a cultural practice and as a medium through which Baiku Yao ritual order, social organization and arrangements, and interactions with the spirit world can be understood. It reveals that bronze drums today possess agency in their power to move people, living and dead.

Keywords: Bronze drum—China—cultural heritage—material culture—Yao—sacred

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The sound of the drums beckoned us. I jumped on the back of Lu Jimin's motorcycle, and the two of us sped up the mountain. We diverged from the paved road that connected Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region to Guizhou province and traversed a steep, rock-covered single track. As soon as we came upon a crowd of motorbikes covering the narrow path, we stopped. Situated in an unused rice paddy that looked over the surrounding terraces was a group of men gathering around a large wooden square 10-foot-high arch. Suspended from the top beam were half-meter-wide bronze drums. A middle-aged man sauntered up to a large pig-skin-covered wooden drum facing the line of bronze drums, picked up thick wood mallets resting on its tympanum, and slammed them down with great force. On every beat he squatted a little to lean into the drum for more force. As his rhythm continued, men approached each of the hanging bronze drums and began to join the lead drummer. Their deep, resonating rhythm began to echo across the neighboring karst mountaintops. It was mid-spring, funeral season for the Baiku Yao, a small sub-branch of the Yao living in southwest China.

One man stood beside the bronze drum hitting its round flat face, while the other man moved a large wooden bucket in and out of its curved bell from behind. The front drummer held a thin bamboo stick in his right hand and tapped the top side of the bronze drum bell to produce a tinny sound on the upbeats. In his left hand, he held a mallet made of tree root to hit softly into the center of the drum's face on the downbeats. Every time he hit the face, the other drummer pushed his wooden bucket into the large bell and just as quickly pulled the bucket out, cupping the sounded blast from the mallet, and sending the soft warm tone outward. The row of buckets flew in and out of the drum bells in perfect unison. Each pair of men performed this movement with bodies fixed in position and heads facing the ground in a solemn stance.

The lead drummer slammed his thick wooden mallets down for a final blow and began to pound more rapidly, a crescendo, ending the first of eleven stanzas. The mood immediately changed. The bronze drummers stood up and excitedly waved their mallets and buckets into the air, yelling. Long-barrel musket rifles were fired and enveloped the rice paddy with white smoke. Each drummer was handed a bowl of locally produced moonshine and consumed it in one draught. I was told it was to keep each player grounded in the human world. Within minutes, the lead drummer grabbed his sticks again and began the next stanza.

Night had fallen quickly, and the final blast of drums rang out. A young man ran across the rice paddy waving strips of white paper attached to a long bamboo rod to signal the end of the first day of the funeral ceremony. Only the drummers and a few dozen men from the village remained. Each pair of men unstrung their drums from the wood frame and walked over to a large flat basket on the ground to receive meat kebabs and glutinous rice balls as a token of gratitude from the family of the deceased. As the crowd dissipated, the village party secretary standing close by turned to me and asked, "Will you be joining us tomorrow? We will be sacrificing the water buffalo before sending up [*shang shan* or "bury"] the elder."

I didn't come to the Baiku Yao village of Huaili, deep in northwest Guangxi, with the intention of researching bronze drums. Rather, my focus was on the recently established village ecomuseum (2004), an initiative led by Chinese scholars and the regional government to, on the one hand, help protect and manage heritage and, on the other hand, promote cultural and ethnic tourism. What began as an investigation on museum development approaches in rural China and the impact of village museumification (Nitzky 2012a, 2012b, 2014) became also an ethnography on bronze drums among the Yao of southwest China.

In the later part of the twentieth century, the social sciences began to take a more critical look at the relationship between people and things. We saw with Arjun Appadurai's seminal edited volume *The Social Life of Things* (1986) and a proliferation of literature from the likes of Daniel Miller (1987), Marilyn Strathern (1988), Nicholas Thomas (1991), Janet Hoskins (1998), and others that the human-object relationship deserves a broader social analysis articulating how people and objects are "tied up with each other." Consequently, what Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall (1999, 170) and others in contemporary material culture studies propose is a new theoretical perspective that looks at objects as constitutive of meaning. In other words, objects do not simply have meaning, they make it. Furthermore, using a biographical approach we can "understand the way objects become invested with meaning through social interactions they are caught up in" and how these meanings change over the "life of the object," recognizing that objects can and should be seen in terms of an unfolding process of becoming (see Thomas 1991). For this article, I draw on this scholarship to illustrate one phase of the life of the bronze drum.

Bronze drums in Asia are regarded as a form of antiquity, representative of long-past societies of the Chinese–Southeast Asian border region, and symbols of national identity. The bronze drum, deemed recently by the Chinese government as a cultural relic, a significant part of national cultural patrimony, and in its earliest iterations a proclaimed national treasure, has a social life that has undergone significant change in meaning, value, and use over the past two thousand years in Asia. Drawing on the archaeological and ethnographic record, many texts have focused on the material form, function, and movement of ancient bronze drums, often creating taxonomies in the process. However, little attention has been paid to understanding the contemporary bronze drum practices and meanings. This article examines the bronze drum not as a cultural artifact or relic but as a meaningful, vital object that is a durable constitutive component of daily life in ethnic southwest China.

For the Baiku Yao, a sub-branch of the Yao in northwest Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (GZAR), bronze drums accumulate biographies by entering the Baiku Yao community as part of a household, undergoing a sacralizing naming ritual, and participating in communicative and mediatory acts in funeral ceremonies. Building on ethnographic empirical data collected in the northern reaches of GZAR from 2008 to 2016, living with the Baiku Yao of Nandan county, and employing a material culture studies analytical framework combined with anthropological and ethnomusicological approaches, I examine here the constitutive aspects of bronze drums in social and religious life. I aim to show how bronze drums are "invested with meaning through the social interactions they are caught up in" (Thomas 1991) and entangled in an active and potent socio-religious system among the Baiku Yao (Dawe 2001). In my investigation of the contemporary relationships between the Baiku Yao and bronze drums, I aim to illustrate the signifying practices of possessing, knowing, and sounding bronze drums and to move beyond examining objects as passive or muted to reveal that bronze drums occupy engendered and status-defining positions and possess agency in the eyes of the Baiku Yao in their power to move people, living and dead.

Bronze drums in China

Archaeologists have unearthed bronze drums throughout northern Vietnam and Myanmar and even as far south as the Malay peninsula and the archipelago of Indonesia (Calò 2009). However, nowhere possesses as many bronze drums as southern China. Of the 2,400 bronze drums worldwide, the majority are found in China. Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangxi are considered the main locations for production and the movement of bronze drums in China over the last two thousand years.[1] While the bronze drum is argued to have originated in Yunnan province, today the most are found in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, namely in its northwest reaches of Hechi Red River Basin (*Hechi Hongshui Heliu*). Composed of seven counties—Donglan, Nandan, Tian'e, Fengshan, Bama, Dahui, and Du'an—and a total of 109 townships, Hechi has over 1,400 bronze drums (Wu et al., 2009). Unique to Hechi is the continued use of bronze drums by different ethnic minority groups, such as the Zhuang, Miao, and Yao. The Baiku ("white trouser" in Chinese) Yao, known locally as the *Donuo*, is a sub-branch of the Yao umbrella ethnic nationality (*minzu*) (see Litzinger 2000; Gladney 1994). With a population of approximately fifty thousand, the Baiku Yao live across three border townships of Lihu and Baxu in Guangxi and Yaoshan in Guizhou Province. Lihu township has the largest collection of bronze drums for any township in the region (Wu et al., 2009).[2] The Baiku Yao are the main reason the Hechi Red River Basin was named in 2015 an official bronze drum cultural ecological protection zone.

While no written texts date the introduction of the bronze drum to the Baiku Yao people, historical and archaeological records show that the bronze drum collection and casting developed early in Guangxi.[3] Chinese texts note that bronze drums in China date back to the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) (Jiang 1982, 1999).[4] In my conversations with two notable scholars of bronze drums in China, Nong

Xuelian and Jiang Tingyu, they stressed that early bronze drums were the right of regional leaders and proof of elite wealth and prestige (personal communication, August 2016). Charles Higham (1996, 2002) and Ian Glover (2010), scholars of bronze culture in Southeast Asia, similarly concur that bronze drums and other bronze objects were markers of high status. Higham (1996, 2002) asserts that ownership of bronze drums was considered the highest symbol of the aristocracy (see also Andaya 2016). In addition to the possession of bronze drums by southwest China's elite, deputy director Lu Wendong of the Museum of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region informed me that elite would flaunt their status by virtue of the width, height, and intricacy of their creation (personal communication, August 2016).

Mr. Nong Xuejian of Guangxi Museum of Anthropology provides an analogy to demonstrate the bronze drum's importance in southern China, stating that historically the bronze drum was like the *ding* (tripod bronze vessel found in northern China) of the south (personal communication, August 2016). Like the *ding*, bronze drums have mobility, moving across the region of southern China and northern Vietnam in accordance with established relationships between lords and elites. As Glover (2010, 19) notes with respect to their wide circulation and connection with diplomacy, bronze drums were prestige goods. In fact, the Chinese historical account of Ma Yuan, a military general of the Eastern Han dynasty who suppressed and conquered much of southern China and northern Vietnam, illustrates the significance of "drum diplomacy." Bronze drums were so important that General Ma Yuan is said to have seized bronze drums across the region and melted them down to be recast as bronze horses in an attempt to remove the power of ruling elites during his southern military raids (Cooler 1995, 8; Han 1998).

From the earliest and most simplistic Wangjiaba-type bronze drum to the later and more intricate types of Shizhaishan, Lingshan, and Majiang,[5] bronze drums in China have transformed in size, decorated motifs, and patterns over time. Geometric motifs and patterns depicted on bronze drums tell us about the strong symbolism drums had (and maintain) in representing a connection between natural and supernatural worlds (Calò 2014). Motifs such as peacocks, feathered dancers, flying birds, canoes, clouds, and thunder adorn the face and sides of bronze drums, depending on the type, period, and region. Along with these patterns, the star/sun-like relief centrally located on the face of bronze drums communicates a connection to and worship of celestial bodies, nature, and the supernatural world (Imamura 2010; Han 1998, 2004; Calò 2014, 2009). Ambra Calò and others note that these features point to the unique spiritual qualities drums were thought to possess among different cultural groups found in China as well as in Southeast Asia. For example, Nong Xuejian explained to me that the three-dimensional frogs placed on the face of many bronze drums are connected to the Yue people of southern China. As farmers, the Yue people were dependent on rain for their crops. The croaking of frogs and the clapping of thunder were thought to precede the coming of rain, and three-dimensional frogs adorned the tympanum of many bronze drums as a venerated symbol of the fertility of the land. People believed that if the drums were struck, rainstorms would ensue (see Bernet Kempers 1988, 21, 67–68, 177–78; Calò 2009, 121). Some research also states that drums were considered to possess great spiritual power as protectors against disaster and evil and brought fortune and wealth (Wu et al., 2009). "Among the Yueh chieftains of Yunnan," as Richard Cooler (1995, 9) discusses, drums "were used to summon the gods, obtain blessings, and to heal the sick." As will be discussed in the following paragraphs, for the Baiku Yao of Guangxi, the bronze drum also possesses a spiritual power to summon and communicate with the supernatural world.

Historically, bronze drums served different purposes among various groups of the China–Southeast Asia border region and beyond. Importantly, bronze drums are not mere antiquities found in museum collections. They continue to hold cultural significance among several ethnic groups today. The Zhuang of northwest Guangxi, for example, continue to venerate the frog during the annual MaGuai Festival by sounding their bronze drums for a good harvest. This article focuses on how for one ethnic minority group in southern China the bronze drum remains an essential element in their socioreligious life. For the Baiku Yao, the bronze drum, or *nou* in Baiku Yao language, is a sacred device understood in the community as a bridge or medium to communicate with the ancestral and spirit world that has consequences in the social realm.

The sacredness of drums

Beyond secular musical performance, drums throughout the world are seen to take on important and distinct symbolic meaning among different cultural groups. Social scientists and historians have well documented drums used for religious and ritual ceremonies. For shamanic and animistic ritual practices, for example, drums play a significant role among Native American groups like the Lakota and Iñupiat, the Sámi of Northern Europe, and the Manchu, Evenki, Oroqen, and Yi of East Asia. According to Michael Witzel (2011) and Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman (2004), a key device of Siberian shamanism, along with shamanic practices from East Asia to the Americas, is a circular frame drum. Its beat is said to induce visionary ecstasy, trance, "vision quests," and divination (see also Pentikäinen 2010 on the Sámi). Beyond the transformation sound drums produce, many groups claim the drum as a living being or force that contributes to power and mediumship of the shaman. In Åke Hultkrantz's (1991, 16) extensive work comparing shaman drums, the Siberian drum is noted for its embodiment of a spirit, namely the guardian's spirit. It is granted life when a spirit possesses the structural membrane of the drum. Christopher Rybak and Amanda Decker-Fitts (2009), drawing on the work of Joseph Epes Brown (1953), claim that among many Native American groups the round form of the drum "represents the entire world, and the rhythmic beat represents the heartbeat of the world." The "talking drums" found in Nigeria are said to have a direct connection to deities. Olusegun Oladosu (2016) stresses that the drum both reveals the pulse and inner feelings of the Yoruba people of Benin and Western Nigeria, and the rhythm enhances the ecstatic state of the practitioner. Oladosu also shows the ritual salience of Yoruba drums in how they "facilitate the acts of spiritual expression in ritual passages by awaken[ing] and invok[ing] the spirits of deities [namely Ogun, the god of iron] in festivals and thus motivat[ing] connection between them and the participants" (2016, 57). Through their power to transform the state of practitioners, to summon spirits, and to embody life itself, drums can hold significant power, potent symbolism, and revered sacredness.

To quote the late social anthropologist Stanley Tambiah (1979, 1985, 1996): "Anything toward which an 'unquestioned' and 'traditionalizing' attitude is adopted can be viewed as sacred" (1985, 130). In my discussions with Baiku Yao elders and bronze drum players, a similar collective unquestionability was expressed about the power drums embody and their ability to communicate directly with the ancestral world. The exploration of the sacred and constitution of sacred objects has long been a focus of attention in the social sciences. Much earlier than Tambiah, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss (1964) examined the sacredness found in *mana*, describing the sacred as "that which gives value to things and to people, magical value, religious value, social value." Apart from Hubert and Mauss's analysis of the sacredness of things and beings, eminent sociologist Emile Durkheim, in his seminal text, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1954), probed further the relationship between the sacred and the social. While noting that sacred objects may vary from one society to the next, Durkheim found uniformity across societies in that "the sacred character of a thing is not implicit in the intrinsic properties of the thing; it is something added." Durkheim's constructivist approach showed that nothing, therefore, is excluded *a priori* from the realm of the sacred; anything can be given representative meaning. Thus, while sacredness may be unquestionable by a group, sacredness is also proscribed by that very group. Furthermore, Hubert and Mauss supported that the sacred is representative of and constitutes the values of a given community and its members. Be it holy water, the Nile River, sutras, or bronze drums, a community is seen engaging in certain acts in accordance with the ascribed values and meanings to maintain the sacredness of a thing or being.

According to Durkheim (1954, 380), "an object is sacred, because it inspires, in one way or another, a collective sentiment of respect," which endows "its representation in the conscious mind with such strength that it automatically prompts or inhibits" certain acts (Derlon and Mauzé n.d., 5). Tambiah (2013) states that sacred things are "recognized as permanent embodiments of virtue and power." To understand the sacredness of a drum is not only to detail its characteristics and distinction from the profane but also to probe how it exemplifies and manifests morals, values, and social obligations of the group that defines it and holds it in high esteem. In this article, I illustrate how the bronze drum performs the essential role in the eyes of the Baiku Yao of announcing the death of a community member to the human and spirit world. Its revered sound is collectively understood as having the power to open the path to the ancestral land for the deceased spirit to reach. The event described at the beginning of the article reveals how communicative interaction is an essential part of funeral ceremonies among the Baiku Yao. This includes music and drumming as a mode of enacting ancestral respect and mediation between the natural and supernatural worlds. The process of enactment requires particular drums, the wooden drum and bronze drum, to be played in unison by village laymen during funeral ceremonies. The bronze drum also demands respect because of the sacralization process it undergoes after entering the community, whereby it experiences an anthropogenic metamorphosis through ritual. Rather than maintaining a stance on the dichotomous relationship between sacred and profane, with their associated unbridled distinction, I aim here to show how the inscription of sacredness of the bronze drum has serious consequences in the social realm for the Baiku Yao, so much so that cultural and symbolic capital as well as kin relations are constituted through the drum's ownership and use. For this article, I highlight the social and cosmological relationships in which bronze drums are entangled in rural China. In following Alfred Gell, I attempt to unravel not only what the bronze drum represents and embodies but what bronze drums *do* affectively by holding a "practical mediatory role" (1998, 6) in the Baiku Yao world.

Bronze drum folklore

Several miles up the steep and winding road from the township of Lihu, Li Fangcai's adobe and brick home sits centrally located in Huaili village.[6] He is known throughout the Baiku Yao community and beyond as a master drummer and has been recognized by the Guangxi regional government as an intangible heritage "inheritor." Li Fangcai sat on a low wood stool across from me in his home. We were separated by dinner cooking in a steel wok over a wood fire pit that his wife had prepared. In the corner of Li Fangcai's house stood an enormous wooden skin drum like I had seen before leading the line of bronze drums. He saw me take notice. Leaning toward me over the simmering wok, Li said, "You know, we play drums for deceased elders!" He slowly pulled back out of the smoke and took a few puffs off his stubby cigarette. His pause was intentional after this definitive statement. The silence that persisted connoted a certainty, a claim of the power of the drum.

Conversations and interviews with villagers and my attendance at funeral ceremonies summer after summer over eight years provided little in the way of a deeper description on the power of the drum beyond what I heard repeated in household after household, "we play drums for deceased elders." Although the Baiku Yao are steeped in a complicated ritual system of venerating ancestors and animate and inanimate spirits, I observed that they do not engage in discussions in the symbolism of ritual life with each other, let alone with a visiting anthropologist. Only those recipients of a shamanic ritual may be informed of the name of a harmful spirit, the reason for pain or strife, and what needs to be done to appease it through ritual sacrifice. Such knowledge is not considered taboo or secretive. Rather, the fact that it remains elusive and tacit is an illustration of the Baiku Yao people's unquestionable acceptance of ritual belief and practiced ritual postulates (see Rappaport 1999). The questions I posed about the role of the bronze drum were considered odd. It was obvious to them that "we play for deceased elders." Indeed, the unyielding certainty of the bronze drum's power strengthens the dimensions of its symbolic attachments.

Durkheim and others tell us that cultural objects are "the fruits of collective production, fundamentally social in their genesis." In the case of the Baiku Yao bronze drum, collective production can be seen as the act of cultural transmission, through voicing and passing on oral traditions, learning through social practice, and the unspoken certainty of spiritual power. Around the night fire the collective production process would take place. Baiku Yao elders would lament that the days when children would sit around the fire hearth at night and listen to tales from their elders had disappeared. The introduction of the television and more recently the smartphone had certainly accelerated if not induced such change. As we experienced the warm glow, elders kindly entertained my probes for any knowledge surrounding the bronze drum in the spatial and temporal context. My inquiries, unbeknown to me at the time, lent themselves to the receipt of community knowledge by present youth. In the households I visited to discuss the bronze drum, young children listened on as I did for the first time, receiving the benefits of cultural production. One instance, the tale of Lasai Decha, serves as an example of many such evenings when I learned the meaning of bronze drums through folklore.

> A long time ago . . . a young boy named Lasai Decha was taking out his cow to the fields to graze when he saw a mother cow undergoing significant pain while giving birth to her calf. Later that day, Lasai Decha returned from his duties and informed his mother of what he witnessed that day. She then patiently explained to him the birthing process and stated, "not only do cows suffer, but I too underwent significant pain and suffering for several days to give birth to you." Much later, upon his mother's death, the filial Lasai Decha decided not to permit his mother's body to be consumed by his fellow villagers, according to customary form of cannibalism after someone's death. Instead, the son secretly hid his mother's body in a coffin underground in his home to prevent her body from being seen. When villagers came to ask of his mother's whereabouts, the boy lied, saying she was off in the fields. Lasai Decha went to consult his maternal uncle (*jiujiu*) on how to honor his deceased mother. His uncle explained that he must offer meat to his fellow villagers even if it was not his mother. His uncle told him that he would need a water buffalo to sacrifice. In addition, he would need a bronze drum and cow-skin drum to play for his mother. His uncle mentioned a man who had such drums that Lasai Decha should see. Lasai Decha collected a large water buffalo of his own and invited his uncle to slaughter the animal in public. Then he divided the meat to present to each household. Although the villagers were initially angry that Lasai Decha had violated the social laws of society, they welcomed the sacrifice of the buffalo as an alternative.

Every elder I spoke with told me this story, recalling it from their memory of sitting around the evening fire when they were younger. Why did elders relay this tale when asked about the use of the drum for the deceased? The tale of *Lasai Decha* exemplifies acts of honoring the dead and the role kin must play in this process. The elision of cannibalism was never explained to me by elders, and I received little to no response to my probe. However, the bronze drum in this story could be used as an explanation for abandoning the grisly practice of eating the dead, as a more honorable way to pay reverence to deceased elders. The transmission of the narrative of *Lasai Decha* is the oral expression of this sentiment, and the bronze drum and the water buffalo act as the physical embodiment of it. For the Baiku Yao I spoke with, the bronze drum triggers strong moral and social obligations.

The collective knowledge of this narrative across Baiku Yao society constitutes a fundamental part of the discourse on ritual practice that legitimizes both the logic of death and the custom of funerals. While little is mentioned directly in the narrative on the use of the drum, other folktales were referenced by villagers I spoke with. Most notable is that of the Monkey Drummer, which points to the association between the bronze drum and death:

> A long time ago, a *dounou* ["Baiku Yao people" in Baiku Yao language] male elder went into the forest to harvest some soybeans. While in the forest, he got tired from working and decided to take a nap. After a while, a group of monkeys were coming down the mountain and saw the man lying in a pile of soybean husks not moving. Thinking he was dead, the monkey and accompanying fox decided to play the bronze drum for the man to commemorate his death. The elder was wakened by the sound of the drums, and, lying still, he watched mesmerized at the animals playing. He witnessed the monkey beating the drum jumping around it and making strange movements. He became so surprised that he stood up and startled the animals, making them run off into the forest. The man took the two drums—wooden pig-skin drum and bronze drum—back to his village. Later, during the funeral of a village elder, the man decided to play the wooden pig-skin drum with the accompanying bronze drum. While playing, the man began to mimic the movements he remembered from the monkey on the mountain. The man told his story to the villagers and thus began the legend of *QinZeGeLa*, monkey stick jump.

Through this folktale, we witness the relationship Baiku Yao people have with nature. In this case fauna, the monkey and fox, are displaying anthropomorphic characteristics in their ability to make effective and symbolic use of human material culture, providing them with curiosity and cleverness, as well as consciousness in terms of reason. Here, the monkey and fox are using the drums as communicative devices associated with (assumed) death. It is unclear in the tale if the animals are attempting to "wake" the dead, or if they are attempting to communicate with the deceased ancestors, similar to what the drums are used for by the Baiku Yao people. However, the tale shows a direct correlation between drums and death. The legend of *QinZeGeLa* and the tale of Lasai Decha are orally transmitted stories that act as collective productions of kinship and moral and social obligation well known by all Baiku Yao. These are postulates based on rules of social conduct associated with a collective sentiment of filial piety. Because the *QinZeGeLa* often follows the tale of Lasai Decha in conversations with Baiku Yao elders, it shows that actions taken to honor the dead are tied to the bronze drum, representing the connection between the living and the dead. For the Baiku Yao, the bronze drum signifies the ritualization of death.[7]

The value of sound

The bronze drums Baiku Yao possess and use for funeral ceremonies are of the Majiang style (Heger IV type, Song to Qing dynasty, 960–1912 CE). These are adorned with concentric circles leading to a central sun/star relief on the tympanum, with four ear handles attached to the drum waist. Majiang bronze drums are smaller in shape than other types found throughout China and Vietnam, and are approximately 50 cm in diameter, standing at approximately 30 cm in height. My inquiries on the adornment and motifs on their bronze drums received little interest by my Baiku Yao informants. Lu Chaojin, Lihu township mayor, former vice director of the Lihu Baiku Yao ecomuseum, and Baiku Yao resident of Huaili village, told me "value is not found in bronze drum visual aesthetics, such as physical form and the carved patterns, [but] rather it is found in the drum's sound" (personal communication, June 2016). Much earlier associations between bronze drum size and motif intricacy and elite status are irrelevant to the Baiku Yao's emic value system based on sound. The desire for a superior sound was also made clear to me in my visits to the local Lihu township market days, held on dates of 3, 6, and 9 in the month. Li Shiqi is a drum refurbisher and seller in Lihu and distributes bronze drums across northern Guangxi and southern Guizhou. Every market day he comes to the main square in Lihu to display and play his drums to entice potential buyers. On each occasion I observed a crowd of Baiku Yao men surrounding the sounded drums. They were not examining the visual aesthetics of each drum, but rather listening intently and discussing the quality of their sound. In conversations with Li Shiqi, he emphasized that sound was the key to a drum's value (personal communication, August 2018).

Sitting on the stoop of Lu Jimin's family home, he told me the story of the recent acquisition of his household bronze drum. About a year ago, while on his walk down the mountain to Lihu market town, Lu Jimin's father was told by another villager about a nearby bronze drum for sale. Intrigued by the praise of the drum, Lu's father went to see it. Immediately after hearing the drum, he called his son. "My father," Lu Jimin recalled, "made no mention of its beauty or size. Rather, he went on and on about this drum with a rich, warm, and soft sound" (personal communication, August 2017). Lu explained to his father that he had no money to acquire such a drum at that time. His meager farming income and wife's salary from migrant labor were barely enough to sustain a family of four. But his father was insistent, doting on the drum's sound. Using his own money saved from years of hard labor, his father returned home later that night with the bronze drum over his shoulder.

Across the seventy households in Huaili and twenty households in the larger Lihu township I interviewed, Baiku Yao villagers all expressed a strong desire to have a bronze drum of their own. According to the Nandan Cultural Relics Management Office, since the late 1990s, Baiku Yao villages have seen a rise in bronze drum ownership. The proliferation correlates with the rise in land tenure and the call for migrant labor in large urban centers, like Shenzhen and Guangzhou. New, available income and the increase in remittance has contributed to the building of new concrete homes in Lihu villages; the purchase of automotive vehicles, televisions, and smartphones increased meat consumption; and a rise in bronze drum acquisition. Interestingly, this has also come at the same time as contemporary bronze drum manufacturing in Hechi.[8]

Since the early 2000s, bronze drums have begun to be manufactured in two specific locations in Guangxi, in Huanjiang county and Dongsan county. I was fortunate to visit the largest bronze drum factory in Guangxi founded by the Wei brothers in Huanjiang, closest to Nandan county and Lihu township. The Wei brothers and their crew produce a whole line of bronze drums, from miniature souvenirs and hand-size instruments played like a gamelan to the world's largest bronze drum, listed in the Guinness Book of World Records at over 6.5 meters (20 feet) in diameter (Xinhua 2018). In my conversations with the owners, they explained that the most bronze drums were sold to the Baiku Yao, followed by the Zhuang, Miao, and Shui ethnic groups of Guangxi and Guizhou province. Acknowledging the importance of sound for their biggest clientele, the Wei brothers told me that they decided to invite Baiku Yao elders known to have what many in the community call "a good ear for drums" to the factory to assist in the manufacturing process (personal communication, August 2018). Formerly, bronze drums were acquired through inheritance, trade, and private monetary exchange with outsiders, typically with the Zhuang, recalled for me by Lu Laoyao, the eldest Baiku Yao shaman in Guangxi who recently passed away at eighty-one years old (personal communication, April 2013). Bronze drums now come to Lihu township via Baiku Yao entrepreneurs trying to capitalize on local cultural needs. The Wei brothers' construction of Guangxi's first bronze drum plant established an available line of bronze drums for the Baiku Yao.

Bronze drums hold a temporal market value as a commodity for the Baiku Yao people. However, the drum quickly moves from the "commodity phase" of consumption into what Igor Kopytoff (1986) calls a state of singularization, changing as it enters a new regime of value (Appadurai 1986). For the Baiku Yao, singularization of the bronze drum is established when it joins them as part of the community and as a declared sacred object of funeral ceremonies. This transformational process begins when the newly acquired bronze drum is brought to the village. Male clansmen and villagers come from across the village to witness the arrival of the new bronze drum and hear it sounded for the first time. In discussing the welcoming event of a new drum, villager and local drum expert Lu Jishen explained to me that all bronze drums are prized for their funeral ritual purpose, but certain drums are regarded more highly: "A well-made drum is one that has a good shape, symmetry in form, and compatible thickness for its size, and the right material composition.[9] But it all comes down to its sound" (personal communication, August 2013).

The scrutiny devoted to the sound of a bronze drum during this initial public welcoming event sometimes leads to decisions to alter it. This, combined with the rise of an economy of newly manufactured drums, has contributed to sound alteration becoming an important trade among the Baiku Yao. Augmentation of a drum's sound involves a process called "rubbing," whereby the underside of drum's metal tympanum is thinned and buffed, currently using an electric sander. Thinning the material of the drum face can enhance sound quality by making a softer and cleaner sound.[10] The standard for good sound, according to bronze drum seller Li Shiqi, is older inherited drums. He explained that purchased newly manufactured drums are often brought to him to rub and to match the sound of older bronze drums. In recent conversations with Baiku Yao villagers, with the proliferation of drum production and sale, a nostalgic value on older bronze drums has become even more prominent in the community, for they are regarded as possessing the best sound quality.[11]

Bronze drum acquisition and possession is situated into a particular value system for the Baiku Yao people. Jean Baudrillard emphasizes that objects must be understood in terms of their sign value beyond their utilitarian value. He points to the fact that objects "serve as symbolic markers of class, status, and prestige" (cited in Woodward 2007, 75). This can be understood through the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and his notion of the cultural field and forms of capital. As a "site of cultural practice," Bourdieu describes a cultural field that involves multiple cultural "agents" and the behaviors they perform determined by the economies of various forms of capital. In applying this to the consumption of bronze drums and the discourse of sound and status that surround them for the Baiku Yao, I have observed behaviors associated with wealth and the limits thereof, as well as knowledge of "tasteful" or valued sound quality. For instance, considering the high price for bronze drums, the purchase of a drum by an individual household or extended family demonstrates a significant investment. As of 2018, bronze drums purchased in a local market can cost between 7,000 to 10,000 RMB, or $1,100 to $1,570 US dollars, approximately half a year of income for a Baiku Yao villager farmer. More than economic capital, collective recognition of possessing a good-sounding bronze drum immediately affords social admiration. Among the Baiku Yao, the knowledge and ability to have an ear for drum sound is a form of cultural capital. I observed this in Huaili when a Baiku Yao elder I was speaking with was invited to hear a newly acquired bronze drum to consult on questions regarding sound and sound augmentation. I learned that only a handful of elders in the community were consulted on sound aesthetics, including Lu Jimin's father. Lu expressed to me, "You know, guys have different preferences; some like the drum to sound this way, some like it that way, but when it is a warm, soft sounding drum, everyone agrees on its worthiness." Lu Jimin's words were clear—there was a collective recognition of bronze drum sound quality. In fact, after his acquisition of the new bronze drum, I heard continuous praise given to Lu Jimin's father throughout the Baiku Yao community, revealing the elevated status he was accorded for his knowledge of good sound and with his stamp of approval, the acknowledged higher value of the new drum. For the Baiku Yao, the ability to identify preferred taste in drum sound or a household's financial capacity to purchase an object of great monetary value affords symbolic capital, social prestige, and certain reputation and status augmentation as a result.

The value system of bronze drums among the Baiku Yao, of which wealth and knowledge are integral parts in consumption and esteem, is based on their claimed sign value of sacredness. The necessity of these performative symbolic devices for the Baiku Yao prompts their acquisition as well as the development of skills related to distinguishing good "soft" sound from inferior tones. With the drum's power of sound deemed essential to the funeral ritual and passage of a deceased villager to the sacred realm of the ancestral land, it becomes clear why sound is both desired and commands respect and admiration.

The anthropomorphic metamorphosis of drums

According to the Baiku Yao people, the power of sound is not only tied to the natural world. The Baiku Yao understand "sound" as deeply connected to and an expression of emotive spirits (Xu 2010, 53), be it from a human, animal, spirit, or celestial body. According to Baiku Yao elders I spoke with, sounds that move the Baiku Yao have organic and spiritual functionality in communication. In discussions on the power of sound, elders referred to a traditional folktale on their origin of the sun. In the oral legend of *Gu Vo Va Glei and the Nine Suns*, after the strong and heroic Gu Vo Va Glei slayed the eight suns with his bow and arrows, the world turned to complete darkness. It was only from the deep and resolute sound of the bear that the last celestial sun could be summoned to grace the world with its light.[12] Here it is shown that for the Baiku Yao a connection can exist between the natural and supernatural world, and sound can act as a medium of communication between these worlds.

For the animistic Baiku Yao, all things can have a spirit, including the mountains and rivers, the sun and moon, wind and rain, animals, humans, the home, and also the bronze drum (see Yu 1987). The Baiku Yao understand the spirit world as not ethereal but as a realm possessing volition and as an active force in the universe. In speaking about the spirit world, or supernatural, Roger Ivar Lohmann (2003) claims that it is a "universal human experience that is elaborated differently in different traditions" and is often defined in academic circles through the "unique spiritual reality of a given culture." Many etic assumptions exist for the "supernatural," such as Joseph Bosco's (2003) articulation as a "realm of spirits beyond the observable world that seems to transcend natural law."[13] Bosco (2003) and Lohmann (2003) both warn of "the dangers of conflating various etic and emic *definitions* of the supernatural" (emphasis in Lohmann 2003). According to Lohmann (ibid., 176), what is most important is to move beyond definitions to understand how different people model this phenomenon through both etic and emic perspectives. Present in this discussion, as suggested in the preceding paragraphs, is the argued separation between the spirit and human worlds.

For the Baiku Yao people, however, they interpret the "law" of the universe as deeply implicated in the relationships between humans and spirits. One can easily influence the other, and harmony between both worlds can suddenly be disrupted. With the belief in the power of emotive spirits to cause unpredictable, sometimes treacherous, occurrences—including life, sickness, death, rain, flooding, and drought—impacting an individual, family, village, and the environment, Baiku Yao people practice social obligation in how they honor and appease certain spirits and ancestors. This complicated ritual and belief system, I observed, leaves the Baiku Yao with an unceasing sense of powerlessness that plays a prominent role in their social life.[14]

The Baiku Yao, like other cultures found throughout the world,[15] engage in countless ritual acts in the attempt to understand and communicate with emotive spirits. Ritual practitioners are called upon to give blessings and appease spirits by performing various rituals. In many cases ritual practitioners attempt to reduce the imminence of calamity and resolve pain and misfortune enhanced by villagers' "eruptive anxieties" (Norenzayan and Hansen 2006, 174; see also Durkheim 1954). Only a small group of these "spirit men and women,"[16] referred to as *weiyua* and *nomhao* in Baiku Yao language, are seen to possess the ability to conduct these rituals.[17] Their role in bringing balance to the natural and spirit worlds further makes salient the blurred distinction of these realms for the Baiku Yao. Rituals conducted by *weiyua* and *nomhao* range from hearing and summoning spirits to reciting incantations, conducting divination, journeying into the spirit world, leading funerals, and bestowing a name to a bronze drum and sanctifying it as a sacred living object.[18] Only through a specific initiation ritual, conducted by a *nomhao* with divination abilities, does the bronze drum enter a state of singularization in the Baiku Yao community, when its spirit is recognized and is imputed with symbolic agency and the power to animate communicative practices between both natural and spirit worlds.

A few days after Lu Jimin's father acquired his new bronze drum, he made arrangements with the family and clan and invited a *nomhao* on an auspicious day to perform the naming ritual. Lu Jimin's explanation corroborated other accounts I collected on the ritual procedures involving the *nomhao*'s communication with the spirit of the drum and the guardian spirit of the household.[19] The bronze drum lay on the floor, centrally located in the middle of the home. The *nomhao* sat near the bronze drum on a short wooden chair, accompanied by his assistant. While cups of wine were filled and placed in a large flat bamboo basket on the ground, the *nomhao* began to cut a short stack of white tissue paper into a rectangular arch shape. Taking the tissue paper and a piece of charcoal from the cooking hearth near him, the *nomhao* drew an image of a figure riding a horse, creating a totem of the household protective spirit, *Gong Gu Xi*. After the tissue paper was stuck on a central pillar of the house, the assistant helped to slit the throat of a live chicken, draining some of its blood into one of the empty white cups. The wine, incense, and the sacrificial chicken were offerings to the household spirit. As they were "given," the *nomhao* chanted in a monotone voice, occasionally tossing uncooked rice over the incense. That same morning, the *nomhao* and his assistant conducted a series of similar offering practices outside near a small pool of water. There they sacrificed a live duck and also offered wine to honor the water dragon spirit, which is said to have a connection to the bronze drum. Both the household and dragon spirits are appeased in order to request acceptance of the new bronze drum spirit.

Back inside the home, the chicken and duck were being prepared for the later meal. Several bowls were placed on the tympanum face of the bronze drum, each filled with wine, raw pork, raw chicken and duck meat, and water. Holding in his hand two pieces of split bamboo sticks, approximately 5–8 cm in length, the *nomhao* began to chant and focused intensely on the drum. After several minutes of chanting, the *nomhao* "presented" a name to the bronze drum through his words.[20] Immediately, the *nomhao* dropped the bamboo sticks, as his divination device, into one bowl of water sitting on the drum. When the bamboo sticks crossed,[21] which may take several tries and different naming attempts, the *nomhao* declared the spirits' consent. Turning to the members of the household, the *nomhao* announced the drum's name. The household hosts and invited guests rejoiced and commenced a large feast to celebrate the welcoming of the bronze drum into their community.

The process of anthropomorphism—"imaginatively attributing and thence perceiving humanlike characteristics in nonhuman things" (Lohmann 2007, 5; see also Guthrie 1993)—is fundamental to the inscription of the bronze drum as a participating sacred object. The attributes of a drum's name, gender, and "living" community member are bestowed and recognized through this ritual, creating a sense of personhood for the bronze drum. Indeed, the naming ritual is the projection of the internal culture on the external world (Lohmann 2007, 5). The Baiku Yao engender bronze drums with sacred meaning as they are brought into the ritual logic of animistic practices and human interactions with the spirit world. According to Janet Hoskins (1993, 119), rendering cultural objects, like the bronze drum, with specific anthropomorphic characteristics further legitimizes the constructed belief and social system and relates to the achievement of certain goals. The culmination of this sacralization process for the bronze drum is claimed by the Baiku Yao to allow the drum to participate in the funeral ceremony as an active member of the community that has agency in its power to communicate with the spirit world and open the gate to the ancestral land for the deceased.

Ceremonial bronze drums

Consanguineal and affinal kin and the entire clan of the deceased are immediately notified when an auspicious day is chosen for a funeral.[22] The son or brother of the deceased acts quickly to find and acquire one or more water buffaloes (depending on available family finances) for funeral sacrifice.[23] The maternal uncle of the deceased is contacted, because he plays an important role in orchestrating the funeral ceremony arrangements. Men notified of the funeral come from across the region bringing their bronze drums to the home of the deceased or nearby kin. Drums are stored there for the duration of the funeral. Family and friends begin to prepare gifts for the deceased and the decedent's family. Intricate and elaborate ceremonial clothing, hand-made by Baiku Yao women, is taken out of the locked wood chests to place in the deceased's coffin at the time of burial. Other sacrificial animals are acquired, and consultations are made with family about necessary funeral resources, such as wine and glutinous rice.

On the first day of the funeral ceremony, called "opening the path" or *bojie* in Baiku Yao language, drums take center stage. Anywhere from a few to over two dozen bronze drums are hung on a large wooden arch frame, as detailed at the beginning of this article. Only bronze drums that have undergone the naming rite of passage may be played at a funeral. Before they are sounded, a *nomhao* leads a "welcoming" ritual, called *ji gu*, for the bronze drums (figure 1). The *nomhao* proceeds to move down the line of drums, chanting to each one, asking the drum spirit to participate in the funeral. The *nomhao* lightly dips a pair of chopsticks into a bowl of water and taps them onto the center of each bronze drum and begins to chant:

> Divine "jade mother,"
> Auspicious jade mother.
> Today, the elder (name) has passed away,
> We ask of you to come and join us in grievance.
> We use fresh water and good wine to wash your face.
> Everyone can see our sorrowful heart.
> For the elder that has passed away we come together to hold this memorial service.
> Using your formidable power to drive away demons and ghosts,
> To escort the elder to go to the otherworld.
> Today many bronze drums have come,
> Maternal grand-uncle, paternal grand-uncle, and elders [are here].
> *(If is it not the deceased household's bronze drum, these two sentences change into*

"You are representing [relative's name].")
Numerous ancient treasures are requested amiably
Simultaneously giving off your jade-mother formidable power.
Open your jade-mother throat,
Give off your jade-mother sound.
Let your jade-mother sound reach the temple of heaven,
Let your jade-mother sound reach the otherworld.
Now you jade mother will open the path for the elder,
Now you jade mother will protect the spirit of the elder.
Here, a support frame is for you jade mother
Together we will pass.[24]

After each bronze drum is welcomed, Baiku Yao men approach the drums and split into pairs. With the bronze drum hanging only ten centimeters off the ground, each drumming pair takes their positions next to or behind the bronze drum with a mallet or wood-slat bucket in hand and commences playing. Bronze drums follow the drumming rhythm of the central wooden skin-covered drum and begin the "formal" drumming period of *bojie*.[25]

Drumming has a determined set of bars with repeating measures of rhythmic melody (see figure 2). The number of measures in each cadence is determined by the lead *zou* drummer in accordance with the gender of the deceased, typically ten measures long. Once each cadence is reached in unison, all drummers lift their arms and drumming devices into the air, yell, and stop to take a drink of wine. This is extremely important, for the consumption of wine symbolizes that the drummer's spirit stays grounded and does not leave with the deceased to the spirit world. The

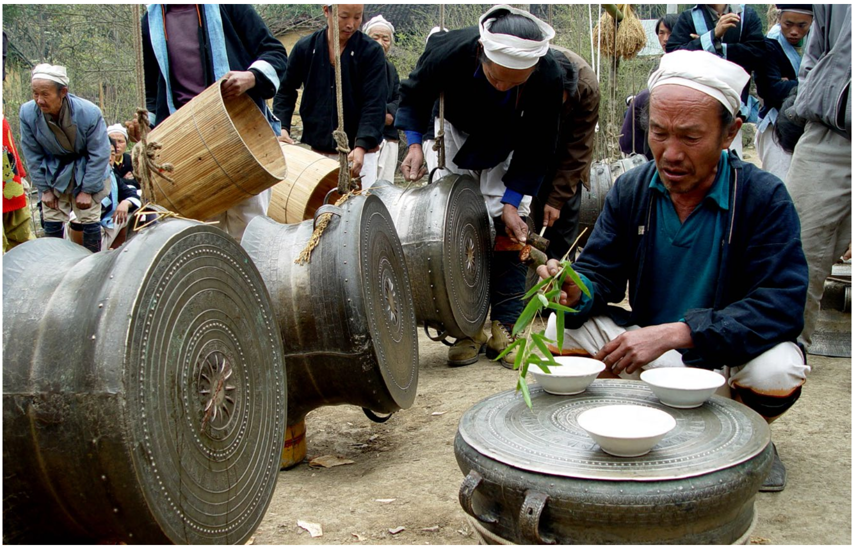

Figure 1. Bronze drum, Huaili village, Lihu township, Nandan county, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Photograph courtesy of Huaili Ecomuseum

rhythmic drumming continues until the determined number of bars for the deceased are completed.

Funerals in Baiku Yao society are considered a time of great loss and a period to lament the death of a loved one. Clansmen, relatives, and friends gather to grieve and cry for the loss of the deceased. This emotional period takes place in different locations and times throughout the three-day ceremony. Particular instances of crying as an expression of grief include sitting next to the coffin, circling the sacrificial buffalo, and leading and carrying the deceased up the mountain for burial. Drummers' behavior exemplifies this sentiment with their serious, solemn, and devout look of concentration facing the earth during the drumming process. Yet, when each drumming cadence is reached, the mood suddenly shifts. Drummers' joyous outbursts are not considered disrespectful at all.[26] As one villager exclaimed to me as drums echoed behind him, "When elders die, it is a time of happiness. They reach the ancestral land, which is a land of paradise. Death is a relief from the hardship of real life." Death symbolizes a moment of rejoicing, whereby the deceased can join with his or her ancestors. The sound of the bronze drum holds the key to this union, said to open the path to the ancestral land, announcing the journey of the dead.

This article has shown that many Baiku Yao associate the power of the bronze drum with its ability to communicate with the spirit world. Drumming also plays a central role in commanding movement of the living. What may seem to be the use of word of mouth to publicly spread the announcement of death is, in fact, the sounding of the drum. It is a kind of "call to prayer," a pronounced call to honor the dead for the entire Baiku Yao community. Villagers I spoke with lamented that when they hear the distinct rhythmic sound of the bronze drums, they know someone has died. The sound of drums is the indicator and consequently promotes social coordination and cooperation in movement for the group. The sound beckons villagers to come together to commemorate the passage of the deceased to the ancestral land.

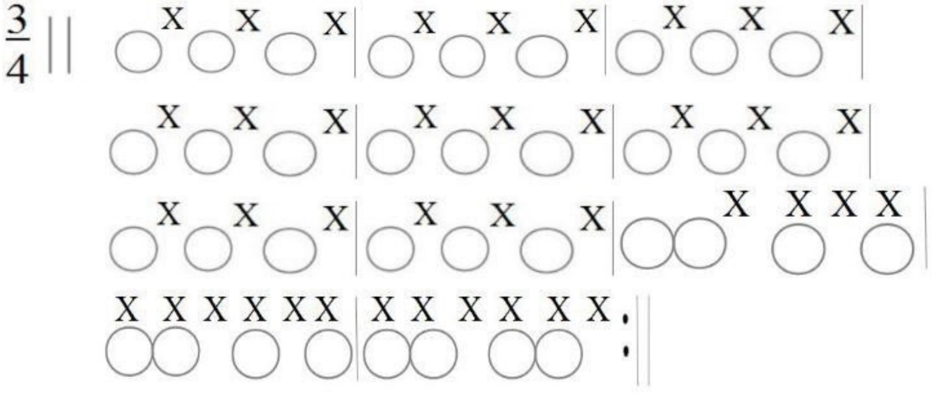

Figure 2. Huaili bronze drum style. "O" represents hitting the center of the drum with a mallet, "X" represents hitting the side of the drum with a bamboo stick. The rhythmic melody can be lengthened or shortened between the first and eighth bar according to the *zou* player. Diagram created by William David Nitzky.

Much scholarship on shamanic and animistic practices found worldwide notes how ritual practitioners typically handle or perform ritual devices, including drums. In the notable historian of religion Mircea Eliade's (1964) work on the diversity of shamanic practices, he suggests that mediumship does not belong exclusively to the shaman; laymen themselves are capable of such a phenomenon. Baiku Yao ritual leaders who preside over the funeral, chanting over the sacrifice of the water buffalo and even "journeying" from dusk to dawn into the spirit world escorting the deceased soul to the ancestral land, discussed in the following paragraphs, do not engage in the drumming practice. They never handle bronze drums during a funeral. Drumming is a practice only beholden to Baiku Yao laymen. Those who bring their drums into the funeral space to honor the dead, and those who are welcomed to play due to their relation with the owner, engage in this participatory act. Importantly, unlike the *nomhao*, these male villagers are not performing as mediums. Rather, they act as mechanisms to activate the affective power of the drums. In my conversations with several drummers after funeral services, not one villager claimed their individual role in opening the path to the ancestral land through drumming. It was said to me that the bronze drum spirit was sending its sound and acted as mediator.

Bronze drums command respect and are distinguished from the profane entertainments of daily life because of what they symbolize, the high esteem in which they are held, how and when they are sounded, and how they are kept. Yet, my observations suggest that the bronze drum's association with the sacred realm because of its collectively understood power as a primary mediator and communicator between the living and the dead is an unambiguously social phenomenon. Rather than this blurred boundary making sacredness of the drum questionable or diminished for the Baiku Yao, entanglement in the social has produced the reverse effect. The bronze drum is not seen merely as a distant object holding symbolic value for funerals. Instead, villagers directly participate in disseminating its power through a somatic experience, which contributes to increased respect and social responsibility for the drum by village laymen.

As household treasures, storage of bronze drums is conducted with the highest degree of care by the Baiku Yao. They must only be moved when needed. To secure their safety, the whereabouts of the stored bronze drums is a private household matter. Secrecy persists, and villagers often do not discuss where they keep their drums. In my evaluation of households with bronze drums, they claimed they were stored in the "safest place" in the home, referred to me as either under the bed of the head of the household covered by a blanket, under a stairwell, or even in an indoor dug out hole located in the floor. Although villagers know which households hold drums, prior to the 1980s reform era, the secrecy of drum location was strictly enforced across the village. During the Mao era, bronze drums were kept in far off mountain caves with their location known by only a few men, because of their seizure under the ill-fated movement to increase steel production for the nation during the Great Leap Forward (see Lynch 2008). Huaili villagers also stated that during the Cultural Revolution, "The use of bronze drums was strongly prohibited, and was also deemed 'superstitious' (*mixin*). We couldn't play the drum or sacrifice buffaloes, so we did not have funerals at that time." During this time the number of bronze drums significantly declined in Hechi region; in Hechi's Donglan county alone, the number fell from five hundred in 1961 to forty in 2009 (Wu et al., 2009).

The evening after the bronze drums are first sounded for the funeral is an important time for community cohesion and cultural transmission. Only during this time, between *bojie* and the burial, can bronze drums be played "freely." Freedom to play bronze drums at this time is open to males of any age and does not require asking permission from the drum to play. Outside of the funeral drumming, this is one of the only times youth can learn the practice of drumming. A home of one of the relatives of the deceased is chosen and used as a gathering space for villagers to come intermittently to mourn and sit together to reminisce about the loss of a friend or relative. In the corner of the home one or two bronze drums hang from a ceiling beam. Male villagers take turns playing the bronze drum, creating a deafening sound inside. Youth, typically over the age of twelve, can request to play the bronze drum at this time. Youth are encouraged to play by an elder and first handed a mallet and bamboo stick to practice beating the drum. The *doulou*, or wooden bucket, is not given to youth until they are big enough to handle the heavier and more laborious object. Male villagers I interviewed at one of these night gatherings claimed that they actually do not "teach" youth how to play. One elder stated, "It is up to the youth himself if he wants to play." As youth take up drumming, an elder will often stand nearby to watch on for guidance. Only after a youth finishes will an elder offer any advice on improving playing technique. All of my drummer interviewees surveyed, from ages eighteen to seventy-five, learned to play the bronze drum in this way.[27] Only after a youth is familiar with the form and technique of drumming are they welcomed to play during the funeral ceremony. The transmission of bronze drum playing for the Baiku Yao is not a forced practice or understood as a formal means of inheritance between teacher and student. Rather, it is a cultural practice transmitted through personal interest and communal obligation.

On the second day of the funeral, villagers gather to participate and witness the sacrifice of the water buffalo.[28] Members of the family of the deceased circle the buffalo in turn, crying to it and giving thanks to its sacrifice, all while the *nomhao* chants and throws handfuls of uncooked rice at the animal. After the buffalo receives three blows to the neck by a long sword blade, villagers tie its legs tightly with rope, carefully dogging the buffalo's long sharp horns. Soon after the animal is brought to the ground, men gather around and slaughter it.

The night of the second day brings the spiritual journey to the ancestral land. The highest-level ritual practitioner in the community is called upon to come to the home of the deceased. Late in the evening, surrounded by family, kin, and close friends of the deceased, he sits in front of the coffin. For the next six to eight hours, until sunrise, the *nomhao* chants, in an ancient Baiku Yao vernacular unintelligible to most villagers, and journeys into the spirit world, guiding the soul of the deceased to the ancestral land, called *hijie nuodu* in Baiku Yao language. In Huaili only two practitioners have the ability to perform such a ritual, Gu Zong Zou (forty years old), and Lu Laoyao (eighty-one years old), both of whom have themselves passed to the ancestral land as of 2019.

During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to spend several days with Gu Zong Zou in 2015 to discuss the "journey" he conducts. Unlike many *nomhao* and *weiyua* I spoke with, Gu Zong Zuo was open to talk about his ritual practices, explaining clearly to me that the night journey "shows us where we came from and how we got here. It includes the origins of rice and clothing, the bronze drum and skin-covered wooden drum, the land we once lived on, and the migration of our people." When asked if he traveled alone on this journey with the deceased, he said that the spirit of two village elders seated next to him holding sticks during the ritual accompany him. They help defend against any challenges faced along the way. "It is the most dangerous for me and the spirit of the deceased," he said, "as we are confronted with many obstacles and demons. Reaching the ancestral land is an extremely arduous act." While Gu Zong Zou explained to me some of the key points of their journey, I slowly composed a list of place names and a map sketch. Watching me draw, he grinned and asked for my pen and paper. Over the course of our conversation he roughly illustrated the journey himself (see figure 3). Over the course of their travels, he guides these spirits from Huaili to the village of Badi, through the land of monkeys, over the perilous volcano, the mountain so high one can touch the stars, and across the seven pools to a large river, to name just a few sites.[29] When they reach "the river," Gu Zong Zou calls to the ancestors. Only when they are welcomed may Gu Zong Zou and the spirit of the deceased cross. Afterward, all spirits of the living that accompanied them on the journey rush with Gu Zong Zou along the same route back to Huaili and to the natural world of the living.[30]

The next morning, villagers gather on the third day of the funeral to participate in the burial of the deceased. Men carry the coffin, covered with a hand-made embroidered and indigo-dyed cloth, up to the mountain side where a grave has been dug. After the burial, villagers gather outside near the deceased person's home and sit together on the ground in two long thirty-to-forty-person rows facing each other. In the center of the parallel rows of mourners, meat from the sacrificial buffalo and glutinous rice is placed on large green plant leaves, and, using bamboo chopsticks cut for the funeral, villager attendants begin the meal.[31] Women eat first, and then men come down from the grave site and switch places with them. At this time, owners of the bronze drums go to where they have been stored for the duration of the funeral. Similar to the welcoming of the drums prior to the funeral ceremony, a *nomhao* conducts a final ritual to thank the drums, give them nourishment with bowls of meat, water, and wine placed on their face, and send them back to a peaceful existence in their respective households.[32]

Social arrangements and the bronze drum

The position the bronze drum occupies as a social agent in Baiku Yao culture affects the relationships people form with it and the social arrangements between villagers (Hoskins 2006; Gell 1998, 7). Taboos, ritual order, and practices, encoded in postulates of the sacred (Lambek 2013, 5; Rappaport 1999), produce a kind of performative truth and certainty for the Baiku Yao people. Furthermore, they establish clear kin, community, and gender relations. Playing the bronze drum and skin-covered

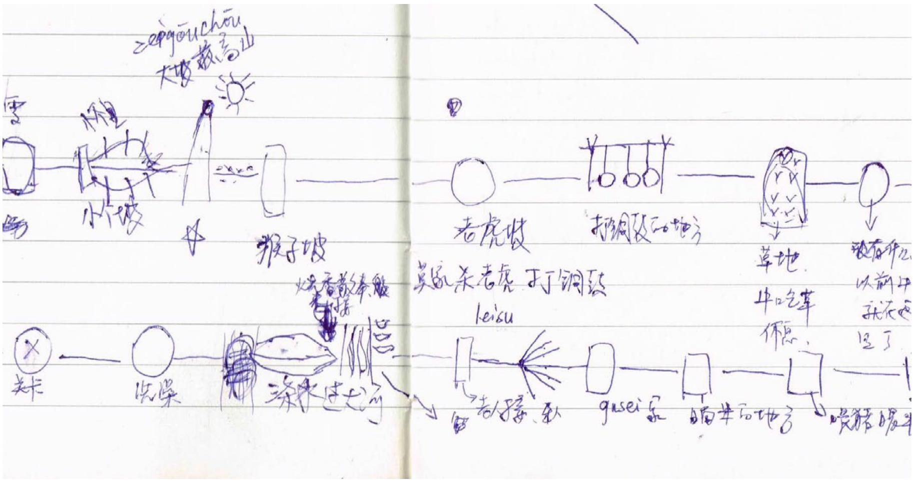

Figure 3. Partial depiction of the "journey" to the Baiku Yao ancestral land. Translation by Lu Chaoming. Illustration by Gu Zong Zou of Huaili village and William David Nitzky, 2015.

wooden drum is strictly conducted by men. Women, however, are excluded from this performative act and from handling a named drum. In her discussion on gender and musical instruments, Veronica Doubleday (2008) argues that, "when any class of people wishes to maintain control over a particular musical instrument, an exclusive instrument-human relationship is developed, forbidding outsiders access." Women are placed in a negative instrument-human relationship with the bronze drum, where gender taboos aim to exclude them from interactions with the drum's sacredness (Doubleday 2008, 5; see also Herdt 1982).

Every member of the family, extended family, and clan of the deceased participates in the funeral ritual through practices of gift giving, mourning, sounding bronze drums, cooking and food preparation, and buffalo sacrifice. These different roles within the funeral exemplify clan obligation and cohesion. Chinese scholars who have studied Baiku Yao culture call family clan organizations *youguo*, literally meaning "oil pot" in Chinese, and pronounced *wei yao* in Baiku Yao language. The creation of this etic term draws on the fact that blood relatives of the deceased, from nuclear family members to cousins, share a custom of not consuming "fat oil" (all forms of meat) during the funeral and mourning period. This is seen in the fact that blood relatives of the deceased do not take part in the seated-row food consumption after the burial like other funeral attendees. In the main Huaili village, for example, there are four *youguo* clans.[33] The association of the *youguo* is also significant through other social activities among the Baiku Yao, such as marriage; when a member of a *youguo* has been declared by a *nomhao* or *weiyua* as threatened by a harmful spirit, a "day of rest" may be prescribed for the entire clan.

Sanctions on bronze drum usage also impact the clan and kin relationships. Most villagers I spoke with about the ability to request a bronze drum by others expressed that sharing was clearly clan endogamous. If a bronze drum is purchased by multiple households, such as when several brothers pool their money to acquire a drum, a common act in Huaili, the bronze drum is considered part of that particular family.

Typically the eldest brother or the brother who contributed the most money for acquisition houses the bronze drum, unless their home is deemed unsuitable for the protection of the drum. While members of the multiple households may use the drum, it is not customarily borrowed. On the rare occasion it is, the drum must not be given to anyone outside of the families' clan and requires mutual consent given by the families' brothers.

Clan cohesion is also strengthened through drum ownership. As mentioned, possession of a bronze drum elevates the status of an individual. This also translates and extends to the entire clan of that individual. If an individual's bronze drum is deemed of high value due to its revered sound, this reputation, too, extends to the individual's clan. In late-night conversations with Baiku Yao elders about well-regarded bronze drums, I often heard them refer to an individual villager by name for his particular drum or mention of his clan.

Quantity as well as quality brings prestige. A clan's possession of multiple bronze drums symbolizes the power of the clan in the Baiku Yao community.[34] This was also evident in villagers' discussions of past funerals with me. They judged a funeral by the number of buffaloes sacrificed and bronze drums sounded. The more drums played at a family member or clansmen's funeral demonstrates the esteem and honor for that individual and his or her family. At the same time the Baiku Yao are experiencing a growth in bronze drum ownership, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that the bronze drum is a form of inheritance, and its value is transmittable. Bronze drums are customarily passed down from generation to generation. When a son and his family inherits a drum, it continues to afford pride to the household and for the entire clan.

Conclusion: Social life of bronze drums

This article has shown that the bronze drum is no mere inanimate object but differs only in form from other sacred objects well known to anthropology, such as the revered necklaces and bracelets of the Kula in the Trobriands (Malinowski 1922; Weiner 1992), the sperm whale tooth (*tabua*) in Fiji (Arno 2005; Sahlins 1983), string bags in New Guinea (MacKenzie 1991), and barkcloth ponchos (*tiputa*) in Polynesia (Thomas 1999). In short, the bronze drum has a vibrant social life in contemporary China. A two-thousand-year-old form of material culture, once the treasure of regional lords and a tool of ancient cultural diplomacy, the bronze drum remains an integral part of Baiku Yao culture. I have shown the multiple facets of signifying practices associated with bronze drums, involving folklore, funeral ceremonies, social arrangements, and the links between the living and spirit worlds that structure pragmatic aspects of social and ritual life for the Baiku Yao (Woodward 2007, 14, 28). As shown in this article, Baiku Yao folklore transmits the association between the bronze drum and honoring the dead into the collective consciousness of villagers through the spoken word. The naming ritual incites an anthropogenic metamorphosis of the bronze drum for the Baiku Yao and initiates the drum's sacredness, defining it as a spirit in the community, a protector of the household, and participating agent in funeral ceremonies. The drum's sound is said to have the power to summon the living and also open the path for the dead to venture to the idyllic ancestral land. Its sacredness also is seen to have consequences in the social realm. The bronze drum sound is not only a necessity for spiritual mediation but also an aesthetic that becomes a mark of cultural capital throughout the Baiku Yao community. Furthermore, reputation and social arrangements of kin and community inclusion and exclusion are articulated through bronze drum possession and use. According to Appadurai (1986, 5), by engaging with objects' dynamic movement and exploring their connection to the human experience, "we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things" and grasp the meanings that are "inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories." Indeed, through the social interactions within which they are embedded, bronze drums stimulate a collective emotional response because of their ability to animate memories, enjoin filial piety and kin obligations, and make connections with the spirit world. When bronze drums are integrated in broader social, cultural, economic, and political contexts as a result of recent government-led initiatives to constitute bronze drums as protected "cultural heritage" and used as resources to achieve certain economic goals through tourism, the Baiku Yao people are forced to reckon with the meanings, values, and significance of their prized drums. I explore a new "heritagization" phase in the social life of bronze drums in forthcoming work.

Through extensive ethnographic data collected while living with the Baiku Yao in northern Guangxi, this article has detailed the local knowledge that surrounds and frames the bronze drum. Furthermore, I have exposed the agency of bronze drums in contemporary ethnic China. Alfred Gell speaks of the capacity of things to be "social agents." He writes that agency of a thing is "seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events" (1998, 16). Putting people and objects, particularly art, on equal footing, Gell presents the capability of things to evoke change, acting as protagonists in the movement and actions of people. They do this, Gell argues, when they are enmeshed in social relationships (ibid., 17). This agentive role of things becomes even more pronounced when inanimate objects are conceived of as being alive (Winter 2007). The symbolic action of mediation, communication, and protection by bronze drums among the Baiku Yao builds and shapes people's perceptions and meanings of ritual, the link between the natural and spirit worlds, and kin-based arrangements and obligations. Meanings for the sacred drum and their imputed agency emerge in these social interactions.

I argue, following Margaret Kartomi (1990), that we must address objects and material culture through an emic perspective and articulate the local classifications and signifying practices that are culturally emergent, expressed in writing, voice, and through behavioral expressions by the cultural groups that value and engage with the transmission and practice of such cultural heritage. This relativistic and ethnographic approach to material culture aids in highlighting the culture-emerging schemes that reflect the norms and rules, belief and value systems, social uses and performance practices, and social arrangements that shape and are constituted by forms of material culture like the bronze drum. Material culture requires human interactions for relevant "things" to acquire and animate agency. It is clear that Baiku Yao people understand this well, which is why they go to great lengths to modify and improve inferior-sounding mass-produced drums flooding the market to reach a high-level sound deemed best for funerals, and why they inscribe drums with anthropomorphic attributes through naming rituals to make them kin for communication with ancestors. Yet people, too, require such materiality to define their own social relations and agency, demonstrating a dialectic between people and things (Feldman 2010, 150). In this article, I have shown how bronze drums are not inanimate objects, fixed in time, as often seen in museums across China and the world. In the social context of the Baiku Yao, bronze drums are significant forms of living material culture—with names, stories, spiritual embodiment, and agentive power—that are essential for navigating the boundaries between sacred and social realms and the social arrangements of clan and community collectivities in the Baiku Yao's contemporary social life.

When we hold an heirloom in our hands or something that was bestowed to us by a parent or grandparent, why—if at all—does this object resonate with us? Is it a memento or gift? Does it have "stopping-power" and the ability to make us reflect on our past and our place in the present? What exactly does it embody? Does it signify wealth or prestige? Is it connected to a memory? Does it possess the identity or spirit of our kin as an inalienable attribute, described by Annette Weiner (1992); do we hold our ancestors in our hands? How does it speak to us, and what does it say? Does it reveal its past, its life? Does it have power over us or others? The relationship between the bronze drum and the Baiku Yao people of southern China reveals how material culture is entangled in our own multiple webs of cultural significance (Hoskins 2006, 81). Bronze drums should be understood as more than a transmitted form of tangible heritage. They can have a social life and the power to challenge our senses and our comprehension, and to order our social worlds.

NOTES

1. Calò (2014) explores the diversity of routes drum traveled throughout China, Southeast Asia and the Malay Peninsula, and Indonesia.

2. According to Nandan Culture Bureau (*Wentiju*) the county has 405 bronze drums distributed across Lihu (215), Baxu (91), and so on (see Wu et al., 2009, 27).

3. Imamura (2010) notes from records by Chen and Huang (1993) that bronze drums dating to the Warring States Period, fourth to second century BCE, were found in Guangxi.

4. In addition to possessing different functions, bronze drums have evolved over time with a range of shapes, decorations, and material composition. They generally have a common shape, cylindrical and hollow, with a large bellowing bell and flat face. However, diameter and height, carved motifs, and relief decorations differ across types associated with region and time throughout southern China and Southeast Asia. Bronze drums stand anywhere from one-third of a meter to a half meter tall, with a face approximately half a meter in diameter. These measurements are an average of the three types of bronze drums—LengShuiChong, Zunyi, Majiang—found in southern China. Vietnamese and Burmese bronze drums are found to be similar in shape and height, yet some do reach almost a meter tall. These bronze drums date

from three periods: the end of the Song dynasty and beginning of the Yuan dynasty, the Yuan and Ming dynasty, and the Qing dynasty, with the majority seen as Majiang type (Wu et al., 2009).

5. In 1902 Franz Heger identified and classified four different types of bronze drums throughout Southeast Asian and southern China, by region and chronology, known as Heger types I–IV. There have been subsequent variations in this classification system offered by Chinese, Vietnamese, and Western scholars (Bernet Kempers 1988).

6. As the largest village in Lihu township, Huaili consists of nine natural villages (*ziran tun*), considered hamlets of a village political structure, with a population of 99 percent Baiku Yao.

7. Baiku Yao believe that after death the deceased's spirit is not extinguished. The spirit exists in the universe, and the relationship with the living persists even after death. For the deceased to have a peaceful existence in the afterlife, the spirit of the departed must reach the ancestral land and remain there for eternity.

8. The manufacturing of bronze drums in GZAR is evidence to support the durability of bronze drums usage among ethnic groups across the region as well as bronze drums representing status symbols for individuals and clans for the Baiku Yao. It also indicates how the Han majority have embraced the bronze drum as a moniker of wealth and good fortune, especially seen in southern China.

9. The direct correlation between a drum's sound and the raw material (including certain elements, such as silver and gold) composition is illustrated in the fact that for Baiku Yao villagers, older drums that possess these qualities are ascribed higher value than newer drums, which are claimed to be much thicker and have much lower amounts of gold and silver (*jinyin*) and less bronze.

10. Thinning also adds to drum fragility. Thus, much care is placed on beating and transporting the bronze drum.

11. According to bronze drum sound connoisseur Lu Zhisen, such practices were not required before, because bronze drums were previously made of better materials. He explained to me that within the past ten years, the sound quality of drums has diminished, attributed, according to him, to the rise in "mass production" and use of alternative materials to create metal alloy. Interestingly, this is around the same time the bronze drum became publicly recognized as an important "cultural heritage" of Guangxi.

12. Today it is said that upon hearing the sound of the rooster the sun awakes and rises in the morning. The oral legend of *Gu Vo Va Glei and the Nine Suns* was told to me by Baiku Yao storytellers and Huaili primary school teacher He, who had conducted his own research on local folktales (personal communications, May–August 2016).

13. There has been a long and continuous debate in anthropological circles on the emic and etic sides of the term "supernatural," such that many find problematic the utility of etic distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" (see Lohmann 2003).

14. Chinese research on the Baiku Yao acknowledges this fact but often does not delve into analysis on this topic. This is partly due to the fact that ethnic minority engagements with the spirit world have long been regarded as "superstitions" (*mixin*), and their study has only recently become more accepted in Chinese academia. Although research on Baiku Yao culture and religious activities does exist from the early 1980s (see Yu 1987), it has been, for the most part,

preliminary. Since the establishment of the Huaili ecomuseum in 2004 and designation of Yao embroidered dress and *QingZeGeLa* as intangible cultural heritage elements, Baiku Yao culture has received much more academic and government attention, seen through a significant rise in academic publications in Chinese (see also Nitzky 2014). However, rich ethnographies are still lacking, especially on the ritual system of the Baiku Yao.

15. See for example the Miao and Yi in southwest China and Native American Cheyenne and Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea, to name a few (Mueggler 2001; Lowie 1924; Tuzin 1982).

16. I prefer to use the emic term instead of the etic concept "shaman." A shaman is commonly referred to as someone who "uses soul journeys in dreams and trance to counteract supernatural causes of illness" (Lohmann 2003). In Baiku Yao society, *weiyua* and *nomhao* work to counteract supernatural causes, but they do not call on other spirits to embody them as a form of spirit possession. They use incantations to "communicate" with spirits in the supernatural world for multiple reasons. Although it may seem through observations that these practitioners slip sometimes in a "trance," my conversations with *weiyua* and *nomhao* reveal that they are in fact always mentally "present" and are seen as constantly aware of events taking place in the human world during their rituals. Like shamans found in other parts of the world as described by Eliade, *weiyua* and *nomhao* obtain their ability to conduct such rituals from a dream-like experience. *Weiyua*, in particular, are said to be able to engage in a "journey" to find and bring back a threatened or missing soul. I use the term "spirit men and women" here to connote a "conjurer and seer of spirits."

17. Of the six male ritual practitioners in Lihu township I interviewed, all received the ability to practice rituals and communicate with spirits at middle age, some starting as late as sixty-five years old. *Weiyua*, however, are summoned much earlier in age, most around the age of twenty-six. The "summoning" period often takes place through a series of vivid dreams or visions of the future in which the individual encounters a specific spirit that calls on them. This transition period of embracing the spirit often involves bouts of extreme physical discomfort with escalations of personal sickness, including rashes, bleeding, earache, and even malabsorption and malnourishment. Regarded as the most powerful *weiyua* in Lihu township, Gu Zong Zou explained to me that, "suddenly, at the moment of total incapacitation, when I was only skin and bones, my body began to change, and my health improved. It was when I had accepted the *jidou* [child-like spirits] and way of the *weiyua*" (personal communication, August 2013). Typically, *weiyua* are women and *nomhao* are men, although exceptions do apply, such as in the case of the male ritual leader Gu Zong Zou, who is identified by local Baiku Yao as a *weiyua*. In the Baiku Yao community there are often more *nomhao* than *weiyua*.

18. Rituals I observed often involve a two-step process: (1) the *weiyua* locates and calls back/retrieves the soul of the living and; (2) a spirit man or woman (either *weiyua* or *nomhao*) gives ritual offerings to thank the associated spirit god that had "endangered" or "taken" the human soul. This second ritual is often conducted days or weeks later and only held if the soul of the living returns to their respective body, for example the person for which the ritual is performed gets better. For both *nomhao* and *weiyua*, they often call upon their respective household protective spirit (*gong gu xi* in Baiku Yao language; Ch. *jiashen*) to assist in ritual practices.

19. Description of the naming ritual is drawn from my research in Lihu and cross-checked with data gathered by ecomuseum staff at Huaili ecomuseum, along with some information from Liang (2005, 114–15) and Wu et al. (2009, 217).

20. Female drums are referred to as *mei* in Baiku Yao language, translated as "mother." Male drums are referred to as *bo*, or father. Given names for drums include an auspicious name followed by the *mei* or *bo* term, such as "gold mother" and "jade mother." Bronze drums also have a specific gender determined by their appearance—the molded "sun/star" motif on the tympanum face of the drum—and sound. For the Baiku Yao, female drums are prized over male drums, reflected in the high number of "female" drums found throughout the Baiku Yao–populated townships of Lihu, Baxu, and Yaoshan. Female drums (*geme nou*) are said to possess a deeper and more resonating sound than male drums' (*gebeng nou*) higher, sharper sound. A male drum is recognized by having a long flat sun image with its rays protruding from the center of the drum. Female drums have short, curved relief sun rays. The shape of the sun rays and added metal used to form the curved relief of the "female" drum is understood by some local experts as a factor in altering the sound of the drum. See Lohmann (2007) for a similar analysis of gendered feminine drums of the Asaburo.

21. Crossed sticks forming an X is considered auspicious, parallel sticks are not. For other rituals, the ritual practitioner may use a split piece of jointed segment of a bamboo stem (or culm), with both halves of the bamboo dropped on the ground for divination. An auspicious sign with this tool is when one half is facing up and the other is facing down.

22. From May until October, funerals are not held in Baiku Yao society. From early summer to mid-fall, villagers are busy with the yearly harvest and time is limited for planning and preparing large events like funerals. In addition, because water buffaloes are an indispensable part of the cultivation process, sacrifice of buffaloes for the funeral ceremony during this time would be disruptive to modes of production and to the constructed sociocultural system. Thus, applying this functionalist and cultural materialism approach, funerals are held only after the harvest and before the start of working on the next year's crop. In cases when a member of the community dies from May to October, their funerals are put on hold. The body of the deceased is placed in a prearranged black wood coffin and placed in a dug hole in the ground of the deceased's family home. This temporary grave is used until the allocated time for funerals or when the family is prepared to host a suitable formal funeral service.

23. To hold a formal funeral, a buffalo must be sacrificed. If the family is financially incapable, experienced by many prior to the 1980s reform period, the deceased's body will be buried in a grave on the mountainside and later a formal funeral with sacrificial buffalo will be hosted. Even after several years a previously deceased relative may be honored. Water buffaloes can be family owned, purchased from relatives or other clansmen, or, as commonly done today, acquired from a breeding farm. On average, water buffaloes can be very costly for a Baiku Yao household. At the time of data collection on water buffalo purchases (2013), one cost between 5,000 and 10,000 RMB (approximately $800–$1,600 US dollars).

24. This ritual chant was performed in "ancient" Baiku Yao language, and the words are incomprehensible to the average villager. With the help of a local shaman and transcription by Lu Chaojin, the chant was first converted into vernacular Baiku Yao language and then translated into Chinese for the author to document in 2012. The bronze drum "jade mother"

is used here as an example. It is the name of a newly acquired drum of Lu Chaojin, of which the author witnessed the naming ritual and use during a funeral. The deceased elder's name is left out of the transcription out of respect for the deceased and their family. The transcribed text was also cross checked with research conducted by Liang (2005, 115, in Wu et al., 2009).

25. Baiku Yao bronze drums are played using three distinct rhythms. Rhythms are played according to where the funeral is held or where the deceased is from. Rhythms include Huaili, Yaoli, and Jihou. In Baxu county and Yaoshan they play the Huaili rhythm.

26. Laughing, smiling, and joking is also seen from a small group of three or four male villagers standing behind the lead drummer playing the skin-covered wooden drum. As the drumming takes place, these men hold a set number of sticks—an even number (8, 10, or 12) if the deceased is female and an odd number (7, 9, or 11) if male—and they joyously wave the sticks in the air, said to aid in guiding the deceased into the otherworld, with the sticks used as forms of defense against any treacherous encounters along the way.

27. Some male villagers also received practice earlier in age, learning the rhythm of drumming by playing the bamboo drum (*zhu tonggu*), a short bamboo tube with carved holes that is banged on the ground and tapped with a bamboo stick to mimic the sound of the bronze drum.

28. The duration between the *bojie* ritual and sacrifice of the water buffalo can be a few days. However, the second day for sacrifice and third day for burial are always consecutive. I have recorded on several occasions the entire funeral ceremony of the Baiku Yao, from start to finish. Yet, a complete description of the many acts and rituals of this events falls outside the scope of this article. See scholars Yu (1987), Liang (2005), Liu (2006), and Xu (2010), who have written a description of many parts of the funeral ceremony in Chinese.

29. I only present some highlights on the route to the ancestral land. According to Gu Zong Zou and Lu Chaojin there are over two hundred sites traveled along this route.

30. By conducting a detailed analysis correlating the multiple steps and locations that compose the Baiku Yao people's route to the ancestral land in relation with the history and geography of the land inhabited by past generations of Baiku Yao (and assumed to be crossed on their migration to their present location of northern Guangxi and southern Guizhou province, such as Hunan, Jiangsu, and Shanxi provinces), one may begin to create a theory on the migratory route taken by the Baiku Yao and an accurate ethnohistory. Along these lines of investigation, in 2016, I assisted former ecomuseum vice-director Lu Chaojin, the Huaili ecomuseum, and members of the recently established Baiku Yao Culture and Development Association on a new project to compose a written account of Baiku Yao culture by Baiku Yao authors. Ritual practitioners, including Gu Zong Zou, and Baiku Yao storytellers were brought together from across the region to record their accounts, chants, and discussions. The publication of the first volume of this work is forthcoming in Chinese.

31. Each attendee, who has gifted wine, rice, corn, or money to the family of the deceased, also gives about half a kilogram of wrapped cooked glutinous rice, the prized stable of the Baiku Yao.

32. Three bowls of rice, glutinous rice, and wine are placed on each bronze drum, and the ritual practitioner chants: "Divine [bronze drum's name], auspicious [bronze drum's name], today the elder has already been sent up the mountain, he/she is already settled at the ancestral land. The far clear black moon [bronze drum's spiritual name] is a supernatural entity. He gave you a thick and broad handle, he gave you a red face. Now, we have not eaten meat, now we give

you meat. We have not drunk, now we give you drink. Together we use fresh water and wine, to wash the sorrow of the face. You came with [relative's name], you came on the back of [relative's name]. This bowl of wine is to let him face your face. This bowl of meat is set aside for him to have energy to return home. Thunder has hit you motionless, wind has blown you to not shake. Protect your master's richness. Protect your master's fortune."

33. In the Huaili ecomuseum villages, Manjiang natural village has six clans, HuaQiao natural village has four clans, and HuaTu natural village has five clans.

34. Every clan in the entire village of Huaili has at least one bronze drum. Bronze drums can also bind an entire village. For example, in Manjiang, one of the natural villages of Huaili, five drums—*meimu*, *meilo*, *meispei*, *meitho*, *meizei*—are communal "village drums," passed down from a common ancestor of the whole Lu clan of Manjiang. These drums are protected by the village leader of Manjiang and are allowed communal borrowing within the village for funeral ceremonies.

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Hikketsu no monogatari (A Tale of Calligraphy Brushes)

A Humorous Medieval Instructional Tale

Annotated Translation, with Translator's Introduction

Hikketsu no monogatari (A Tale of Calligraphy Brushes, 1480) is a medieval instructional fiction that reveals the practices and rituals of military households as well as customs and manners of the late fifteenth century. The tale is extremely rare among more than four hundred existing *otogizōshi* in that the author as well as its completion and copied dates are known. While the tale is didactic and adopts a question and answer format, it is simultaneously humorous, with the main characters being a long-lived nun called *shiro bikuni* (literally "white nun") or *happyaku bikuni* (literally "eight hundred nun") and a pack of proper-behaving racoon dogs (*tanuki*). The legends of *happyaku bikuni* exist all over Japan. Many legends tell of a young woman from Wakasa Province who unknowingly ate a mermaid's flesh, which kept her forever youthful in appearance. She decided to become a Buddhist nun. After eight hundred years she returned to Wakasa, and there she entered a cave to live the remainder of her time and expire. According to Tokuda Kazuo, *Hikketsu no monogatari* is the first literature that documents a *happyaku bikuni* legend. *Hikketsu no monogatari* is a treasure house of what to know and do (or not do) in medieval Japan, some of which still applies to present-day Japanese society. The present translation is, though partial due to the limited space, the first English translation of *Hikketsu no monogatari*.

Keywords: *Otogizōshi—happyaku bikuni—shira bikuni*—raccoon dogs—military households—humor—customs and manners

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Hikketsu no monogatari (A Tale of Calligraphy Brushes) is an *otogizōshi* (literally "companion tale"), short stories written from the fourteenth to seventeenth century for the purpose of both entertainment and moral or religious edification.* The tale reveals the practices and rituals of military households as well as customs and manners of the late fifteenth century. It is a treasure house of what to know and do (or not do). Having *tanuki* (racoon dogs) and a *shiro bikuni* (white nun, also known as *happyaku bikuni* or *yao bikuni*, eight hundred nun) as the main characters, the work is highly entertaining. *Hikketsu no monogatari* is a rare interspecies type of *otogizōshi* about a *tanuki* (racoon dog). While there are many *otogizōshi* about mice, foxes, monkeys, fish, and birds, except for *Jūnirui kassen emaki* (The War of the Twelve Animals),[1] *Hikketsu no monogatari* is perhaps the only *otogizōshi* that has a *tanuki*. As Miura Okuto notes, the work is a masterpiece early interspecies type of *otogizōshi* (Miura 2008, 142). It is also an excellent text to reveal the popular sightseeing spots in the vicinity of Kyoto in those days. Importantly, the tale is extremely rare in that the author and completion and copied dates are written in the text. According to the postscript, the text was completed by Ishii Yasunaga, his priesthood name Ihō (dates unknown), in 1480 (Bunmei 12) and was copied in 1517 by Sogō Rokurō Minamoto Yoshishige. Ichiko Teiji notes that Ishii was perhaps a high government official, possibly a secretary of the judicial council (*hyōjōsho*) (Ichiko 1955, 389).

Hikketsu no monogatari describes a trip of three respectable *tanuki*—the head of the main *tanuki* household named Kinhiro and two *tanuki* of an influential branch family—from Tanba Province to the capital city Kyoto in search of butterbur sprouts (*fukinotō*). In the capital, the *tanuki* trio encounter a *shiro bikuni* who is more than eight hundred years old. The *shiro bikuni* happens to stay in Kyoto at the time of the *tanuki*s' visit and gives a sermon. When the *tanuki* introduce themselves, she learns that she and the *tanuki* share the same ancestor. As a token of their blood-relation, the *tanuki* trio are encouraged to ask her any questions concerning courtly and military practices and customs, and scholarship. After bidding farewell to the *shiro bikuni* and then to his companions, the head *tanuki* visits a shrine that is famous for its great calligraphy skill, in spite of the fact that *tanuki* fur is used to make calligraphy brushes. There, he is spotted by a famous brushmaker and is attacked for his fur. While plucking the fur from the *tanuki*, the brushmaker tells him that a *tanuki* without fur can become an ingredient for *tanuki* soup.

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*Editors' Note: All sources are listed in the Annotated Translation, which follows this Translator's Introduction.

The instructional elements of the text

Like many other *otogizōshi*, *Hikketsu no monogatari* is instructional and entertaining. The section of questions and answers between the *tanuki* and *shiro bikuni*, which gives the *tanuki* (and audience) broad knowledge about military scholarship and ancient customs and manners, comprises approximately seventy percent of the whole text. Ichiko notes that exhibiting knowledge of history and customs was conventional in *otogizōshi*, and that the question and answer format reminds one of *Seigen mondō* (Questions and Answers on the Customs and Manners, written by Ichijō Kanera [1402–81]); writing on the subject in that manner must have been a fashionable thing of the day (Ichiko 1955, 390; 2003, 182).[2] Instructional texts generally tend to be pedantic and rather tedious, but Miura argues that the style of questions and answers allows a large amount of information into the story, enables the reader to empathize with the character of a questioner, and easily immerses the audience into the story world (Miura 2008, 154). While it adopts a question and answer format for its pedagogic passages, the author inserts hilarious comments through the mouths of *tanuki* or *shiro bikuni*, as noted in the section on "entertainment."

Buke-kojitsu, a field of studies in usages, rituals, and practices for samurai households, was popular in the Muromachi culture.[3] As the dominant military lords held various rites and gave performances on behalf of the court aristocracy, manners and rituals in regard to annual functions, treatment of military equipment, lifestyle, and so on were established. Those who discussed *buke-kojitsu* such as the Ise family, Ogasawara family, and Taga family appeared among military lords who served *bakufu* (Hamano 2015, 585–86). The topics of the dialogue between the *shiro bikuni* and the *tanuki* range from Shinto to Buddhism, Japanese poetry, samurai learning, calligraphy, falconry, archery, horsemanship, arms, cookery, eating manners, and so on, with various examples from the classic literatures of China and Japan. Hamano Yasunori points out that while many of the *shiro bikuni*'s instructions are believed to be true, an account of the origins of *kasagake* (equestrian archery; literally "hat shooting") and *kokasagake* (literally "small *kasagake*") is fictional. In the *kasagake* episode, a courtesan flirtatiously challenges a young samurai on his way to Kamakura to shoot a woman's conical hat hung across the street from the government office, whereupon he takes a whistling arrow and successfully shoots it. Likewise for the origin of *kokasagake*, the handsome fellow named Ogasawara Jirō is playfully urged by a courtesan to take an arrow to shoot a hat and a small tray; as expected, Ogasawara Jirō performs beautifully. Hamano praises the episodes as a quintessential funny story in the text and surmises that, as will be described later, this section of the text reveals a major reason for Ishii Yasunaga to have written *Hikketsu no monogatari* (Hamano 2015, 589).

The entertainment elements of the text

The tale is interspersed with other intellectually entertaining elements. For instance, it includes *michiyuki*, lyric composition describing scenery that travelers see on their way to the destination—the *tanuki*s' traveling route and the scenic description on their way to Kyoto gives poetic as well as geographical information. Also *monotsukushi* (enumeration of the names of things) is used at the beginning to describe the branch *tanuki* family's gift to the head *tanuki*—this section is fun to read, as the names of fish gifts are cleverly incorporated in the names of producing areas. Further, Sawai Taizō observes that the main humor comes from anthropomorphization of *tanuki* (Sawai 2014, 135–38).

Indeed, anthropomorphized *tanuki* looking for butterbur sprouts itself is hilarious. These *tanuki* consider butterbur sprouts to be a great cure for a hefty hangover after a night of drinking, and simply sending someone to get them is not enough for the *tanuki*. So the main character Kinhiro solemnly declares, "I feel depressed whenever I send someone to buy things from the capital, because they don't get the right thing. I propose that we go and stay at an inn on Ōgimachi Street in Kyoto and eat butterbur sprouts to our heart's content."

According to *Nihon zokushin jiten* (Dictionary of Japanese Superstitions), *fukinotō* or butterbur sprouts were believed to make *tanuki* stupid. It is actually not that butterbur sprouts make *tanuki* slow and an easy target, but rather the butterbur sprout season coincides with the time of *tanuki* merrymaking; it is the time of the *tanuki*'s procreation, and the *tanuki* let their guard down. But this inattentiveness of *tanuki* was believed to be caused by them eating butterbur sprouts (Suzuki 1982, 363). This superstition is reflected in *shiro bikuni*'s warning against *tanuki* eating butterbur sprouts. When the *tanuki* finally arrive at their destination they are ironically told by the *shiro bikuni* that butterbur sprouts are poisonous to *tanuki*. Kinhiro is, however, not fazed at all, and his response to her advice is quite funny: "It seems 'good medicine tastes bitter.' Butterbur sprouts certainly cannot be poison. Your words are indeed 'royal advice is hard to hear.'" It shows Kinhiro's gentlemanly manner as a respectable *tanuki*, adding more humor.

To eat butterbur sprouts was the purpose of the *tanuki*s' journey to Kyoto. There is a phrase, "*tanuki*s' journey to the capital" (*tanuki no Kyō nobori*). It means *tanuki* going to the capital but also connotes country bumpkins going to the capital and moving about in confusion. In the tale, the author describes Kinhiro and his group's trip to the capital just as a respectable samurai family coming from the countryside would. But the more properly the *tanuki* behave, the more humorous they look. On his way back Kinhiro visits a famous calligraphy shrine in Kyoto just as an ordinary tourist would do, but there he is attacked by Fudeo Yuinaga, a famous brushmaker. The name Fudeo Yuinaga is a play on words, as *fude o yuu* means "to make brushes." For Fudeo, Kinhiro is just a *tanuki* whose fur is economically important as the source of calligraphy brushes (Suzuki 1982, 359). Yuinaga plucks Kinhiro's fur, though Kinhiro desperately begs him to stop. As Fudeo does not listen, Kinhiro asks, "If you continue to do that [pluck away at my fur], what *am I* [Kinhiro] going to be?" Fudeo replies, "Just become *an ingredient of soup* (*oshiru no mi*)," which is word play in the form of a pun on Kinhiro's question "*am I*?" (*kono mi*). Fuedo's reply is simultaneously a punchline of the humorous story (Sawai 2014, 139–40). This punchline at the expense of *tanuki* may sound cruel rather than funny to the present-day reader. The *tanuki* receives the information from *shiro bikuni* in all seriousness, but in the end the *tanuki* becomes the target of a human who only sees him as a source of calligraphy brushes and *tanuki* soup. But, as will be explained in the next section, this is all part of the calculated structure by the author, who had fun writing in a *tanuki* theme.

As Haruo Shirane comments, animals in the interspecies stories are "often cute, act like human beings, and become objects of sympathy, empathy, and humor. These tales frequently function as literary parody or as satire on social conventions and the foibles of human beings" (Shirane 2018, 12). Having animals for the main character would be a good venue for the upright samurai's hilarious conduct without offending readers' sensitivities.

Why is a *tanuki* chosen for the main character?

The *tanuki* characters in *Hikketsu no monogatari* provide a framework for the didactic nature of the story. They are informed enough to pose questions to *shiro bikuni* and uninformed enough to ask for definitive answers. They pose questions with child-like single-mindedness but also of probing depth, such as asking about the types of Buddhist compassion and military treatises, among others.

Michael Dylan Foster notes that "since at least the Kamakura period (1185–1333), narratives have featured the *tanuki* as a trickster who enjoys causing mischief, and sometimes mayhem, in the human world," and that it "is a beast of the borders, ecologically skirting the line between culture and nature. Folklorically, too, *tanuki* are commonly depicted as liminal creatures, simultaneously of this world and the other world" (Foster 2012, 4; also see De Visser 1908 for a thorough discussion of *tanuki*). The first recorded *tanuki* as a trickster is in a *setsuwa* (tale literature or narrative; myths, legends, folktales, anecdotes, and the like) from the thirteenth-century *Uji shūi monogatari* (A Collection of Tales from Uji) (De Visser 1908, 41; Li 2009, 224). The *setsuwa* tells of a holy man who begins to receive nightly visits from the Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (Fugen). A hunter who brings the holy man food and other necessities is invited to stay to witness the hallowed sight. But when the bodhisattva appears, radiating a beautiful light, the hunter becomes suspicious that he, a hunter by profession, would be allowed to see such a holy vision. So, he shoots at the image with an arrow to see whether the Boddhisattva is the true one. The light then goes out and a crashing sound is heard. The next morning, the hunter and the holy man follow a trail of blood and find a dead *tanuki* with an arrow in its chest (for the Japanese text, see SNKBZ 50, 267–69. For an English translation see Tyler 1987, 174–75). As Foster notes, "although it is fair to say that the *tanuki* image from the Edo period (1600-1868) onward was generally a lighthearted one, such comicality is not ubiquitous. Particularly in the famous folktale of *Kachi kachi yama* (Clack Clack Mountain), the *tanuki* is portrayed as vicious and dangerous; however, even this decidedly nasty *tanuki* dies in the end" (Foster 2012, 23; for an English translation of *Kachi kachi yama*, see Seki 1966, 39–40).

While *tanuki* were a major source of humor, there are some other reasons why *tanuki* were chosen for the main characters. Ichiko Teiji assumes *tanuki* New Year soup could be part of the reason (Ichiko 1955, 390). The story starts in the beginning of the New Year (and the postscript informs us that the tale was completed on the eleventh day of the first month of Bunmei [1480]). *Tanuki* soup is a winter dish, and the sudden appearance of the subject at the end follows a *tanuki* theme. Importantly, in the minds of people the *tanuki*'s fur was a major source for calligraphy brushes, as the punchline attests. A brush and in its extension *tanuki* as a recognized source of calligraphy brushes represent penmanship, which is, as will be explained later, probably one of the reasons why the story was written. The encounter of the suddenly appearing brushmaker and Kinhiro-*tanuki*, who is a primary fur source for calligraphy brushes (as well as *tanuki* soup), at the closing provides a cogent title: *Hikketsu no monogatari*, a tale of calligraphy brushes.

Who is the *shiro bikuni* or *happyaku bikuni*?

The character who answers the *tanuki*'s questions is a *shiro bikuni* or *happyaku bikuni*, a legendary folkloric figure who lived an extraordinarily long life (see figure 1). In *Hikketsu no monogatari* she appears as a treasury warehouse of knowledge, which was acquired from living through a long history. In regard to the name *shiro bikuni*, on the one hand Nakahara Yasutomi (1399–1457) writes in his diary *Yasutomiki* (Diary of Nakahara Yasutomi) that "She might be called *shiro bikuni* because her hair is all white [grey]" (Nakahara 1965, 12). Kuzumi Kazuo, on the other hand, notes that a *happyaku bikuni* is also called *shiro bikuni* because her skin was white [pale] (Kuzumi 2012, 165). Tokuda Kazuo conjectures that the name *shira* (*shiro*) of *shiro bikuni* represents

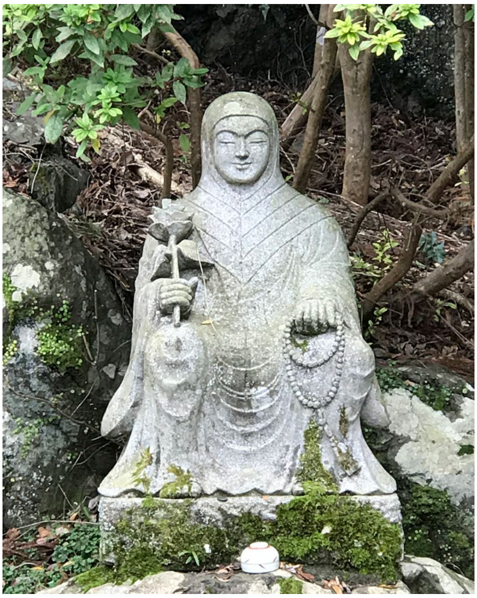

Figure 1. The statue of *happyaku bikuni* in Kūinji Temple in the city of Obama, Fukui Prefecture. Photograph by Noriko Tsunoda Reider, 2019.

her association with deities, as symbolized in the name Shirayama or Hakusan (Mt. White), a miraculous mountain of the Hokuriku region (Tokuda 1990, 116; Ōta 2007, 42). *Happyaku* in *happyaku bikuni* is a number referring to "many." She is a nun who has lived many, many years. Also, many legends of *happyaku bikuni* tell that she lived for eight hundred years. *Happyaku* in the name *happyaku bikuni* most likely comes from her age when the nun entered the cave to pass away (Kuzumi 2012, 174).

Yanagita Kunio, who investigated several sites and corresponding literature, speculates that *shiro bikuni* must have been born sometime between Taika (645–650) and Daidō (806–810) (Yanagita 1970, 239). In *Hikketsu no monogatari*, the fictional *shiro bikuni* says that her father served at the court of Emperor Keitai (r. 507?–530?) (Sawai 2014, 388). In any case, as she is known for longevity, her knowledge of ancient customs, manners, and history that she acquired during her long life comes to the audience as believable.

Interestingly a *shiro bikuni* was said to appear in Kyoto in the author Ishii's lifetime. Tokuda Kazuo asserts *Hikketsu no monogatari* is a contemporary fiction of the Muromachi period, well reflecting the social conditions and culture of intellectuals at that time (Tokuda 1990, 107). The appearance of the *shiro bikuni* in the capital is documented in several contemporary diaries. For example, in the aforementioned *Yasutomiki*, on the twenty-sixth day of the fifth month of Bun'an 6 (1449), Yasutomi notes,

> Someone says around the twentieth day of this month, a nun of a little over two hundred years old named *shiro bikuni* came to the capital from Wakasa, and people thought it very mysterious. I wonder if she was summoned by a military governor. A side gate was made to the great Jizō Hall located on the north side of Higashinotōin Street and Second Avenue, and people paid to see her in the building. An elderly man says she is a *shiro bikuni* whom he heard about long ago. She might be called *shiro bikuni* because her hair is all white [grey]. An official went to see her, I heard. With uncertain rumors still around, she went back to Wakasa Province today. (Nakahara 1965, 12)

It continues that on the following day, the twenty-seventh day of the same month, "one says that nun from the East came to the capital and lectured on the *Lotus Sutra* at Jizō-Hall located at the north side of the corner of Nishinotōin Street and First Avenue. She was about fifty years of age and stayed there with twenty companions" (Nakahara 1965, 13).

Similarly, in *Tsunamitsu kōki* (Diary of Hirohashi Tsunamitsu) written by the court noble Hirohashi Tsunamitsu (1431–77), he notes on the eighth day of the sixth month of the same year, Bun'an 6 (1449), "*Shiro bikuni* is going to visit the imperial palace, I hear. Her age is said to be eight hundred years. She is going back home today. She must be a shape-shifter. It is ominous. There are various questionable things about her, so they are investigating and selecting the documents all day." On the following day, the ninth day of the sixth month of Bun'an 6 (1449), Tsunamitsu writes, "I heard yesterday the *shiro bikuni* was supposed to visit the imperial palace, but she hasn't showed up yet. It is so very strange" (Endō et al. 2017, 111; Tokuda 1990, 113).

Another account is found in *Gaun nikkenroku*, the diary of Zen priest Zuikei Shūhō (1391–1473). On the twenty-sixth day of the seventh month of the same year, Bun'an 6 (1449), Zuikei Shūhō describes,

> The master of Jōsuian hermitage says that recently an eight-hundred-year-old nun from Wakasa Province came to the capital and people rushed to see her. However, the place she was staying was tightly closed, and it was not easy to take a glimpse of her. So those with wealth and high status paid one hundred *sen*, and lowly people, ten *sen*, to see her. (Tōkyō daigaku shiryō hensanjo 1961, 39; Tokuda 1990, 112–13)

In *Hikketsu no monogatari*, the character *shiro bikuni* is described as, "now staying at Jizō (Ksitigarbha) Hall of Ōmine Temple" (Sawai 2014, 387). Sawai points out that the Jizō Hall of the text corresponds to the description of *Yasutomiki* ("Jizō-Hall located at the north side of the corner of Nishinotōin Street and First Avenue"), because Ōmine Temple used to exist on the corner of Nishinotōin Street and First Avenue around the time of Bun'an era (1444–49) (Sawai 2014, 141). Tokuda Kazuo argues that the *shiro bikuni* character in *Hikketsu no monogatari* is a sketch of the contemporary wanderers who imitate the *shiro bikuni*/*happyaku bikuni* folkloric figure. Importantly, Tokuda points out that what the *shiro bikuni* in *Hikketsu no monogatari* says about the origin of her long life is almost identical with the description found in gazetteers of the Edo period and present-day *happyaku bikuni* legends (Tokuda 1990, 110).

Many *happyaku bikuni* legends tell of a fisherman in Wakasa who was invited to a party by a mysterious, distinguished-looking old man. At the party the fisherman was offered some meat that appeared to be a mermaid's flesh. The fisherman was afraid to eat the mermaid flesh, so he hid the meat deep in his sleeve. When the fisherman returned home, his daughter found the meat in his sleeve, and thinking it was ordinary fish, she ate it. As time passed by, it became noticeable that the daughter stopped aging—perhaps because she ate the strange flesh her father brought home. Her family and friends passed away, but her appearance remained youthful, about sixteen or seventeen years of age. To deal with her exceptionality, she decided to become a Buddhist nun and traveled around, helping the poor and often planting camellia flowers. After eight hundred years she returned to Wakasa, and there she entered a cave to live the remainder of her time and expire (see figure 2).[4] *Hikketsu no monogatari,* therefore, is the first literature that documents a *happyaku bikuni* legend (Tokuda 1990, 110).

It is widely known that the *happyaku bikuni* is deeply related to or perhaps was a Kumano *bikuni* (see for example Tokuda 1990; Matsumoto 2007). The *shiro bikuni* in *Hikketsu no monogatari* tells her past to the *tanuki* characters, that when she made a pilgrimage to Kumano she visited Kōkokuji Temple at Yura and became a disciple of the founder, Shinchi Kakushin (1207–98). Tokuda notes that it is quite natural that Kumano Gongen appears in the text, meaning that she was a *miko*, instructing the miracles of Kumano deities (Tokuda 1990, 117; Glassman 2008, 183), and further comments that the nun in the tale was a *miko* who traveled around the country teaching about the Kumano deities, no different from the Kumano *bikuni* figures of the early modern period (Tokuda 1990, 119). Various interpretations of the close associations between *miko* and female sexual entertainers have been discussed (see

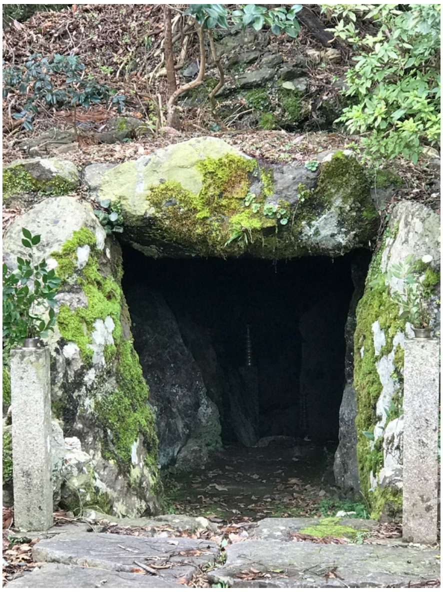

Figure 2. The cave in Kūinji Temple where the *happyaku bikuni* is said to have entered. Photograph by Noriko Tsunoda Reider, 2019.

Goodwin 2007, 84–119 for a thorough discussion). Interestingly the *shiro bikuni*'s mother in the tale is introduced as a stunningly beautiful entertainer named Hoshi no mae. During the medieval period *miko*, especially *arukimiko* (traveling *miko*), participated in these fundraising efforts and other spiritual services; they also helped propagate the teachings and practices associated with specific deities and shrines, similar to those of Buddhist holy men (*hijiri*) and *shugendō* practitioners (Meeks 2011, 223, 250). Barbara Ruch writes that itinerant mendicant nuns spent their lives on the road in devout pilgrimage, religious fundraising, and especially proselytizing activities, as numerous fifteenth- and sixteenth-century diary entries attest (Ruch 2002, 540). Some wandering *miko* probably took advantage of the *shiro bikuni*/*happyaku bikuni* folkloric figure to advance their profession or tout their knowledge. As Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, “the work and the world represented in it enter the real world, enriching it, much as the real world enters the created work and impacts it, as part of the natural process of its creation” (Bakhtin 1981, 254). Thus the legends of *happyaku bikuni* continue to be told.

Ishii Yasunaga’s possible intent in writing *The Tale of Calligraphy Brushes*

According to the postscript of the text, Ishii Yasunaga’s priesthood name is Ihō. Ichiko Teiji suggests that the author, a samurai skilled at writing, must have drawn up the manuscript for amusement after his retirement (Ichiko 1955, 390). As I mentioned earlier, Hamano Yasunori notes that the handsome fellow named Ogasawara Jirō in the episode of *kokasagake* is a figure whom the Ogasawara family reveres as their founder (Hamano 2015, 590). Ogasawara Nagakiyo (1162–1242), also known as Ogasawara Jirō, was an instructor in archery and horsemanship for Minamoto no

Yoritomo and performed various rituals relating to archery and horsemanship. Both the Ogasawara School of Etiquette and the Ogasawara School of Etiquette, Archery, and Horsemanship cite him as their founder (see Ogasawara-ryū reihō Sōke Honbu, n.d.; Ogasawara-ryū, n.d.). Ogasawara Mochinaga (1384–1458) became the archery instructor for the sixth Shogun Ashikaga Yoshinori (1392–1441), and around this time the Ogasawara family, specifically that of the Kyoto branch, distinguished themselves by codifying the rites concerning archery and horsemanship. Ogasawara Mochinaga's descendants in the Muromachi period solidified the family's position in the archery and horsemanship rituals and ceremonies (Futaki 1999, 17).[5]

Hamano conjectures that Ishii Yasunaga was well versed in the Ogasawara family's codes of etiquette and ancient learning; in the text the Ogasawara is described in a favorable light as the most authentic among several expert households. He argues *Hikketsu no monogatari* could be considered as a parody—or, I would say perhaps more like witty humor—of the Ogasawara school's code of etiquette for samurai households—not to mock the Ogasawara school but to spread the authenticity of the Ogasawara's practices in a positive way (Hamano 2015, 597).[6]

I also speculate that the author wanted to emphasize that a good warrior had to be well-rounded in many types of physical prowess. As the *shiro bikuni* teaches, "without swimming skills, even though a warrior may master all the martial arts, he will not be able to earn the name of a mighty warrior." Perhaps more importantly, a warrior must possess both military prowess and superb penmanship; one cannot be considered great without either one. Ishii Yasunaga has the *tanuki* ask a question: "Should a warrior not put his heart too much into scholarship?" Quoting a saying from *Kongzi jiayu* (The School Sayings of Confucius), the *shiro bikuni* responds, "A man well versed in letters is always skilled in the use of arms. A man skilled in arms is always well versed in letters." The importance of excellence in literary art is also represented by the title—calligraphy brushes' very materials are culled from *tanuki*, hence *tanuki* are made the main characters. The *shiro bikuni* makes a note on proper calligraphy. *Hikketsu no monogatari* thus instructs that a good warrior is expected to be good at martial and literary arts and also have good manners.

Translator

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I would like to thank the editors of *Asian Ethnology* and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. The photos were taken while I was a visiting researcher at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Nichibunken) in Kyoto in 2019. I am grateful for Nichibunken's financial support.

Notes

1. See Sarah Thompson's translation of *Jūnirui kassen emaki* in Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 385–416.

2. Among *otogizōshi*, *Tamamo no mae sōshi* (Lady Tamomo) and *Kachō Fūgetsu* (Flowers and Birds, Wind and Rain) are examples that contain long didactic question and answer sections in the manner of *Hikketsu no monogatari*. See Laura Nüffer's translation of *Tamamo no mae sōshi* in Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 348–70, and Kimbrough's translation of *Kachō Fūgetsu* in Kimbrough 2014, 311–23.

3. *Buke-kojitsu* is a term used in contrast to court nobles' *yūsoku-kojitsu* (studies in usages, rituals, and practices for ancient court), as powerful military lords took control of various rituals in place of court aristocrats. See Hamano 2015, 585.

4. The legends of *happyaku bikuni* exist all over Japan. For comprehensive collections of *happyaku bikuni* legends, see Obama-shi kyōdo kenkyūkai 1991; Ōta 2007; Fujie 2009. For a story in English, see Light 2018, 22–24. As Yanagita Kunio notes, what the nun ate to make her live long does not necessarily have to be mermaid flesh; it could be a shellfish with nine holes (Yanagita 1970, 242). In *Hikketsu no monogatari*, it is a lycium that caused the nun's longevity.

5. However, the governmental etiquette and manners as well as various rites of passage and rituals in life were largely controlled by the Ise family (Futaki 1999, 5).

6. For a good example of the intellectual wit in the Muromachi period, see Saitō 2014.

Translation (Partial)

The following translation is from the unillustrated *Hikketsu no monogatari*, a *recchōsō* (multisection book) in the collection of the Sonkeikaku bunko, typeset and annotated in Sawai Taizō's *Muromachi monogatari to kohaikai: Muromachi no "chi" no yukue* (2014, 381–415). The manuscript housed by the Sonkeikaku bunko is the only known text of this work. With appropriate respect for the reader's time, only the sections the author believes relevant to the point (approximately two-thirds) are presented here. The deleted parts are indicated by ellipses ". . ." with a note, [*Truncated.*].

The First Calligraphy of the Year Brings Harmony, Comfort,
Prosperity, and Happiness to Everyone[1]

Hikketsu no monogatari

When could that have been? There was a *tanuki* (raccoon-dog) named Kinhiro with the rank of Vice Master of the Palace Table Office (*daizen no suke*) in Yuge Manor, Kuwata District of Tanba Province.[2] He dug a moat of half a mile around his estate, inside which he built a tile-roofed mud wall with five gates on the east, west, and north sides. Within the wall were many buildings including a main residence, guest hall, samurai guard house, stable, pavilions, libraries, and storehouses. He was indeed living splendidly. He applied himself to various artistic accomplishments; he went to bed at midnight and woke up at the hour of the tiger in the morning.[3]

One morning when he was gazing at a southern vista, he noticed that while the northern branches were covered with snow, on a southern branch this year's first plum flower was blossoming. Kinhiro was greatly surprised and summoned his attendants. "Look at that. 'There is no calendar in the mountains.'[4] With plum blossoms, one knows the arrival of spring. So surely this is the beginning of the New Year. *Tanuki* are idle around the end of the year, and I haven't seen human beings around, but I've still been concerned. Don't let your guard down. Hoist the wisteria draw-bridge up. Secure the gates. Dog-barks in the neighboring villages must be a signal for huntsmen to come.

"If many birds are flying up in the mountain, consider falconers are there. Because the falconers silence the sounds of bells attached to their dogs and hawks so as not to surprise the game, you won't know the falconers are approaching. Even though hunting sounds are far, if you hear crows crying nearby, be on alert, thinking that the huntsmen are nearby. If a loudly crying bird, tired from being chased, flies through in this direction for help, you should chase it away. If you go outside and let the falcons and dogs smell our scent, we will be all done in. If old and experienced dogs intrude, young *tanuki* should confront them and bite their noses. That would really hurt the dogs. If I compare what I mean by 'be on guard,' it would be like 'The Battle on the Bridge' of the *Tale of the Heike*.[5] Minamoto no Yorimasa [1104–80] had revolted against the Heike clan and rescued Prince Mochihito [1151–80] from Onjōji Temple. They were planning to flee to Yoshino in the south, but Prince Mochihito was too exhausted, so Yorimasa took him to Byōdō-in to rest. Yorimasa ordered his men to pry the planks off the Uji Bridge to prepare for the Heike's imminent attack. When the Heike force rode to the bridge, the advance guard had warned their men coming behind of the stripped planks, but those coming up were surging over, many falling to the river and being swept away. The Heike [needed to cross the river but] were hesitant seeing the roaring Uji River, when Ashikaga no Matatarō Fujiwara Tadatsuna, seventeen years of age, rushed to the front and rode through the river, guiding his fellow warriors. How could one surpass this?"

Now, there lived in Kena Manor of Izumi Province[6] a badger named Hirotō, the estate steward with the title of Senior Assistant Minister of Ceremonial. He was from a branch family of Kinhiro, looked very well, and was diligent. On his way back from Ōtori Shrine, known for its various types of trees and nightingales, Hirotō visited Kinhiro.

Hirotō said, "I was thinking it was still the passing year of snow on Mt. Ikoma and Mt. Futakami.[7] Just as a poem goes,

> *uguisu no / koe nakariseba / yuki kienu / yamasato ikade / haru o shiramashi*[8]
>
> Since it did away / with the bush warblers' voices / the lingering snow / causes one to wonder how / mountain towns could know it's spring

"The appreciation gift for my dear master should not be delayed. My gifts are thirty barrels of quality dry saké from sweet Amano, and for the side dishes, yellowtail, *akagai* (ark shell) of red face, delicious meat of fish like bonito from the areas of the victorious deity of Sumiyoshi, and shrimp from Ebisu Shrine.[9] 'Come and bring fine crucian carp,'[10] I had said, and I sent my eldest son, Mami no Tarō Hiromochi, on a horse to Tanba Province to procure these gifts for you."

Journeying through the beach of Sakai, which borders Izumi Province and Settsu Province, going through Abeno, Suminoe, and Ten'ōji Temple, Hirotō and Hiromochi reached Amagasaki.[11] The spring wind of Naniwa harbor urges common reeds to bourgeon forth. On a misty night of the hazy moon the father and son had a lodging at Koyanoike.[12] Moving through the bamboo grasses of Inano, passing Onobara and Ninchōji Temple, traveling through Waraiji smilingly, and then Ogawa, they soon reached Yuge Manor.[13]

From afar Hirotō got off the horse and had his attendant report their arrival. From inside the gate came the voice of Kinhiro's attendant to inquire who it was. Hirotō's attendant responded, "His lordship arrived from Izumi Province." The gate immediately opened, and the draw bridge was put down to let Hirotō's party inside. They were invited to the verandah, where lights were offered through the rolled-up bamboo blinds.

Kinhiro had an audience with Hirotō. Hirotō sat straight respectfully and expressed New Year's greetings. "My lord, your wealth is as huge as Mt. Ōe, and, as a poem says, 'The Ikuno road / across Ōe Mountain / is far away,'[14] please excuse my lateness of arrival." So saying, he had his attendant bring gifts to the verandah. Kinhiro nodded and made a ceremonial response according to custom. "I appreciate your coming here all the way, especially accompanied by your eldest son. It is indeed auspicious. I am very pleased." Thus, he ordered the preparation of the most formal banquet with threefold exchanges of saké and dishes. To start the auspicious occasion, a spring pheasant was put on a cutting board, and Hiromochi, being a young man, cut it appropriately.

Soon the first saké cup was presented, accompanied by soup containing rice cakes and vegetables. At that moment, Kinhio's uncle Tokimune, also known as Koamidabu,[15] who lived in Utsu, came in. The host and guests left their seats to allow Tokimune to take the seat of honor. After bowing ceremoniously, they all took their own seats.

Various fish were further brought in, and they consumed many cups of saké. During pleasant talk, Koamidabu said, "at this time last year, we had butterbur sprouts for side dishes. Why don't we have them this year?" and they all agreed with him by drumming their bellies.[16]

At the dead of night, they lay here and there utterly intoxicated. The following day, when they got up, Kinhiro said to Hirotō, "I want to eat butterbur sprouts to treat this hangover. As Koamidabu said, the butterbur sprouts are buried deep in the snow in the mountains, and I haven't seen them yet this year. What shall we do?" Hirotō replied, "As a poem goes,

> *Miyama ni wa / matsu no yuki dani / kienaku ni / miyako wa nobe no / wakana tsumi keri*[17]
>
> Deep in the mountains / snowflakes have yet to vanish / even from pine trees, / yet down in the capital / people are picking young greens

The butterbur sprouts must be sold in the capital. I humbly suggest you send someone to the capital." "I feel depressed whenever I send someone to buy things from the capital, because they don't get the right thing. I propose that we go and stay at an inn on Ōgimachi street in Kyoto and eat butterbur sprouts to our hearts' content." They all agreed.

Kinhiro, Hirotō, and Hiromochi felt the sun was setting very slowly that day and eagerly awaited the dawn for their journey to the capital. They left the mansion, listening to the first crow of the rooster behind. At a place called Nagano, Kinhiro recited,

> *Miyako-ji o / isogasu mo are / haru to ieba / hi no kage imada / naka no narikeri*[18]
>
> Hurrying on the road / to the capital / spring though as it is / the sunshine is still / not around

After a while, Kinhiro said, "Lingering winter is still terribly cold. It's no fun to be smothered by the smoke from the charcoal kiln—a memento of the winter, blown hither by morning wind. Crossing Ono ridge won't do.[19] Let's go toward Ninnaji Temple road." He then pulled the right side of the rein and tapped the horse on its right with the stirrup. His horse followed the signal and trotted to the right. Looking at the hedges on the field of plum trees on their way down the mountain village, Hiromochi recited,

> *Keburi tatsu / shizu ga kakiho no / ume no hana / iro ga susukete / yamakaze zo fuku*
>
> Smoke is rising / over the fence of a humble hut / tinting the color of / plum blossoms / the mountain wind blows

Hiromochi had been a page at Eharaji Temple on a mountain in Izumi Province from the autumn when he was seven years old till the eleventh month of the past year, when he was summoned back home from the temple and celebrated his coming-of-age ceremony. Handsome and kind, he was sixteen years of age this year. As Hiromochi was very fond of poetry, it was understandable that he recited the aforementioned poem.

Hirotō was delighted to hear his son's poem and was moved to tears. One's future is as uncertain as spring. They moved on to Kōsanji Temple at Toganoo and Jingoji Temple at Takao to pray, proceeding to Hiraoka and Narutaki.[20] Wild geese were flying over the hills of Narabigaoka; the three glimpsed Mt. Kinugasa, whose top was covered by the Spring goddess's misty sleeves, and glanced at Hirano Woods.[21] Tree buds must have known the arrival of spring already; as they continued their journey, looking at willow trees along Kamiya River, they arrived in Daishōgun.[22]

From there, a certain Saburō and Gorō accompanied the party, and in front of Kitano Shrine, they all humbly dismounted their horses.[23] Passing through Uchino and Takegahana, Ōmiya street and Inokuma street, they came to Modoribashi Bridge, when they saw ahead of them a large crowd of people at Nishinotōin area. When they asked what it was, a man responded, "Don't you know yet? A nun called *shiro bikuni* (White Nun) has come to the capital from Wakasa Province.[24] She is more than eight hundred years old and is now staying at Jizō (Ksitigarbha) Hall of Ōmine Temple.[25] Everyone in the capital really wants to see her."

The three—Kinhiro, Hirotō, and Hiromochi—said to each other, "There still is plenty of time till sunset. Let's go and see her." They went into the Hall, but the woman looked like an ordinary person of about eighty or nighty years old. "There is nothing special about her," so they thought and were about to leave, when the nun hailed them, "Where are you from?"

The three turned around and responded, "I'm a *tanuki*, Kinhiro from Yuge Manor of Tanba Province; this is a badger, Hirotō from Kena Manor of Izumi Province; and that is his son, Mami Tarō Hiromochi." "Come here then," said White Nun. "I want to tell you something." The three then obliged.

"If you have time to listen, I will tell you about your ancestors." "If you are going to tell us about our ancestors," the three replied, "even if we have some urgent business to attend to, we will stay here and listen most carefully." The nun said, "This is a story of the old, it will take time. Take a seat." So they sat in a row.

The nun began, "A long time ago there was a man called Nagahiro, a Chamberlain of Fifth Rank (*goi no kurōdo*). He served at the Emperor Keitai's [r. 507?–530?] court. At an Autumn Leaves banquet, Nagahiro played the drum so superbly that he was rewarded with Yamamura Manor. After that he was occasionally summoned by the imperial court, and he became the Master of the Palace Table Office (*daizen no daibu*). In those days, there was no one who did not appreciate his work. Now his eldest son was named Tsunehiro. He was appointed to govern Yuge of Tanba Province and called himself a Vice Tanuki Master of the Palace Table Office. This is the ancestor of Kinhiro. Nagahiro's younger brother was called Yasuhiro. As he governed Kena of Izumi Province, he was called a Vice Badger Master of Palace Kitchens. This is the ancestor of Hirotō.

"Now you may wonder who I am. Your ancestor Nagahiro was appointed to the magistrate in charge of foreign ships from the north, so he left the capital for the port of Obama, Kichishō Manor in Wakasa Province.[26] To pass the idle time in the country of Obama port, he asked whether there was an entertainment woman around. A man from the area said, 'There is an unparalleled entertainer called Hoshi no mae. Formerly, she served at the imperial court as Lady Karigo.

"'It was the first day of the horse of the second month, and Lady Karigo went to a mountain to take a branch of cypress for the Inari festival in Kyoto.[27] Who could have done it—someone kidnapped and sold her to a merchant. Now she is here at Obama, making her living by entertaining people. I recommend her to you.' Nagahiro replied, 'So be it,' and summoned her. Lady Karigo was indeed stunning, even surpassing a beauty of the most desirable—'a fragrance of plum blossoms, let it put on the cherry blossoms, and let them flower on [wavy] willow branches.'[28] Nagahiro felt as if he had come to Vaisravana's castle where he met the god's younger sister, Srimahadevi.[29]

"Thus Nagahiro and Hoshi no mae vowed eternal love to each other, and I am the result of their passion. Nagahiro's term ended after a while, and he left for the capital. My mother died soon afterward, and I became an orphan. When my mother was pregnant, she had lycium every day. This lycium must have been immortality medicine, because it has kept my life for nine hundred years already. So people say that I am a long-living woman. After that, when I made a pilgrimage to Kumano,[30] I visited a temple at Yura and became a disciple of the founder of the temple.[31] People call me White Nun of Wakasa. In recent years, some call me *happyaku bikuni* [or *yao bikuni*, literally eight hundred *bikuni*].

"Perhaps because of our common ancestors, you are really dear to me. Ask me anything, regardless of past and present. I will tell you whatever you want to know. Don't hesitate." Hearing this, the three prostrated themselves and cried with gratitude. "We are illiterate and stupid. 'Less profitable / than writing on the waters / of a flowing stream—' [such is the futility / of our learning].[32] For our future benefit, please allow us to inquire, and let us write down your answers. We wish to make it a house treasure." "That is quite reasonable," she said, and had an inkstone from Jakuōji and writing paper brought in front of Kinhiro.[33] Kinhiro ceremoniously ground an ink-cake and waited for her talk with an ink-filled brush.

The nun asked them, "Nowadays, many young lords want fur to put around their waist for travel attire. Why did you venture to come to the capital?" They answered, "It is still very cold in the deep mountains, so there are no butterbur sprouts yet. We are attracted to the capital for butterbur sprouts. On this occasion it must be the guidance of buddhas and deities that we could meet with you. We are very grateful."

The nun said, "The fortune is mine as well. Now, contrary to your expectation, butterbur sprouts are poisonous for your health. So do not eat them." Kinhiro replied, "It seems 'good medicine tastes bitter.' Butterbur sprouts certainly cannot be poison. Your words are indeed, 'royal advice is hard to hear.'"

Hirotō asked, "To which deities should we make a pilgrimage?" The nun replied, "One should revere and honor deities. Never go to shrines without first purifying yourselves by abstaining from eating meat. Among the shrines, the Inner and Outer

Shrines of Ise are the master of our country,[34] so don't neglect to pay special respect to them."

"Question: Were the Inner Shrine and Outer Shrine of Ise founded simultaneously?"

"Answer: The Inner Shrine was founded in the reign of Emperor Sujin [the latter third century?] on a hill of Uji of Watarae.[35] The Outer Shrine was built four hundred years after on the field of Yamada."[36]

"Question: To what deity is the Inner Shrine dedicated?"

"Answer: It is dedicated to Amaterasu-ōmikami, Sun Goddess."

"Question: To what deity is the Outer Shrine dedicated?"

"Answer: It is dedicated to Toyouke-Ōmikami, Goddess of Agriculture."

. . . [*Truncated.*]

"Question: Should a warrior not put his heart too much into scholarship?"

"Answer: It is said in *Kongzi jiayu* (The School Sayings of Confucius), 'A man well versed in letters is always skilled in the use of arms. A man skilled in arms is always well versed in letters.'[37]

"Not too long ago, Yoriyoshi received the imperial command to subjugate Sadatō and Munetō.[38] Yoriyoshi left the capital, and his troops already reached Banba in Mino Province,[39] where he took up his lodging. While Yoriyoshi was admiring an artificial hill and stream in the garden, a number of young children of seven or eight years old appeared from nowhere. Yoriyoshi, thinking it strange, saw the mysterious children begin imitating a war.

"They divided into two camps: one camp went up the hill and became the lords of the castle, while the other went to the stream and became the attacking army. Time passed, but the defense of the castle was strong with no sign of surrender. A man who looked like the general said to his men, 'This castle won't fall if we have a stratagem. Let's retreat and study.' Thus, they all disappeared into thin air.

"Yoriyoshi thought what he saw must have been a sign of Hachiman, Great God of Arms, to warn of his lack of scholarship. So he returned to the capital from Mino Province and seriously studied. He mastered 'when the enemy hides in the field, wild geese fly over in disarray, when the crescent moon is reflected on the water, fish suspect it is a fishhook.' Yoriyoshi then embarked on the expedition again. Sadatō had commanded his men to lie in the field so that his troops could shoot arrows at Yoriyoshi, who was approaching the area leisurely. Yoriyoshi didn't know Sadatō's plan, but when he was looking out on the field, he saw the wild geese flying on their way in disarray.

"Yoriyoshi said, 'In the Han dynasty, there was a general named Pang Juan. When he was going to attack his neighboring country, he said, "Sun Bin is in that country. He is good at tactics. As we can't hide our departure, Sun Bin will surely hide his soldiers on that mountain within three days and will attack us from there. We should cross the mountain tonight and reach the plain." So Pang Juan left for the mountain.

"'In the meantime, the king of that country summoned Sun Bin for his advice. Sun Bin said, "The commander-in-general of our enemy must be Pang Juan. I know what Pang is thinking. He must be thinking, 'The time of our departure will be known to this country. According to Sun Bing's plan their soldiers must be deployed in the mountains within three days and would shoot us. We will cross the mountain tonight and reach the plain.' Sun Bin continued, 'If Pang Juan's fierce army goes to the plain with the mountain at its back, it would become a huge battle. Quickly send your bowmen to the deep valley of that mountain to ambush them. Have some soldiers strip the bark from a large tree and write on the trunk in large letters, "Under this tree Pang Juan will die." Pang Juan will be suspicious of the letters and try to look at them with a light, then the bowmen should shoot him.'

"Hearing this, the soldiers were ordered to do as Sun Bin had advised. They went to the mountain and were prepared to shoot. Unaware of this, Pang Juan came to the area in the dark and saw suspicious writing on a trunk. As he struck a light to see, 'Under this tree Pang Juan will die' appeared. While Pang Juan was wondering who could have written this, thousands of arrows like rain shot him dead. Thus, Sun Bin was victorious.[40]

"When Yoriyoshi looked at the wild geese flying in disarray, he thought to himself, 'Just like Pang Juan, the enemy must be hiding his soldiers in the field to kill me.' He then had his men hunt for the enemy soldiers in the field, and indeed many bowmen were hiding as he suspected. Yoriyoshi beat the enemy and thus escaped from the danger. Literary and military arts are the two wheels of one carriage. One won't do without the other."

"Question: For scholarship, what books should one read?"

"Answer: First of all, read the *Xiao Jing* (Book of Filial Piety) to be devoted to your parents.[41] A loyal servant is said to come from a filial family, and an unfilial servant is overlooked by the superior. After that, study the *Sushu wujing* (Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism),[42] and learn righteousness and morality. Then memorize the *Wujing qishu* (Seven Military Classics),[43] and revere the arts of war and ceremonial rites. Further, memorize the Chinese poems composed by Su Dongpo [1037–1101] and Huang Tingjian [or Huang Shangu, 1045–1105], the verses of Three Forms of Tang Poetry, and rules of poetry.[44] Then at a party compose a verse or two of Chinese poetry or linked verse. Also study the Three Imperial Anthologies, *The Tale of Genji*, and *Tales of Ise* to use them for reference in composing your poems and linked verses. Do not idle away your day."

"Question: What books are the Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism?"

"Answer: The Four Books are *Lun yu* (Analects), *Men zi* (Mencius), *Da xue* (Great Learning), and *Zhōng yōng* (Doctrine of the Mean), and the Five Classics are *Shi jing* (Classic of Poetry), *Shu jing* (Book of Documents), *Li ji* (Book of Rites), *Yi jing* (Book of Changes), and *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals). Confucius said to his son, 'If you don't study the odes, you won't know how to speak properly. . . . If you don't study the rites, you won't have any base to stand on.'[45] Here, the rites means *Li ji*; odes means the *Shi jing*. Also, when Confucius was forty-five years old, he said, 'Give me a few more years, and if I can study the *Yi jing* at the age of fifty, I can avoid any great error.'[46] Therefore, even though you master scholarship, don't study *Yi jing* while you are young."

"Question: What are the Seven Military Classics?"

"Answer: They are *Liutao* (Six Secret Teachings), *Sanlue* (Three Strategies), Wuzi (*Wu zi*), the *Sunzi* (Art of War), *Weiliaozi* (*Wei liao zi*), the *Sima fa* (Methods of the Sima), and *Weigong Wendui* (Duke Li of Wei Answering Emperor Taizong of Tang)."

"Question: What are Three Imperial Anthologies?"

"Answer: They are *Kokinshū* (A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern), *Gosenshū* (Later Collection of Japanese Poems), and *Shūishū* (A Collection of Rescued Japanese Poetry). If, however, you study only literary art, you will become tedious. You have to be good at jumping, quick work, heavy labor, and wild horse riding; you have to be able to draw a strong bow, run through the mountains with a hawk, and swim with cormorants. Without swimming skills, even though a warrior may master all the martial arts, he will not be able to earn the name of mighty warrior."

. . . [*Truncated.*]

"Question: Tendai, Hossō, Shingon, Kegon, and Sanron are difficult to learn late in one's life.[47] So I would like to recite *nenbutsu*.[48] What do you think?" "Answer: Among Amida's Forty-Eight Vows, it says, 'May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, any among the throng of living beings in the ten regions of the universe should single-mindedly desire to be reborn in my land, and if they should bring to mind this aspiration ten times and yet not gain rebirth there.'[49] In *Amidakyō* (the Sutra of Amida Buddha),[50] however, it says, 'Keep it [*nenbutsu*] in mind single-mindedly and without distraction, be it for one day, or for two, three, four, five, six, or for seven days.'[51]

"Take this single-mindedness without distraction to your heart and apply yourself to daily routine. Even though you drink saké and eat meat and five pungent roots,[52] if you pray for Amida Buddha, you will see the land of bliss, and you will meet Amida Buddha."

"Question: What was the *Hokke-shū* in those days?" "Answer: In those days there was a high priest named Nichiren.[53] Having mastered the essence of the Tendai teachings and examined the complete Buddhist scriptures several times, he realized that there was no attainment of buddhahood outside the One Vehicle of Lotus and founded his sect. He taught there was only One Vehicle in the ten directions of Buddha fields—not two or three vehicles.

"In early Buddhist scriptures it says that even if a roasted seed is reborn twice, *shōmon* (*sravaka*) of two vehicles will not be able to attain buddhahood.[54] Only with the arrival of the *Lotus Sutra*, if one listens to the *Lotus Sutra*, one is sure to be reborn in the paradise. Only with this sutra, Devadatta with five deadly sins and the eight-year-old Dragon King's daughter could attain buddhahood."[55]

. . . [*Truncated.*]

Hiromochi asked: "I understand that using a hawk is not a sin. Why is that?"

"Answer: The Grand Deity of Suwa (*Suwa no daimyōjin*) composed a verse, 'Deep in karma, sentient beings: though set free, they cannot live. Yet dwelling within humanity, they likewise obtain the fruit of the Buddha,'[56] and he thus devoted himself to fishing and hunting, saving the living beings. It would be a sin to disobey his wishes."

"Question: Regarding the knot called 'bird's head,' the way to tie a string to a prey bag for falconry,[57] what kind of bird is it?"

"Answer: It is a crow. The prey bag is shaped to resemble Mt. Sumeru (*Shumisen*).[58] [The other knot is called 'rabbit's head.'] A rabbit represents the sun, and a crow represents the moon. Deerskin is used for the lining of the bag. As a deer has star-like dots on it, altogether it represents three lights—the sun, moon, and stars. Next, when sealing a letter, one makes the top short and the bottom long. That is also to represent the sun and the moon. Regarding the length of a character, one makes the sun short and the moon long."

"Question: The lengths of the nocks are also different. Do these also represent the sun and moon?"

"Answer: Correct."

"Question: Regarding writing, it is reasonable to put the sun—yang—above and the moon—yin—below. But why do you put the moon above in the case of a bow?" "As this country is called 'the sun's root,' the sun appears as the 'root nock,' one says. In martial arts, however, I understand that to place yin above is the absolute secret of secrets. I am a nun, a female, so how do I know such a thing? A monk named Taira no Fujinaga may know it. Visit him and ask."

"Question: How is it that a crow and rabbit represent the sun and moon?"

"Answer: It is believed that a three-legged crow lives in the sun, and a white rabbit in the moon."

"Question: The prey bag for falconry has the three lights. But there is no mention of stars in calligraphy or archery. Why is it?"

"Answer: Writing is written in nine passages. It is the shape of nine stars. Look at the imperial rescripts from the ancient time. As there were many things to write, details are written on the back, but on the front sheet there are nine large passages. In archery as well, the grip is wrapped by deerskin nine times, representing nine stars."

"Question: As the upper nock represents yin, should one lay the bow on the archery stand with the root nock facing south [and the front of the bow facing north]?"

"Answer: No, that should not be so. Because the character 'north' has a rendering of 'run away,' no martial equipment should be facing north."

"Question: How should one lay the martial equipment between east and west?"

"Answer: According to the Ogasawara family, the arms are laid facing east. Such families as the Chiba, Miura, Kamakura, and Koyama say that soldiers who belong to the Commander in Chief of the Eastern Expedition (*Tōsei shogun*) should put the equipment facing east, while the followers of the Commander in Chief of the Defense of the North (*Chinshufu shogun*) should place them facing west."

"Question: The Commander in Chief of the Barbarian-Subduing Force (*Seii shogun*) means the present shogun. Who is the Commander in Chief of Dazaifu?" "Answer: It was discontinued in modern times. You should know all the offices and ranks. Take a look at *Shokugenshō* (Sources for Offices and Ranks)."[59]

"Question: Why is the end part of a bow called the 'bird-shooting'?" "Answer: After subduing the eastern barbarians, Prince Yamato Takeru passed away at Atsuta in Owari Province.[60] His spirit became a white bird and flew away westward, when a minister of that time shot down [. . .][61] with the end of his bow. The white bird descended on the town called Shiratori (White Bird) in Ōuchi country, Sanuki Province; Tsuruuchi Shrine was built on the spot.[62] A shrine was built in Atsuta, and the *Kusanagi no tsurugi* (Grass-Cutting Sword) is enshrined there as an object of worship[63]; this is the Yatsurugi daimyōjin (Great Deity of Eight-Sword Shrine)."[64]

Hirotō, "Question: What kind of appearance is a 'half-attired' (*han-shōzoku*) warrior?" "Answer: A warrior with full equipment is a man with headgear with a headband, wearing court robes, shin guards over cloth wrapped around shins, gauntlets, and equipment protecting the right side of the wearer; he puts on armor and a sword, holds a long sword, and carries a quiver with arrows over his shoulder. A man [. . .] as mentioned above without wearing armor but having both swords and a quiver with arrows is called a half-attired warrior."

"Question: How is the appearance of a warrior with 'six equipments' (*rokugu*)?"

"Answer: A warrior with gauntlets, shin guards, armor, helmet, sword, and long sword."

"Question: What about a warrior with 'seven weapons' (*shichimono*)?"

"Answer: A warrior with an ax, broadax, rake, scythe, baton, lance, and staff."

"Question: What does it mean by equipped with the skills of 'three archery styles' (*mitsumono*)?"

"Answer: They are *kachiyumi* (walking archery), *kasagake* (equestrian archery [literally 'hat shooting']), and *inuoumono* (shooting dogs on a horseback). Excellent archers in our country are Tachibana no Moroe [684–757], Fujiwara no Hidesato [tenth century], Minamoto no Yoshiie [1039–1106], and Minamoto no Yorimasa [1104–80]. Perhaps even Yi and Yang Youji [?–?] of China won't surpass these people.[65] Lord Moroe shot through the iron shield imported from Korea."

"Question: What is 'walking archery in front of a shrine'?"

"Answer: That is the foundation of walking archery."

"Question: When performing the walking archery in front of a shrine, how do you insert a skewer into the mound?"

"Answer: The front group turns around left, and the back group turns around right. Take [. . .] from the bottom, and [. . .] from the top. [. . .] the arrow from [. . .], and insert it on the mound."

"Question: Is *yabusame* also used for Shinto rituals?"[66]

"Answer: When Empress Jingū was attacking Korea, she thought to show Japan's miraculous power to the Mongols and had three targets put on the ocean. The Grand Deity of Suwa hastened to come on horseback as if running on land, making white-crested waves. The Deity shot the three targets with the whistling arrows. Looking at this, Mongols were frightened [. . .]. This is the beginning of *yabusame*. That is the reason why *yabusame* is written as 'flowing, whistling arrow' in Chinese characters.

"The target holder of this occasion was a small dragon from the capital named Kara. Kara held a square target board on top of a lance. That lance still exists in the Suwa Shrine."

"Then, a sword named *hoshigiri* (star-cutter) was presented, and various deities watched the event at the horse-riding ground. When Minamoto no Yoritomo [1147–99][67] [. . .], he had *yabusame* perform at Tsurugaoka Hachimangū. Because the event was important, the Miura family and the Kamakura family from Sagami Province served the role of archers.[68] The target holder was a samurai from Musashi Province. Therefore, the words 'Masters from Sagami' and 'Men of Musashi' have been used to refer to these people."

"Question: When did *kasagake* begin?"[69]

"Answer: A women's conical hat was hung across the street from the government office in a post town on the Kamakura route. When a young master on his way to Kamakura was passing through, a courtesan came out and said, flirting, 'Why don't you shoot the hat.' Whereupon he took a whistling arrow and shot it. That is also said to be the origin of *kasagake*."

"Question: What is '*kokasagake*' [literally, small *kasagake*]?"[70]

"Answer: This must have been around the same time. There was an unparalleled handsome man on the east of Ōsaka Barrier named Ogasawara Jirō. He was passing through the same place to go to Kamakura, and just like before, a courtesan came out to entice him to shoot the conical hat. Jirō shot down the hat. [. . .] to see him one more time, the woman said, 'Well, my traveling lord, shooting a hat is not that hard. Why don't you try this?' She picked up a thin square tray and placed it at the edge of a verandah for the target. Jirō looked at it, and this time took a small whistling arrow from his servant. He then shot the tray, which broke in half. This must be the beginning."

"Question: When did *inuoumono* begin?" "When the incomparably beautiful woman named Tamamo no mae turned into a fox and fled to a field in Nasuno District of Shimotsuke Province, the deputy governor of Sagami Province and lieutenant governor of Kazusa Province were commanded to subjugate the fox.[71] Upon receiving the imperial order, both warriors practiced killing the fox by shooting dogs, because they thought foxes and dogs were similar, and finally the mission was accomplished. This must be the beginning of *inuoumono*.[72]

"After that the shogun considered *inuoumono* interesting as a warrior's pastime and for entertaining guests. During the entertainment, there often was discussion on the arrows for the *inuoumono*. So the shogun ordered them to make rules, and accordingly the magistrates and legal directors discussed the matter. The official scriber recorded the discussion and created the document to be issued under the shogun's name. The record was presented to the shogun to be copied one by one. These copies were given to the shogun's favored people. I heard that the original writing was later entrusted to the Ogasawara family."

. . . [*Truncated.*]

Hirotō, "Question: Are there any guidelines when you have a meal?" "Answer: There is nothing more important than eating in front of people. When there is a dish using vinegar, eat it after you have three bites from other dishes. Do not eat dishes dressed with mustard, wasabi, etc. The same applies to radishes. Do not eat radishes seasoned in vinegar, *konnyaku* [konjac or Devil's Tongue], garlic, leeks, etc., either. Further, do not eat food cooked with oil and Japanese pepper. Make sure not to chew fish and chicken bones. Do not slurp stock. Sometimes fish comes with ample stock; eat the fish before you drink the stock. Young people's way of drinking soup is especially ugly.

"Hiromochi, mind you, do not eat all at once in one mouthful. If someone respectable asks you a question, you should be able to respond while you have something in your mouth. Do not speak while chewing your food. You should not decline an offer of another helping indiscriminately. You may accept a refilling of rice many times.

"Recently cooked rice is placed on a wooden tray. You should never pour soup into a small container with rice in it. When the rice is very hot, it is unsightly to put the rice on the lid of the bowl, especially when young people do it. Also, you should eat all the cooked rice grains at the bottom of a wooden rice tub. Taira no Masakado [d. 940] discarded grains of boiled rice left at the bottom of a rice tub, and his luck was gone from there.[73] It is said that various regulations settle into 'eating.'"[74]

The nun then told them to go home. So the three presented silk, cotton, coins, etc., that they happened to carry with them to the nun and left. The father and son of the Master Ceremonial left for Izumi Province, and Kinhiro hurried to Tanba [. . .]. He went through Funaokayama, Murasakino, Nagasaka, and reached Take no Shrine that worships Ono no Tōfū [894–967], one of the three great calligraphers. Although worshipping a great calligrapher is a reverse fate in that badgers' fur is used for calligraphy brushes, he went to visit in hope of a good result.

On that occasion, Kinhiro heard someone coming in his direction. He wondered who it was and looked, and he recognized the person as Fudeo Yuinaga, a skillful calligraphy brushmaker famous in the capital. Kinhiro got off his horse and was going to bow, when the man ran up to Kinhiro and started to rip off his fur. "What is it!? I have already presented furs for your brushes this year so please [. . .]." Kinhiro begged Yuinaga to stop, but the man simply would not listen. "If you continue to do that, what am I going to be?" Kinhiro asked. The man replied, "Just become an ingredient for soup."[75]

Kono sōshi / tanuki ga koto wa / kakitaredo / usage no yō ni / o mo nakari keri[76]

This story / was written about / raccoon dogs / but like rabbits / there is no tail [embarrassing]

The eleventh day of the first month of Bunmei [1480] Ihō rōjin

The above story was created by Ishii, the former Imperial Treasury Office Assistant Yasunaga, named Ihō after entering the priesthood.

This story was orally transmitted by Kasai Saburō Saemon no jō Ki no Motohide. Someone asked for this story to be written down, and hence I copied this story.

Early part of the first month of Eishō 14 [1517].

Sogō Rokurō Minamoto Yoshishige

NOTES

1. This is an auspicious expression written at the beginning of First Calligraphy of the Year writings.

2. Present-day Kyōkita-machi, Kita-Kuwata District of Kyoto Prefecture. Formerly there was a village called Tanuki, homonym of raccoon dogs (*tanuki*), at the edge of Yuge. Sawai considers that the author of the tale played on words in choosing this location for the raccoon dogs (Sawai 2014, 136). Tanba Province is composed of the areas of central Kyoto, the northeastern part of Hyōgo Prefecture, and the northern part of Osaka Prefecture.

3. The hour of the tiger is between three and five o'clock in the morning.

4. This phrase is taken from the verse composed by Taishang yinzhe, perhaps a recluse, titled "Daren" ("Response to a Person") from *Tang shixuan* (or *Tōshisen* in Japanese, Selected Poems from the Tang Dynasty). For the Chinese and Japanese texts, see Mekada 1964, 654.

5. "*Hashi gassen*" ("The Battle on the Bridge") in *Heike monogatari* (SNKBZ 45, 315–21); for an English translation, see Tyler 2012, 226–33.

6. Izumi Province corresponds to the southwestern part of Osaka Prefecture. Kena is located in the city of Sakai, Osaka Prefecture.

7. This is Mt. Nijō, stretching over the city of Katsuragi of Nara Prefecture and Minami Kawachi District of Osaka Prefecture.

8. The poem, written by Middle Counselor Fujiwara no Asatada (910–966), is included in *Shūishū* or *Shūi waka shū*. For the Japanese text, see *Shūi waka shū* SNKBT 7, 6. The translation of this poem is by Donald M. Richardson (2002, 1:4).

9. Saké brewed at Amano is dry, even though the sound of the place name Amano (*amai* means sweet) suggests it is sweet. *Akagai* literally means red-shell. In the text, *akagai* is used as a play on words of "red face," *akagao*. Sumiyoshi god is a god of war; hence it is "victorious" (*katsu*) and plays on words with *katsuo*, bonito. Shrimp is *ebi*. It plays on words with *Ebisu* Shrine.

10. Come (*koi*) is homonym of carp (*koi*). Crucian carp is *funa*.

11. Sakai is located between Izumi Province and Settsu Province, the area of the northern and central part of Osaka Prefecture and the southeastern part of Hyōgo Prefecture. Sakai also plays on words on a homonym of *sakai*, meaning a border. Abeno, Suminoe, and Ten'ōji are important transportation points between Izumi and Settsu Provinces. Before the modern period, Amagasaki was part of Settsu Province.

12. Koya in Koyanoike is homonym of *koya*, a cottage, hence, it goes with lodging.

13. Inano is the area from present-day Itami in Hyōgo Prefecture through the city of Amagasaki. It was famous for bamboo grasses. Ninchōji Temple is located in the present-day city of Ibaraki, Osaka Prefecture. The place name Waraiji literally means "laughing road."

14. *Ōeyama / Ikuno no michi no / tōkereba*. Hirotō is citing part of a poem composed by Koshikibu no Naishi (999–1025), which appears in number 550 of *Kin'yōshū* or *Kin'yō waka shū* (The Golden Leaf Anthology of Japanese Poetry). The poem is translated by Donald M. Richardson (1996, 151). For the Japanese text, see *Kin'yō waka shū* in SNKBT 9, 157.

15. It means, "Amida (Amitabha) Minor."

16. *Tanuki* are believed to beat on their full bellies and enjoy themselves on a moonlit night.

17. The poem, written by an anonymous poet, appears as number 18 of the first section of Spring of *Kokinshū* or *Kokin waka shū* (A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern, 905). For the Japanese text, see *Kokin waka shū*, SNKBT 5, 24. The translation is by Helen Craig McCullough (McCullough 1985, 17).

18. "*Nakano*" in the phrase "*imada nakano narikeri*" (still not around) is a word play on the place name, Nagano.

19. Ono ridge is an area between present-day Kyōkita-machi and Kita-ku of the city of Kyoto.

20. Both are located in present-day Ukyō-ku in the city of Kyoto. Narutaki literally means a thunderous waterfall. There was a small waterfall in a place called Narutaki.

21. Narabigaoka consists of three hills located in present-day Omuro, Ukyō-ku in the city of Kyoto. Mt. Kinugasa is a place famed in poetry, located between present-day Ukyō-ku and Kita-ku, also in the city of Kyoto. Hirano Shrine is in the woods located in Kita-ku.

22. It is an area located in present-day Kita-ku in the city of Kyoto.

23. It enshrines the spirit of Sugawara no Michizane (845–903), a famous scholar-statesman who was framed and demoted and died in despair. He became a powerful vengeful spirit and was deified. The shrine is located between present-day Kita-ku and Kamigyō-ku in the city of Kyoto.

24. Wakasa Province is the present-day southern part of Fukui Prefecture.

25. Ōmine Temple was a training ground for mountain ascetics. The temple site remains in present-day Ōmine zushi-machi, Kamigyō-ku, the city of Kyoto.

26. Obama is in the present-day city of Obama, Fukui Prefecture.

27. The horse is the seventh of the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac. A festival is held at Inari Shrines on the first horse day of the second month, commemorating the descent of the enshrined deity to Mt. Inari (in present-day Fushimi-ku in the city of Kyoto) on day of the horse in 711. Cypress is a sacred tree of Inari Shrine.

28. He is referring to Nakahara no Munetoki's (?–?) poem: *Umega ka o / sakura no hana ni / niowasete / yanagi ga eda ni / sakasete shi gana* (A fragrance of plum blossoms / let it put on / the cherry blossoms / and let them flower on [wavy] willow branches / that would be most wonderful). It appears as number 82 in *Goshūi wakashū* (Later Collection of Gleanings of Japanese Poems). For the Japanese text, see *Goshūi wakashū*, SNKBT 8, 35.

29. Vaisravana (J. Bishamonten) is a guardian god of Buddhism. He is also one of the Four Heavenly Guardians and one of the Seven Fortune Deities (*shichifukujin*) in Japan. Srimahadevi (J. Kisshōten) is a goddess of happiness, beauty, and wealth. In Buddhism, she is considered Vaisravana's wife or younger sister. She is also one of the Seven Fortune Deities in Japan.

30. It refers to the Kumano region of present-day Wakayama Prefecture—a mountainous area famous for the three Kumano shrines—Kumano Hongū Taisha, Kumano Hayatama Taisha, and Kumano Nachi Taisha. In the Heian period (794–1185), with the propagation of Pure Land Buddhism, the Kumano shrines became popularly identified with the Pure Land sect. From the Buddhist viewpoint, the shrines were known as Kumano Sansho Gongen, the manifestation of Amida Buddha and other buddhas and bodhisattvas. Kumano was a major center for Shugendō (Japanese mountain asceticism), and during the medieval period *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics), Kumano *bikuni* (nuns from Kumano), and wandering monks spread the cult of Kumano Sansha or Kumano Gongen.

31. The temple is Saihōji Temple (later Kōkokuji Temple). It is located in present-day Yurachō, Hidaka-gun, Wakayama Prefecture. The founder is Shinchi Kakushin (1207–98).

32. This is the first verse of a poem in *Kokinshū* 522. Translation by Helen Craig McCullough (McCullough 1985, 120). The whole poem goes, *yuku mizu ni / kazu kaku yori mo / hakanaki wa / omowanu hito o / omou narikeri* (Less profitable / than writing on the waters / of a flowing stream— / such is the futility / of unrequited passion). For the Japanese poem see *Kokin waka shū*, SNKBT 5, 166.

33. Stone from Mt. Jakuōji of Tanba Province was famous for inkstone material.

34. The Ise Grand Shrines consist of a number of shrines in the compounds located in the present-day city of Ise, Mie Prefecture. The official main shrines are Naikū (Inner Shrine) or Kōtai jingū and Gekū (Outer Shrine) or Toyouke daijingū.

35. The present-day town of Uji in the city of Ise, Mie Prefecture. It is a temple (shrine) town.

36. The present-day town of Yamada in the city of Ise, Mie Prefecture. It is a temple (shrine) town.

37. This statement appears in the "Confucius" chapter of *Records of the Historian* by Sima Qian. For the Chinese and English texts, see Sima Qian 2001, 146–53. For a Japanese text, see Shibasen 1969, 175–77.

38. Yoriyoshi is Minamoto no Yoriyoshi (998–1075). Sadatō is Abe no Sadatō (1019–62), and Munetō is Abe no Munetō (1132–1208). This refers to the Early Nine Years War (1051–63) fought at the far north of *honshū* (the main island) of Japan.

39. Mino Province is the southern area of Gifu Prefecture.

40. This is a story from *Record of the Historian* written by Sima Qian. For Chinese and English texts, see Sima 2001, 148–53; for a Japanese text, see Shibasen 1969, 175–77.

41. It is one of the Confucian classics giving advice on filial piety.

42. They are the foundation of Confucianism and were the basis for the civil examination in Imperial China, and thus considered canonical.

43. They are seven canonical military treatises of China.

44. *Three Forms of Tang Poetry* is an anthology of Chinese poetry of the Tang dynasty compiled by Zhou Bi around 1250.

45. Translation by Burton Watson. See Confucius 2007, 117–18. For the Chinese and Japanese texts, see Hiraoka 1980, 475–76. This passage appears in chapter 16.

46. My translation. For the Chinese and Japanese texts, see Hiraoka 1980, 192–93. This passage appears in chapter 7. There was a superstition that one would encounter misfortune if one learned the *Book of Changes* before the age of fifty.

47. Tendai is a descendant of the Tiantai or Lotus Sutra school of China. *Lotus of the Wonderful Law* is the basic scripture. It originated among monks living at the base of the Tiantai Mountain in Zhejiang Province and was formed around the monk Zhiyi's (538–97) interpretation of the *Lotus Sutra.* The founder of the Japanese Tendai sect is Saichō (or Dengyō Daishi, d. 822), who built Enryakuji Temple on Mt. Hiei in Kyoto. The Hossō (Ch. Faxiang) sect in Japan is one of the Six Schools of Buddhism of the Nara period (710–94); two famous temples, Kōfukuji Temple and Yakushiji Temple in Nara, are those of the Hossō school. The Shingon (Ch. Zhenyan) sect in Japan was founded by Kūkai or Kōbō Daishi (774–835), who built the Kongōbuji Temple on Mt. Kōya in Wakayama Prefecture. The Kegon (Ch. Huayan) sect was founded in China by Fazang (643–712), also known as Xianshou. It is one of the Six Schools of Buddhism of the Nara period. Jizang (549–623) led the elaboration and systemization of the Sanlun (J. Sanron) in China, but the school declined after the ninth century. It is one of the Six Schools of Buddhism in Japan.

48. It is a prayer to Amida Buddha (Amitabha), the principal buddha in the Pure Land, Land of Bliss, or Western Paradise.

49. This is the famous Eighteenth Vow that Amida made when the buddha was a bodhisattva named Dharmakara. It appears in *The Longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra*. My English translation is based upon Luis Gómez's translation of the Eighteenth Vow (see Gómez 1996, 167).

50. It is also known as *The Shorter Sukhavativyuha Sutra.*

51. The translation is by Luis Gómez (1996, 148).

52. *Goshin* are spring onion, scallion, garlic, onion, and leek.

53. Nichiren (1222–82), the founder of the Hokke sect.

54. Literally *shōmon* means a hearer of the Buddha's voice, and originally it meant a buddha's disciple. In Mahayana Buddhism, it refers to a Buddhist who seeks enlightenment for himself but not for others.

55. Devadatta is a Buddhist monk who was hostile to Shakyamuni Buddha. He is purported to be Shakyamuni Buddha's cousin and Ananda's elder brother. Five deadly sins are: 1. patricide, 2. matricide, 3. killing an arhat, 4. wounding a Buddha, and 5. creating dissension in the Buddhist communities. These sins are so grave that if one commits any one, one immediately goes to hell. Devadatta committed three (3, 4, and 5) out of the five deadly sins. The story of the eight-year-old Dragon King's daughter appears in the Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*. The Dragon King's daughter desired enlightenment when she heard Bodhisattva Manjushri's sermon on the *Lotus Sutra.* When Manjushri says that she is capable of attaining buddhahood quickly, another bodhisattva challenges him. The dragon girl then appears in front of the assembly and transforms herself into a male and attains buddhahood instantly.

56. The translation is by Tamara Solomon (Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 193; see Tamara Solomon's translation of the *otogizōshi Suwa no honji* [The Origins of the Suwa Deity] in Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 174–93). The verse *Gōjin no ujō / hanatsu to iedomo ikizu / yue ni jinshin ni yadorite / onajiku bukka o shōse yo*, issued from Suwa Shrine, works like a spell that allows eating of meat. The Grand Deity of Suwa is a god of warriors as well as fishermen and farmers. The shrine is located along the Late Suwa of Nagano Prefecture.

57. It is called *ebukuro* or *efugo*, a bag-like instrument generally made from bamboo.

58. This is the highest and central mountain in the world of Buddhist cosmology.

59. This was written by Kitabatake Chikafusa (1293–1354) in 1340 for the young Emperor Go-Murakami (r. 1339–68).

60. It refers to the western area of Aichi Prefecture.

61. There is a lacuna in the original text.

62. Sanuki Province corresponds to present-day Kagawa Prefecture. Currently Tsuruuchi Shrine is called Shirotori jinja (White Bird Shrine). It is located in Matsubara, Higashi-Kagawa-shi, Kagawa Prefecture.

63. The sword is one of the three imperial regalia of Japan.

64. Yatsurugi daimyōjin is enshrined in Hakkengū (Eight-Sword Shrine), which is an associated shrine of the Atsuta Shrine and is located within Atsuta Shrine's compound.

65. Yi, also known as Houyi, is a master-archer mythological figure. Youji is a master archer of the Spring and Autumn period of China (770–403 BCE).

66. *Yabusame* is horseback archery to shoot a whistling arrow on a square target board.

67. The founder and the first shogun of the Kamakura shogunate.

68. The Miura is a prominent warrior family during the Heian and early Kamakura period in Miura peninsula of Sagami Province, which corresponds to most of present-day Kanagawa Prefecture. The Kamakura is a prominent warrior family during the Heian and early Kamakura period in Kamakura District of Sagami Province.

69. In contrast to *yabusame*, the types of targets in *kasagake* vary.

70. A type of *kasagake*. While a horse is running, a mounted archer shoots an arrow at a four-inch square board target.

71. Shimotsuke Province is recent Tochigi Prefecture, and Kazusa Province corresponds to the present-day central part of Chiba Prefecture.

72. The story that attributes the origin of *inuoimono* to the subjugation by the deputy governors appears in such works as the Noh play *Sesshōseki* (*Killing Stone*) and the *otogizōshi* titled *Tamamonomae* (*Lady Tamamo*). The story goes as follows: One day a mysterious young woman of peerless beauty and intelligence appears in the palace of Retired Emperor Toba (1103–56). The retired emperor falls in love with this woman, who is named Tamamonomae. The retired emperor then becomes seriously ill. A diviner attributes the retired emperor's illness to Tamamonomae, whose real identity is an eight-hundred-year-old fox with two tails (or golden-furred fox with nine tails). The fox had earlier thrown India into disorder, as it had disguised itself as the malicious consort Taji and asked for the head of the king; in China, the fox had become the wicked consort Huayang. In the end, Tamamonomae was killed and turned into a stone. The stone then killed the living creatures that came near it by emitting a toxic gas from within. See Laura Nüffer's translation of the *otogizōshi Tamamo no mae* in Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 348–70.

73. Masakado had his base in eastern Japan. He rebelled against the court in 939, calling himself the New Emperor, and he controlled the major Kanto Provinces. He was killed by the imperial forces led by Taira no Sadamori (tenth century) and Fujiwara no Hidesato (from the ninth to tenth centuries). Masakado's story is told in the *otogizōshi Tawara Tōda monogatari.* See Keller Kimbrough's translation of the *otogizōshi Tawara Tōda monogatari* (The Tale of Tawara Tōda) in Kimbrough and Shirane 2018, 72–99.

74. *Kū* means "eat" but is also the homonym of "emptiness" (*kū*).

75. Fudeo Yuinaga's reply, "Just become *an ingredient of soup* (*oshiru no* *mi*)" is word play in the form of a pun on Kinhiro's question "am I" (*kono* *mi*). In essence, Fuedo Yuinaga's reply suggests in an intellectual or humorous way, "If you [Fudeo, a brushmaker] continue to do that [pluck away at my fur], what *am I* [Kinhiro] going to be?"

76. *Omo nashi* (without a tail) is synonym of *omo nashi* (embarrassing).

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Basketry among Two Peoples of Northern Guangxi, China

In this article, the authors introduce the present-day basketry practices found among two minority nationalities populations living today on the northern borders of China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region: the Baiku Yao of Lihu Yao Ethnic Township in Nandan County and the Dong of Tongle Miao Ethnic Township in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County. The manufacture, marketing, and use of varied basketry forms is discussed for each of these groups, setting up a concluding comparison that situates these basketry practices in relation to more celebrated textile arts heralded within the People's Republic of China's extensive system of intangible cultural heritage promotion.

Keywords: Baskets—crafts—intangible cultural heritage—China—Dong—Yao

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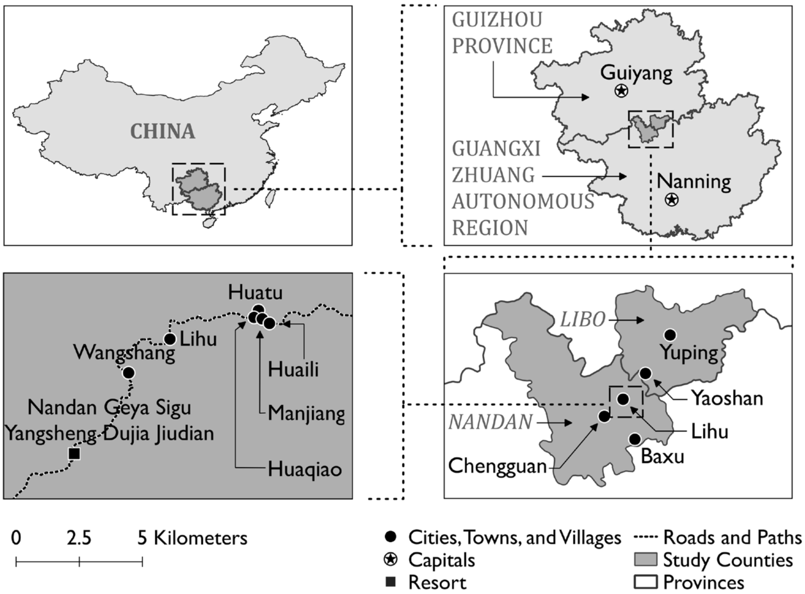
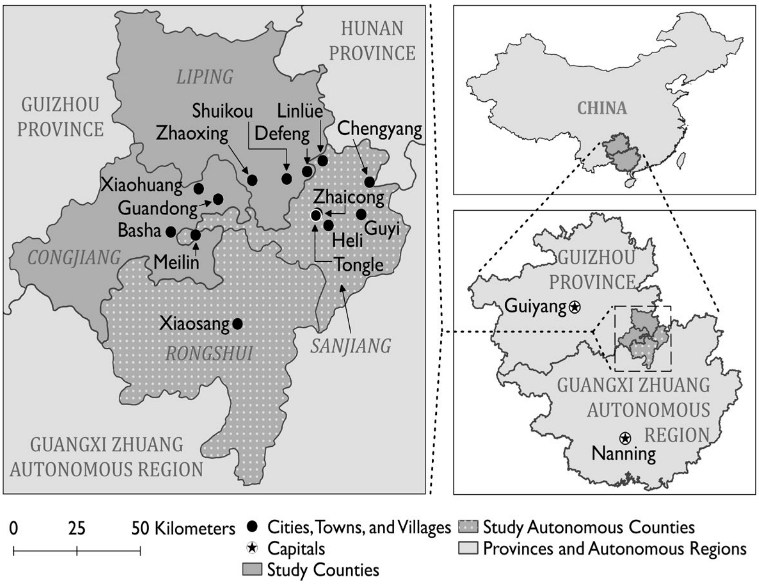
"My elder brother loves me. He made all kinds of baskets for me."—He Jinxiu

In this article we introduce bamboo basketry as found among two peoples of northern Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Visited between 2016 and 2018 as part of a larger project concerned with the intersection of textile arts and intangible cultural heritage practices and policies among minority nationalities living in upland regions of Southwest China, we report here on basketry practices observed and documented in two different locales in Guangxi, both close to the autonomous region's border with Guizhou province (maps 1 and 2). We first consider aspects of the larger phenomenon among the Baiku Yao of Nandan County. After introducing basketry there, we present a comparable account of basketry among the southern Dong living about 190 km to the northeast in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County. In both instances, we work through three key stages within the life cycle of objects—making, circulating, and using (Glassie 1999, 41–86; Shukla 2008, 386–87). These two case studies provide evidence to underpin a comparison, which we take up in a final concluding section. There we will situate these basketry practices in relationship to more celebrated textile arts heralded within the People's Republic of China's extensive intangible cultural heritage system.[1]

Our studies of basketry in Southwest China derive from our participation within a larger program of binational cooperation and collaborative research led by the American Folklore Society and the China Folklore Society. That larger initiative began in 2007, and in 2013 a sub-project linking Chinese and US ethnographic museums and museum-oriented scholars was initiated (Dewhurst and Lloyd 2019; Jackson 2019; Lloyd 2017; MacDowell and Zhang 2016; Zhang and Song 2017). Various funding agencies have supported this larger program of work, with the Henry Luce Foundation providing keystone support crucial to the larger effort and to the securing of additional grant and in-kind resources. This research report arises from this museum sub-project, specifically its second phase (2017–2021). During this period, fieldwork in Guangxi was hosted and led by the Guangxi Museum of Nationalities (aka Anthropology Museum of Guangxi). Research team participants were drawn from the staffs of the host institution as well as from the Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao Ecomuseum, the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, the Michigan State University Museum, the Museum of International Folk Art, and the Sanjiang Dong Ecomuseum.[2]


CHINA
GUIZHOU PROVINCE
Guiyang
GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION
Nanning
Huatu
Lihu
Wangshang
Nandan Geya Sigu
Yangsheng Dujia Jiudian
Huaili
Manjiang
Huaqiao
LIBO
Yuping
Yaoshan
NANDAN
Lihu
Chengguan
Baxu
0
2.5
5 Kilometers
Cities, Towns, and Villages
Capitals
Resort
Roads and Paths
Study Counties
Provinces

Map 1. A map (lower right) of the Baiku Yao region in Nandan and Libo Counties and, at a more local scale (lower left), sites in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township discussed in this article. Map by J. Paul Blekking (Tanager Mapping and Consulting LLC).


HUNAN PROVINCE
LIPING
GUIZHOU PROVINCE
Shuikou
Linlüe
Zhaoxing
Defeng
Chengyang
Xiaohuang
Guandong
Basha
Meilin
CONGJIANG
Zhaicong
Heli
Guyi
Tongle
Xiaosang
RONGSHUI
SANJIANG
GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION
CHINA
GUIZHOU PROVINCE
Guiyang
GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION
Nanning
0
25
50 Kilometers
Cities, Towns, and Villages
Capitals
Study Counties
Study Autonomous Counties
Provinces and Autonomous Regions

Map 2. A map (left) picturing Southern Dong and Miao communities visited by the research team, including Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County locations discussed in this article. Map by J. Paul Blekking (Tanager Mapping and Consulting LLC).

The important place of basketry in the lives of people living in rural areas in China's Southwest would be hard for any visitor to the region to miss. Baskets—mostly made of bamboo—take a very large number of forms, and these are put to a vast range of uses. While baskets can play a key role in domestic activities such as preparing oil tea (*youcha*) for a family's breakfast or even in profound and private rituals, it only requires driving past rice fields being worked or through rural towns filled with busy laborers to see baskets being used to support a vast range of practical activities. Despite a growing range of industrial goods, including plastic basket surrogates and skeuomorphs, that flow into this region's rural markets, bamboo baskets remain crucial tools central to both everyday life as well as to special moments such as festivals, rituals, and life-cycle events such as weddings (Jackson and Zhang 2019). The region's baskets are a nexus for a large amount of both cultural knowledge and cultural activity. Beyond their crucial use in life sustaining and life enhancing labor, their central place in key social and spiritual activities suggests that they are a fundamental element in people's lives in this region, despite their sometimes taken-for-granted status.

Despite their ubiquity and importance in not only China's Southwest but throughout the country, the scholarly literature on Chinese basketry is much smaller than that found for other relevant parts of East and Southeast Asia, where cognate and related basketry practices are found. For Borneo (Indonesia, Malaysia) (Sellato 2012), Japan (Butcher 2015; Cort and Nakamura 1994; Marks 2012), Philippines (Capistrano-Baker 1998; Lane 1986; McKay and Perez 2018; Silvestre 2000), Thailand (Cohen 2000), and other relevant nations there are overview works, in-depth studies, and exhibition catalogues that offer knowledge of both vernacular and elite basketry forms and practices, even if these literatures are still lacking in ethnographic detail and social particularity. For China though, the literature (especially in English) is skewed in the direction of elite, antique, collectable forms most closely associated with urban settings, Han populations, and eastern regions (Fan 2017; Garner 1966; Kwan 2010; Laufer 1925; but cf. Cai 2012, 2015; Kuhn 1980; Liu 2015). In focusing ethnographically on work baskets and the work of those involved in making, selling, and using practical basketry in minority nationalities areas of Southwest China, the research effort closest to our own is that of ethnobotanists Luo Binsheng, Selena Ahmed, and Long Chunlin (Luo, Ahmed, and Long 2020). Their work has centered on basketry in Sansui County, Guizhou, a location that is home to Miao and northern Dong communities well known for basketry production (Geary et al. 2003, 147). In the absence of specialized ethnographic studies of vernacular basketry, it is necessary to turn to general ethnographic accounts for the region, in which basketry is sometimes addressed directly (Geary et al. 2003, 146–47; Ou 2007, 71) but more often is touched on incidentally throughout a work as an outgrowth of the topic's central presence in people's lives (see for example Mueggler 2001, 71, 84, 199, passim; Ma 2013, 38, 62, 68, passim). We aspire, in this article and in related works, to help illuminate this neglected topic. In doing so, we also hope to contribute to broader comparative efforts related to both basketry around the world and to heritage studies within folklore studies and ethnology.

The larger survey project from which our two Guangxi cases are derived has involved investigating craft practices (particularly textile ones) and cultural heritage policies among the Bai people of the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, northwestern Yunnan Province; Buyi (Buyei or Bouyei) people in Anshun Prefecture-Level City, southwestern Guizhou; Miao people in Liupanshui Prefecture-Level City, western Guizhou; Miao and Dong in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, southeast Guizhou; Dong people in Liuzhou Prefecture-Level City, Guangxi; and Yao and Zhuang in Hechi Prefecture-Level City, Guangxi. Here we focus specifically on the case of the Baiku Yao in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township in Nandan County and Dong from Tongle Miao Ethnic Township in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County—both in Guangxi—but we draw context from our wider travels across these two provinces and one autonomous region within Southwest China. Each of the communities that we and our research partners have visited can be characterized as densely, but not solely, populated by the minority nationalities noted here and by broadly similar cultural adaptations to life in upland areas within the geophysical and cultural region known as the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud, Barkataki-Ruscheweyh, and Swain 2016).[3]

In the case studies presented here and within the larger project from which they come, we have combined survey and preliminary ethnographic fieldwork with the building of systematic museum collections. Our framework for ethnographic material culture studies emphasizes attending to the three realms of human activity that Pravina Shukla has characterized as the "sequential contexts" of "creation, communication, and consumption" that reveal the life history of objects (2008, 386–87; Glassie 1999, 41–86). Such histories have the capacity to illuminate the lives of people who make, give, sell, buy, and use things. This approach within material culture–focused folklore studies and ethnology is paralleled by, and shares some features with, *chaîne opératoire* methods within archaeology and, increasingly, social and cultural anthropology (assessed in an ethnographic context by Coupaye 2009). It also parallels broader interests in material culture studies in object biographies and in the social life of things more broadly (Hoskins 2006).

Basketry among the Baiku Yao

The Baiku Yao are one of many branches of the larger Yao nationality, one of China's fifty-six officially recognized nationalities or ethnic groups (Harrell 2001; Mullaney 2010). The majority of Yao people live in the borderlands of Southwest China and Northern Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand (Litzinger 2000; Pourret 2002). In Mandarin Chinese, *Baiku* literally means white trousers, and the Baiku Yao people are thus named for the white knickerbocker-style pants worn by Baiku Yao men, both historically and today. The Baiku Yao population is comprised of about forty-five thousand individuals, with the majority living in Nandan County in Guangxi (in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township and Baxu Yao Ethnic Township) and Libo County in Guizhou (in Yaoshan Yao Ethnic Township). The Baiku Yao townships are thus located in northwest Guangxi and an adjacent part of southern Guizhou. The Baiku Yao community where we, and our project collaborators, have undertaken ethnographic work is Huaili village within Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. Huaili is an administrative village, which also includes several additional nearby natural villages. This village cluster is home to the Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao Ecomuseum, one of the institutional partners for our work there (Gong 2016; Mo 2015; Nitzky 2012, 2014, 2020; Zhang 2018). The Baiku Yao endonym is Dounou, and the language of the community is a dialect of Bunu (Bu-Nao), within the Hmongic branch of the Hmong-Mien (Miao-Yao) language family (Ethnologue 2020a). The most complete ethnographic account of the Baiku Yao in English can be found in William Nitzky's dissertation (2014). Key work by Chinese scholars include studies by Liao (2006) and Yu (1987, 1989). The Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao Ecomuseum staff, who are themselves Baiku Yao, have an active program of documentary work focusing on ethnographic video. Especially relevant to this project is Lu Chaoming's 2014 film *Zhu Yi* (Bamboo Arts), which documents the making of a distinctive type of bamboo basket and a bamboo musical instrument (Lu 2014; cf. Kay 2018, 2019).

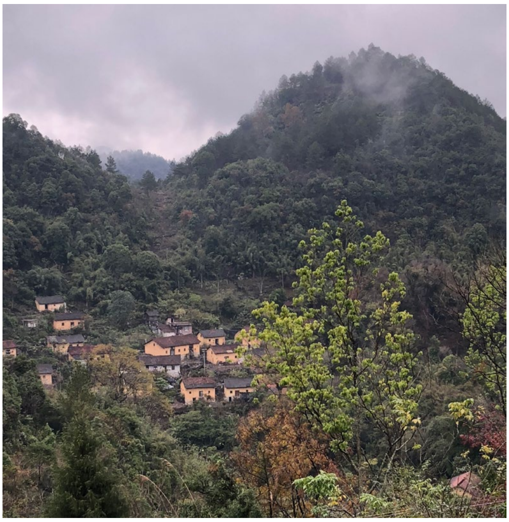


Figure 1. Huatu, one of the Baiku Yao natural villages associated with Hauili administrative village, in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. The persistence of an older Baiku Yao vernacular house type and granary type in Huaqiao, Huatu, and Manjiang villages led to the placement of the Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao Ecomuseum here (Nitzky 2014, 109–10). Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, December 14, 2017.

Figure 2. Agricultural fields in the territory of Hauili within Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. Photograph by Jon Kay, December 16, 2017.

Hauili and its affiliated villages are located in mountainous territory (figures 1–2). Suitable soil and water are in short supply, and residents often walk considerable distances to their agricultural fields. In recent years, the county government has been investing in the development of environmental and cultural heritage tourism activities, drawing on local Baiku Yao and Zhuang culture as a major resource. However, so far, the community has only received a relatively small number of tourists, even though the Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao Ecomuseum was founded there in 2004 and other heritage tourism institutions, including a Baiku Yao-themed resort, have been established (Bu 2019; *China Daily* 2016; Nitzky 2014).

It is in this context that we have studied the status of Baiku Yao basket making, sale, and use. In the remainder of this section, we will recount the place of baskets in farming, household life, textile production, and ritual. Beyond issues of use, we will also address the making and marketing of such baskets in the Baiku Yao communities centered in and around Lihu township. Featuring three community members with whom we consulted in greater depth, this section of the article will evoke some of the personal and community knowledge that the research team has learned from basket users, makers, and sellers.

While in many other parts of China and the world hand-made baskets have passed out of daily use and been transformed into heritage objects, Baiku Yao people are still living and working with many kinds of hand-made bamboo baskets (Jackson and Zhang 2019). However, in Huaili (natural) village there is only one fulltime basket maker. On our first day visiting local people, our Nandan Lihu Baiku Yao Ecomuseum colleagues introduced us to this basket maker, Li Guicai. Mr. Li is in his sixties and lives with his wife, his son, and his daughter-in-law. His father passed away when he was only forty-five days old, and his mother brought him up alone. He learned making baskets by observing other basket makers when he was a teenager, with the goal of financially helping his family (figure 3).

Mr. Li started with making carrying baskets and sold them—at that time—for 4 RMB (US$0.60 in present day US dollars) a pair. He then learned to make the baskets

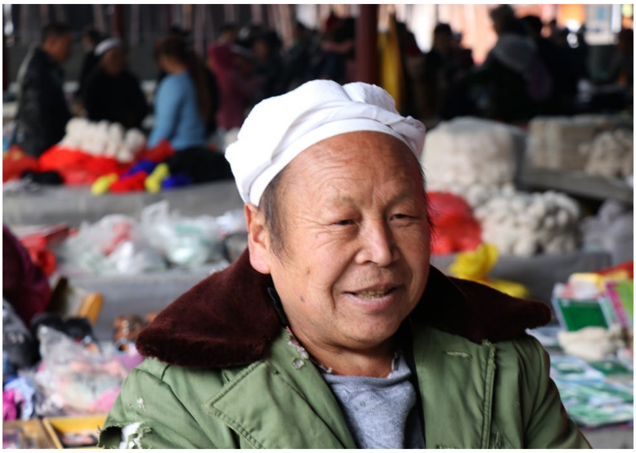


Figure 3. Basket maker Li Guicai photographed during the weekly market in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. Photograph by Jon Kay, December 16, 2017.

that are used by Baiku Yao textile makers to press pleats into new skirts (figure 4). Even after he could make baskets in simpler forms, it still took him three to four years of practice to fully master the skill of making the rice baskets (*zhufanhe*) that are today his signature form (figure 5). Even though making baskets is a source of income for his family, he also makes rice baskets as gifts for relatives and friends who need them for ritual purposes. In Baiku Yao funerals, people hang this type of rice basket, containing sticky (glutinous) rice, on the top of a bamboo pole and place these

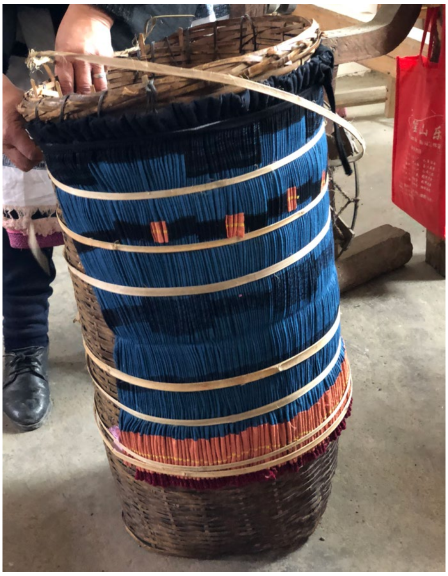


Figure 4. Textile artist He Jinxiu begins unwrapping a new skirt in Baiku Yao style from a pleating basket. While not made by Li Guicai, Ms. He's basket is of a type that Mr. Li learned to make early in his basket-making career. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, December 17, 2017.

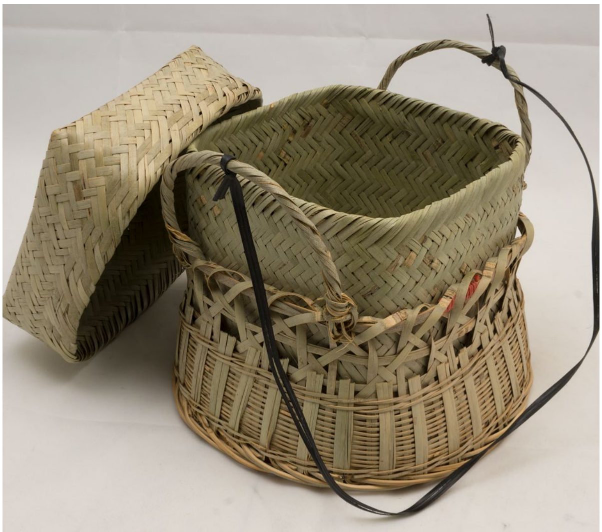


Figure 5. A new rice basket in Baiku Yao style made by Li Guicai on December 14–15, 2017. The basket pictured is the focus of a documentary video by Jon Kay (2019) and of figures 6–7. 27 x 27 x 22.5 cm. IUMAA accession number 2017-11-0001. Photograph courtesy of the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Mathers Ethnographic Collections.

in front of tombs. Rice baskets are also used to carry sticky rice and other culturally important foods as a gift sent between the households of a groom and bride. In everyday contexts, they can be used as a kind of lunchbox for someone spending the day in their fields. In addition to providing a source of financial support for his family, making such baskets is a way for Mr. Li to connect to community members and maintain relationships with them.

Mr. Li used to work as a migrant worker, cutting sugarcane for people who live on the lower, more fertile lands in the region. He used to only make baskets during the non-farming seasons, but eight years earlier he started to be a full-time basket maker, because health challenges prevented him from being a migrant worker or doing farm work at home. Although Mr. Li is capable of making different kinds of baskets, he now focuses on the complex and locally valued rice baskets. Compared to other kinds of baskets in local use, these rice baskets are in high demand in the local Baiku Yao market, as they cannot be imported from other places. This reflects a wider trend within the region in which widely used types are often made by specialist villages outside a locality and imported, while highly valued, locally specific types continue to be produced locally, for local use. Baskets used in ritualized gift exchange, special ceremonies, and festivals are often candidates for such local production.

As we learned over two days spent with Mr. Li, this rice storage basket is not a simple type. As a culturally important basket, the type that Mr. Li makes has an elaborate form. It is double woven, meaning that the basket itself is comprised of two layers, with the smooth, shiny, durable outer face of the bamboo splints facing both outward on the outer layer and inward on the inner layer. It consists of a simpler, more everyday cube-shaped basket, comprising a deeper bottom section and a shallower lid. The added base is practical, because it holds the basket off the ground, which is important as they are often used in muddy farm environments, but the special base and wrapper is also highly decorative.[4]

On our first day with him, Mr. Li started his basket and carried it through to the completion of the base and matching double-woven lid (figure 6). With his bamboo already on hand, this effort took a very full workday in which he only took one extremely quick stretch break, rising from the low stool on which he worked. On our second day watching, photographing, and videorecording him, Mr. Li continued his work, completing the basket's decorative-but-functional base, wrapper, and handles over the course of the morning (figure 7). The basket that Mr. Li allowed us to watch him produce from start to finish was purchased for the collections of the former Mathers Museum of World Cultures for 200 RMB (US$30). That basket is now a part of the collections of the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. An additional basket of this type by Mr. Li was collected for the Michigan State University Museum. A documentary video showing Mr. Li's work in making the basket discussed here has been produced by research team member Jon Kay (2019). Reducing a day and a half of work (and video footage) to fifteen minutes, that film provides rich evidence of how Baiku Yao bamboo basket making works, including the tools and processes used.

As a full-time basket maker, Mr. Li can make five to six rice baskets per month. He sells them to fellow villagers or takes them to the Lihu township market on market

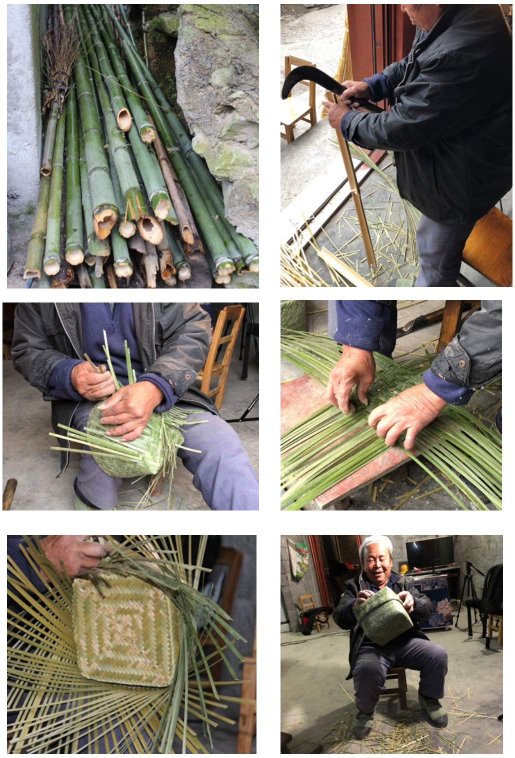


Figure 6. Moments from about ten hours of basket weaving by Li Guicai on December 14, 2017. During his first day working on the rice basket, he completed the double-woven basket and lid, resulting in a cube-shaped basket that is sometimes used in this simpler form.
Photographs by Jason Baird Jackson and Lijun Zhang.

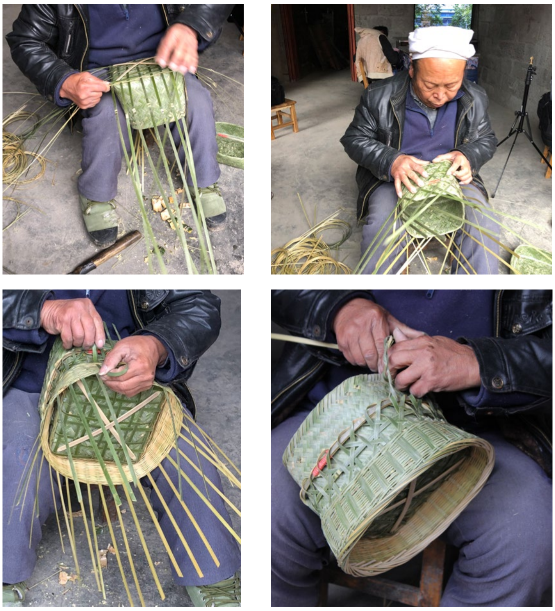


Figure 7. Moments from day two of basket weaving by Li Guicai on December 15, 2017. These images evoke the making of the base, wrapper, and double bail handles for the Baiku Yao–style rice basket.
Photographs by Jason Baird Jackson.

days to sell. Tourists would only very occasionally buy such rice baskets. By the time of our visit in December 2017, Mr. Li had only ever sold four or five baskets to non-local tourists across his whole career of basket making. His discussion and demonstration with our team was his first documentary experience related to his work, and he has not previously participated in any cultural heritage initiatives related to his basketry.

Our days spent with Mr. Li were followed by a hike—along with many of the region's village residents—to Lihu Yao Ethnic Township for its periodic market day. There we met the market's primary Baiku Yao basket merchant, a younger Mr. Li named Li Guozhong. Li Guozhong comes from a basket-making family and is himself a welder and an innovative maker of looms and other weaving tools, but as relates to our topic he is a buyer of wholesale bamboo work baskets and a retail seller of the same to his Zhuang and Yao neighbors from the villages around Lihu (figure 8). He invented a metal version of the otherwise wooden Yao loom—a sign that he is not opposed to technical innovations—but he was clear and practical in response to our queries about the rise of imitation (skeuomorph) baskets of molded plastic (figure 9). He acknowledged that such industrial goods are usually cheaper but noted that price is not the end of it. He observed that his customers prefer to pay a bit more for bamboo baskets because they hold up better over time when the inexpensive plastic ones do not. Much work with baskets in rural Southwest China takes place outdoors. Under such conditions, plastic quickly becomes brittle and breaks, while bamboo is more durable. His customers come to him not out of a vague loyalty to the old way,

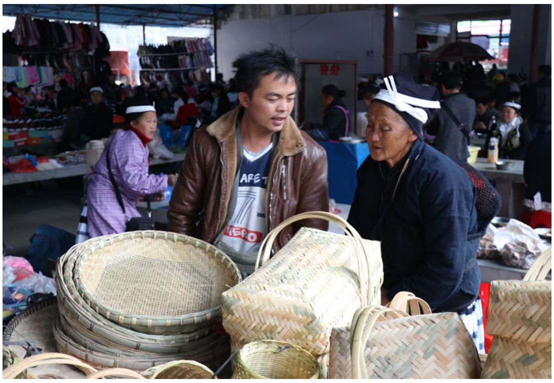


Figure 8. Baiku Yao basket merchant Li Guozhong consults with a potential customer in his stall at the Lihu Yao Ethnic Township marketplace. Photograph by Jon Kay, December 16, 2017.

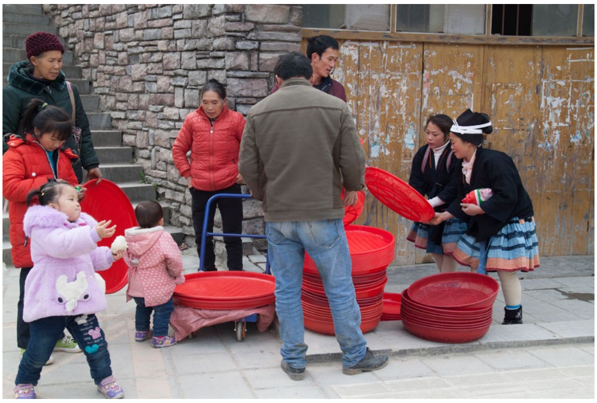


Figure 9. Molded plastic trays and sifters that imitate widespread Chinese basketry forms being sold on market day in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. Photograph by Carrie Hertz, December 16, 2017.

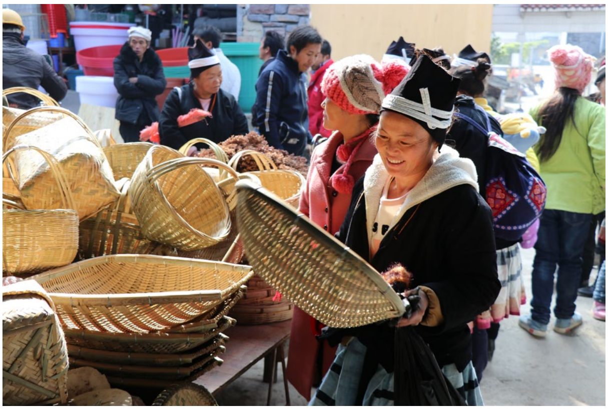


Figure 10. Potential customers visit Li Guozhong's basketry stall at the Lihu Yao Ethnic Township market. Photograph by Jon Kay, December 16, 2017.

but because his baskets last longer than the plastic imitations that can be found elsewhere in the Lihu market.

Our team documented fifteen basket forms for sale in his market stall, purchasing fifteen baskets across fourteen of the fifteen types (figure 10).[5] While some of his baskets came from local sources, most were obtained from wholesalers across the provincial border in more remote parts of Guizhou. As we learned during our later trip to Liping County in the summer of 2019, there are a large number of full-time basket makers who produce baskets in neighboring Guizhou. There, certain villages are known for specializing in making particular basket forms. Mr. Li's business gathering baskets on a regional basis and selling them to his Lihu township neighbors connects them within a larger regional basketry trade network.

Of the fifteen basket types that Mr. Li had on offer in December 2017, some are widely used and easily found across the entire region. Of this sort are low trays (*zhubian*) that are used in a wide range of applications, from drying produce and

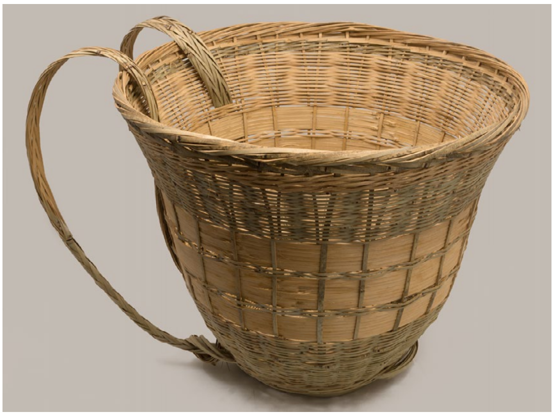


Figure 11. A backpack basket in the style preferred by the Baiku Yao in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. Purchased from Li Guozhong on December 16, 2017. 75.5 x 55.5 x 48 cm. IUMAA accession number 2017-11-0015. Photograph courtesy of the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Mathers Ethnographic Collections.

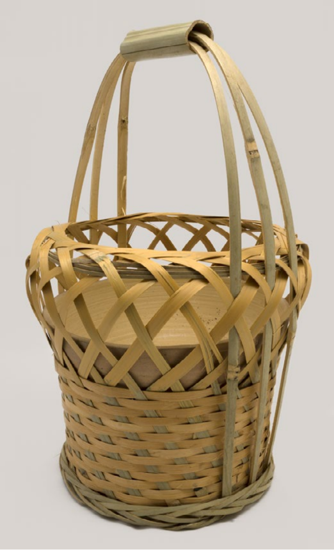


Figure 12. A brazier or coal-carrying basket of a type used among the Baiku Yao in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. Fashioned of bamboo, the bucket-shaped basket holds a pottery vessel, making it suitable for carrying hot coals or warming a space with them. Purchased from Li Guozhong on December 16, 2019. 41 x 25 x 24.5 cm. IUMAA Accession number 2017-11-0017. Photograph courtesy of the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Mathers Ethnographic Collections.

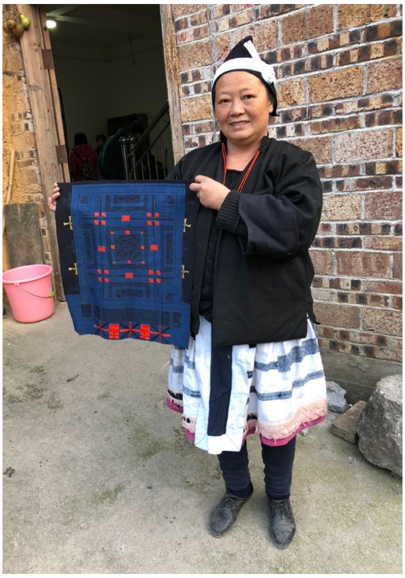


Figure 13. Textile artist He Jinxiu displays an indigo dyed and embroidered blouse panel outside her home in Huaili village. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, December 17, 2017.

fanning grain to displaying retail goods within shops. Others are more localized, such as the distinctive form of backpack basket (*beilou*) preferred by the Baiku Yao and a local type of handled coal brazier basket (*huolong*) that contains a ceramic bowl for use in carrying, and keeping warm with, hot coals (figures 11–12).

In addition to considering the making and circulation of baskets, inventorying baskets within households and using such inventories for related interviews in which we discussed each of the baskets identified in the household surveys helped us gain a better understanding of the basket forms gathered and curated by Baiku Yao families and the ways that they are used within the life of the Baiku Yao community. As an instance from this part of our investigation, we focus here on the baskets found in the household of He Jinxiu. Ms. He is a highly regarded textile artist in her fifties. She is the chair of the Huaili Village Women's Federation (*fulian*) and is actively involved in the village leadership work. She was also a key collaborator in the work of our larger research group, part of whom focused attention not on basketry but on fabric arts such as indigo dyeing, embroidery, weaving, and the making of clothing and other textile works. Ms. He is an expert in all of these disciplines (figure 13).

Ms. He lives with her husband and her five-year-old granddaughter in a two-story home in Huaili. We documented sixty-seven baskets in her household. There are baskets for carrying crops from the field, for hauling vegetables back from the garden, for drying the harvested crops, and for storing them. There are also baskets

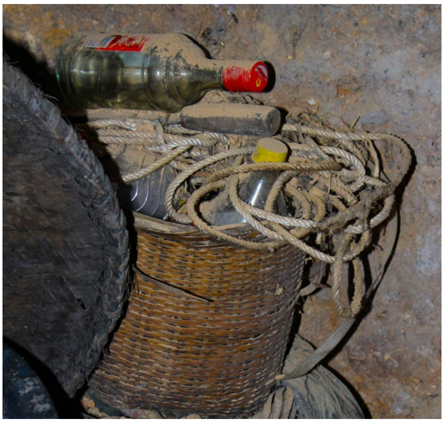


Figure 14. A cotton harvesting basket found in the kitchen of Ms. He's home. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, December 17, 2017.

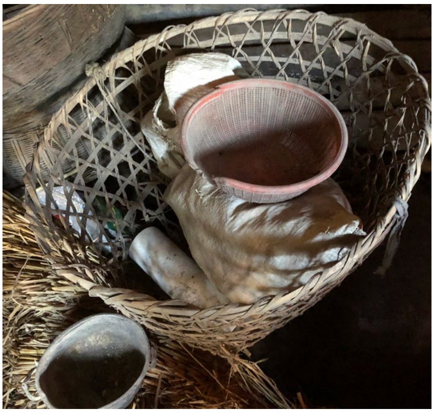


Figure 15. A tobacco-carrying basket found in Ms. He's storage shed. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, December 17, 2017.

for holding weavers' shuttles and for covering pots of indigo dye. In general, Ms. He's baskets can be categorized into farming baskets, baskets for daily household use, baskets associated with textile arts, and ritual baskets.

On the refrigerator in Ms. He's living room hung the kind of iconic Baiku Yao rice basket that the older Mr. Li makes. Now such rice baskets are less commonly used for taking food to the rice field, especially among the younger generation, as motorcycles have made commutes to the rice fields faster and more convenient. Particularly valued by, and essential to, Ms. He in her work is a basket in the shape of a conical tube used for pressing pleats into skirts. Ms. He proudly said that the basket was made by her husband in the year that her thirty-three-year-old daughter was born. Now not many people have this kind of basket in the village, and many neighbors come to borrow it from her. This skirt-pleating basket is one of the types that the older Mr. Li—Ms. He's neighbor—learned to fashion at the start of his basketry career (figure 4).

Among the baskets that Ms. He has stored in her kitchen is a round basket that we picture in figure 14. Ms. He attaches the ropes through the basket and hangs it on her waist when she picks cotton during August and September (lunar calendar). When we visited her in December 2017, she explained that she had not grown cotton that year as she was too busy with village leadership tasks relating to local work on an ongoing poverty alleviation campaign.

In the storage shed in front of Ms. He's house, we found a very big tobacco basket. Ms. He's family put tobacco leaves in this basket and walked thirty-five minutes to carry them from the tobacco field to the tobacco flue-curing house. The villagers around Huaili have been encouraged to grow agricultural cash crops such as tobacco and chestnuts so as to generate additional income for their families (figure 15).

In the same storage shed, we also saw a big drying basket (figure 16). Among the Baiku Yao, such a basket can be used on rainy days. People put charcoal under the basket to continue the drying of rice and cotton harvested from the field. Ms. He noted that the basket was made by her husband's grandfather, and that it has been within her family for more than half a century. Although her family no longer use it for this original function, they still want to keep it as long as they can.

A kitchen made of rammed earth at the back of her brick house is where Ms. He cooks food and produces indigo dye. It is also a private, sacred space with religious items in basket form. Because of their deep cultural importance and the traditional beliefs associated with them, it is a taboo to touch some of the indigo dye and ritual baskets curated and used in this core space of the household. Three round-shaped baskets attached to the wall of the kitchen are ritual baskets that represent her godchildren. The two on the left are for her two godsons and the one on the right is for her goddaughter.[6] The baskets were sent to her from her godchildren's families, and a bowl of water is placed in the baskets in accord with Baiku Yao custom. A basket in the shape of a bowl that is hung on the kitchen wall is also for ritual purposes. If a family's livestock animal is sick and has to be killed, the family must get such a basket and place it on the kitchen wall before killing the animal. At a corner of the kitchen is an item that looks like a small rake or harrow. It is another form of ritual bamboo object. It is for blessing Ms. He's granddaughter's health and safety. It is used on children from the age of three months to five years and must be made by the child's uncles on the mother's side. The important lesson that Ms. He graciously shared with us in allowing us to see and learn a bit about such bamboo basketry objects is that while baskets are crucial to the practical everyday lives of working people—helping them undertake a myriad of types of labor—they are also crucial to the spiritual lives of the Baiku Yao people. This is a point that can be observed through close study of ethnographic works from the region (for example Formoso 2013, 88–89; Mueggler 2001, passim) but that has not, to our knowledge, been stated directly in the English-language literature.

The vast majority of the baskets in Ms. He's household are made of bamboo; but, as in other parts of the world, industrially manufactured basket surrogates from materials such as plastic have—despite the younger Mr. Li's sound observations on the topic—appeared in Baiku Yao people's households. In figure 17 is shown two of the five plastic "baskets" found in Ms. He's home. These are the only two plastic

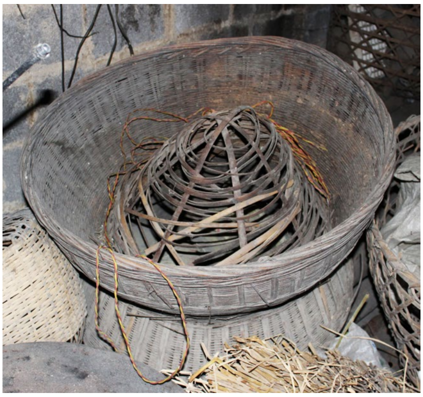


Figure 16. A crop-drying basket kept in Ms. He's storage shed. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, December 17, 2017.

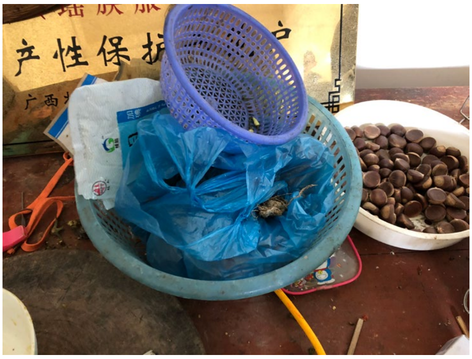


Figure 17. Large and small plastic "baskets" used by Ms. He and her granddaughter for gathering chestnuts, chilis, and other produce. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, December 17, 2017.

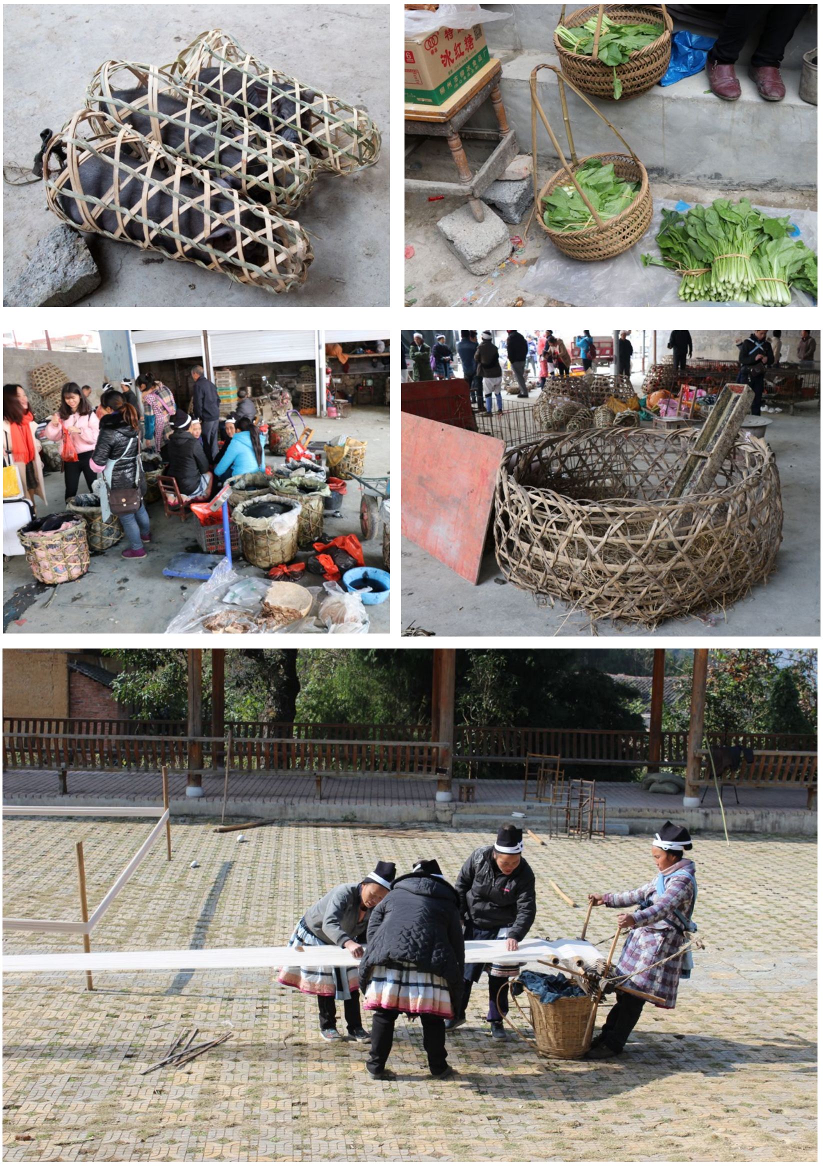


Figure 18. Baskets in use among the Baiku Yao in Nandan County. Clockwise: marketing pigs, marketing vegetables, a basketry corral, using a backpack basket as a support while preparing a loom, and marketing indigo. Photographs by Carrie Hertz, Jon Kay, and Jason Baird Jackson, December 16–17, 2017.

examples used outdoors. She bought them in the Lihu township market and uses them to pick chestnuts with her granddaughter.

From these three knowledgeable consultants—Ms. He, Mr. Li, and Mr. Li—and from others with whom we spoke in Huali and Manjiang villages and in Lihu township, we learned of the vital importance of baskets in the daily life of the Baiku Yao people (figure 18). In addition to the forms, styles, and functions of baskets, we also learned some of the stories behind the baskets and how these people connect to their family, community, and the local ecological environment through baskets while confronting

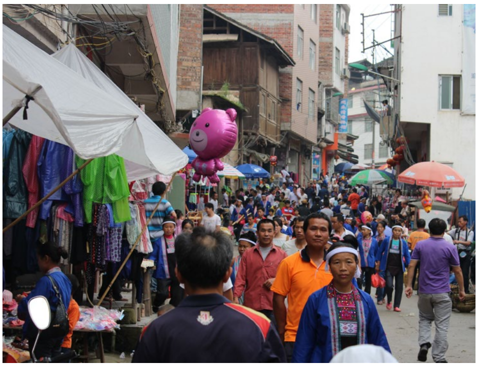


Figure 19. The streets of Tongle Miao Ethnic Township are crowded with vendors, shoppers, and other participants during the Dong Respect the Water Buffalo Festival. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, May 13, 2016.

often hard economic realities with sometimes difficult, but very knowledge-dependent, labor. This observation also holds for the Dong people of Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, to whom we turn next, but there are also differences between the two communities that a comparison can help reveal.

Basketry among the Southern Dong of Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County

Known officially within the enumeration of recognized Chinese nationalities as Dong, the people so named refer to themselves with the endonym Kam (Geary et al. 2003, 3). The Dong people residing in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, in northern Guangxi, speak one of two varieties of the southern dialect of Kam (Geary et al. 2003, 33–35). The Kam (Dong) language is part of the Kam-Sui language family, which is itself a part of the larger Kam-Tai family (Ethnologue 2020b). While we have pursued studies of basketry in Dong villages in neighboring Congjiang and Liping Counties in Guizhou, we limit our account here to our experiences and to the situation in Sanjiang. There we interviewed and collected baskets from basket merchants in the county seat and undertook more focused research in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township and one of its associated natural villages, Zhaicong. It is important to note that the southern Dong and the Dong people as a whole (northern and southern, combined) constitute a much larger and more geographically expansive population than do the Baiku Yao. The overall Dong population is estimated to be 2.88 million individuals spread across Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi, and Hubei (National Bureau of Statistics 2010). The overall population of Tongle Miao Ethnic Township was reported to be 47,102 in 2020. The township's breakdown by nationality, as reflected in county government data, is reported as: 46.7 percent Dong, 46.7 percent Miao, 6 percent Yao, 0.5 percent Han, and 0.02 percent Zhuang (Wu Lianghuan, pers. comm., 2021; Geary et al. 2003, 27–29).[7]

In Chinese administrative nomenclature, townships are rural towns that are administrative centers inclusive of outlying villages. Ethnic townships, such as Lihu Yao Ethnic Township in Nandan County, are ones associated with a predominant local nationality. Like Lihu, Tongle is an ethnic township. As its name suggests, it is associated with the area's Miao people, but as a town itself, Tongle is a hub for Dong cultural life (figure 19). General and village-specific ethnographies of the Dong that are applicable to the Dong situation in Sanjiang include works by Candice Cornet (2009), D. Norman Geary and his collaborators (2003), Catherine Ingram (2011) and Jiaping Wu (Ingram and Wu 2017), Fang Changgan (2019), Li Yajuan and her collaborators (Li, Turner, and Cui 2015; Li et al. 2020), Ou Chaoquan (2007), Ruan Xing (1996, 2007), Shi Kaizhong (2007), and Suvi Rautio (2019).

In evoking basketry in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County in the north of Guangxi, we can begin with a creator, Mr. Qin Fuyuying, a Dong basket maker in Zhaicong village, which is now virtually adjacent to the town of Tongle on its north side (figures 20–21). Like other area makers, he uses a preferred local species of green bamboo that he is able to gather himself from nearby hillsides.[8] In a pattern already observed among the Baiku Yao and discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the Dong people of Sanjiang use baskets that are alternatively made locally by craftspeople like Mr. Qin or by specialists working elsewhere in the region. For reasons related to variable economic conditions in the Guizhou-Guangxi borderlands, the most common work basket types used in Sanjiang county are imported from more remote basket-making communities across the mountains and the provincial border in Guizhou.

In the Guangxi communities where we have worked, locally made baskets exist in response to more specialized and less widespread needs. As was noted earlier in connection with the basket type that is Mr. Li's specialty, this is a pattern that we have found across Southwest China. If the full basketry repertoire is not made locally, then those baskets that *are* still made locally will often be marked as of special interest to local people and will figure in more specifically localized work practices or in local rituals. Mr. Qin makes bamboo work baskets in this regional and local context. His signature form is a locally valued basket worn at the waist by wading fishermen who use it as a creel (figures 21–22). This form is a variant of another local type used for

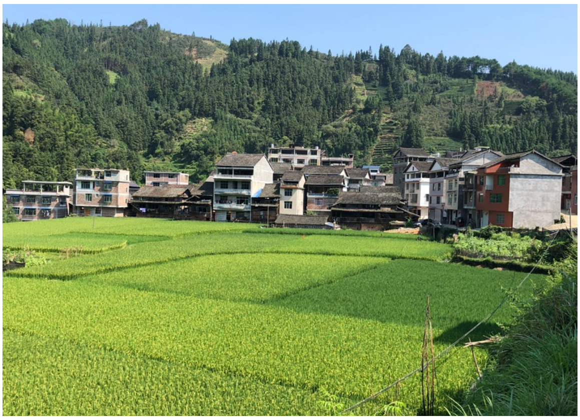


Figure 20. Tongle viewed across the rice paddies from Qin Fuyuying's home in Zhaicong village. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson July 18, 2018.

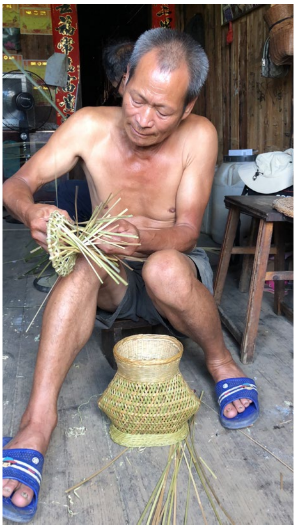


Figure 21. At his home in Zhaicong village in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township, basket maker Qin Fuyuying is pictured at work on a fish creel basket of a type used among the Dong people of Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, July 18, 2018.

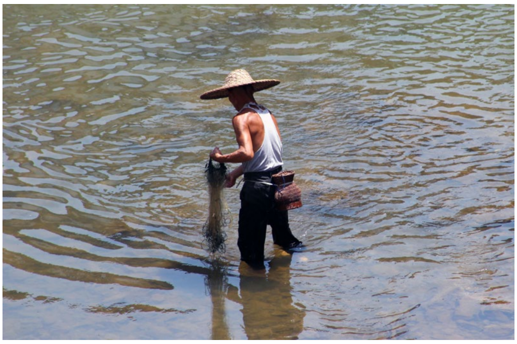


Figure 22. A Dong man in a basketry hat uses a cast net and a basketry creel to fish on the Miao River in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, July 19, 2018.

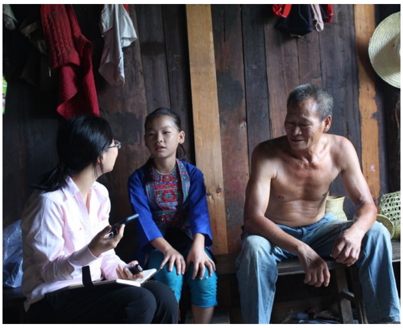


Figure 23. Qin Fuyuying's granddaughter Qin Yuntao works as a Kam-Mandarin translator during Lijun Zhang's interview with him, focused on his history as a basket maker and on the use of baskets in his household. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, July 19, 2018.

the harvesting of tea. Tea is now a key local cash crop that is grown widely by farmers in the Tongle area.

In his sixties, Mr. Qin has been making baskets for more than forty years. When he was a teenager, he worked at a small hydroelectric station near his village. There he met a basket maker who taught him the craft, and Mr. Qin is now generally regarded as one of the best basket makers in his village. We were pleased that our partners at the Sanjiang Dong Ecomuseum arranged for us to meet him and his family in July 2018. They hosted us for an interview (figure 23), allowed us to video document his basket making, and sold us examples of his work for the museum collection that we have been developing as a part of our basketry research. In addition, like Ms. He in Hauli, Mr. Qin and his family very generously permitted us to undertake a basketry inventory within their home.

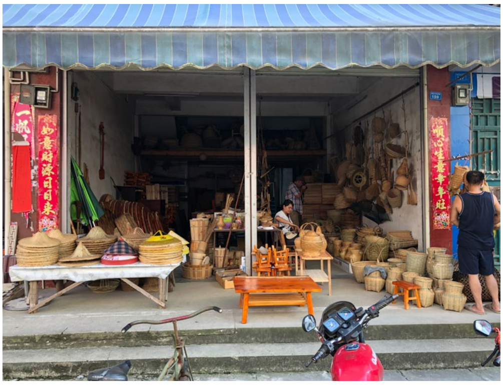


Figure 24. Su Chengchang (right) and his Guiyue Baskets and Wood Crafts shop in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, July 17, 2018.

Figure 25. Basket shop owner Su Chengchang at his shop in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, July 19, 2018.

Mr. Qin might make a bundle of baskets and offer them directly to buyers on a market day, but he regularly sells his wares to another of our interlocutors, Mr. Su Chengchang, the proprietor of Guiyue Baskets and Wood Crafts Store—the most prominent and impressive basketry shop in Tongle township (figures 24–25). As we noted earlier, retailers gather baskets from a wide region. This is because scores of different basket types are used locally, but today many fewer are made locally. With Mr. Su's help, we visited one of his source communities in Liping County, Guizhou during 2019. We thus now know a bit about the kinds of places where Mr. Su obtains his stock. These are Dong villages specializing in basketry production. Such villages supply a wide multiethnic region in the mountains of Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan.

When we documented his shop inventory in July of 2018, Mr. Su had forty-one different kinds of baskets on offer. Some are near-ubiquitous types used daily by rural people throughout the region. Examples of such commonplace baskets include scoops, trays, and colanders of various sizes. Iconic of the Dong farmer is the boot-shaped billhook carrier (figure 26).[9] In Mr. Su's shop, there are also basket types that he reports to be on the verge of obsolescence. For the museum collections that we have been building, for instance, we purchased a pair of peddler's baskets to be carried from remote village to remote village on a shoulder pole by a traveling salesperson offering small goods such as needles and candy (Ou 2007, 78) (figure 27). In our study region, such baskets are more likely to serve today as decorations in tourist-facing retail establishments. The general trend is one in which baskets in many forms remain essential to the work of rural life, but the incredible variety found in the past is diminishing in tandem with general processes of social and cultural change, including the development of new transportation infrastructures and the adoption of new household, farming, and industrial technologies.

Mr. Su was a cosmetic product salesman in Guizhou before he started his basketry selling career. He came back to his hometown to open the store that has enabled him to stay with his family while making a living by selling baskets. He has been a generous supporter of our studies and a proud participant in our museum collecting. In addition to discussing the origins and uses of each basketry type in his shop, Mr. Su helped us make a representative selection of baskets for the museum collection that we have assembled. Over two trips to Tongle, we have obtained fifteen baskets from his shop and fourteen from other sellers in the county, including Mr. Qin. These are in addition to fourteen Dong baskets that we have collected in Liping or Congjiang counties in Guizhou.[10]

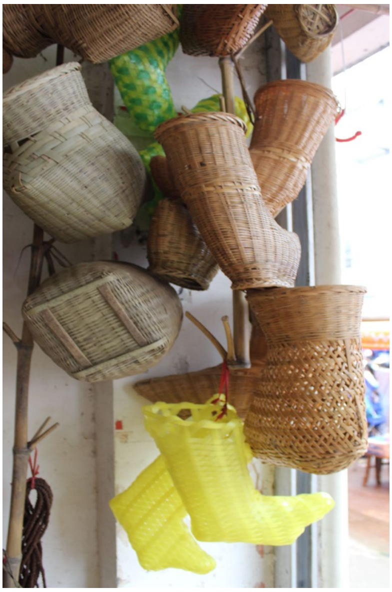


Figure 26. Billhook carrier baskets hang on display at the Guiyue Baskets and Wood Crafts shop in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township. Photograph by Jason Baird Jackson, May 13, 2016.

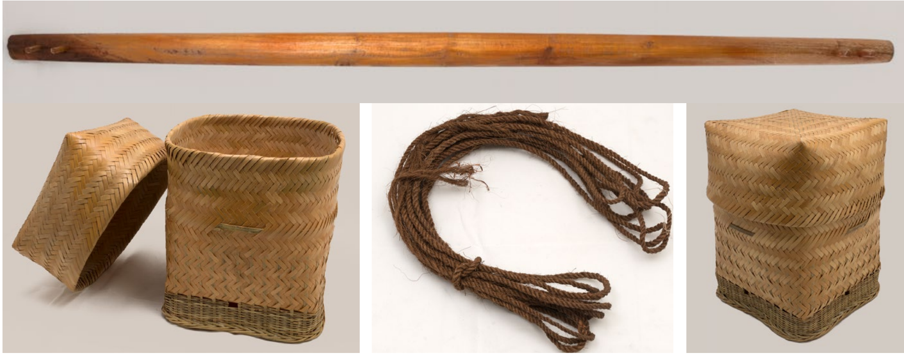


Figure 27. Comprising a set, a pair of peddler's baskets with a carrying pole and rope purchased in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township from Su Chengchang on July 17 and 19, 2018. Small, square openings at the base of the baskets can accommodate ropes used in creating a system for suspending the baskets from a shoulder pole. The pole pictured here is equipped with a pair of upright dowels near each end. These keep baskets suspended by rope harnesses in place on the pole. IUMAA accession numbers and measurements are: left basket 2018-07-10 (34 x 28 x 25.5 cm), right basket 2018-07-11 (34 x 28.5 x 25.5 cm), shoulder pole 2018-07-20 (121 x 5. X 3 cm), and rope 2018-07-21 (73.5 x 5 x 4 cm [bundled]). Photographs courtesy of the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Mathers Ethnographic Collections.

Outside of large towns like the Sanjiang county seat of Guyi, the main competition for a shop owner like Mr. Su is not other basketry shops but pop-up sales that occur during regular market days. His customers benefit from his large, diverse stock and regular hours, but bargain hunters in a position to wait can try to meet their needs during these festive occasions. For makers, pop-up sales during festival markets enable them to trade wholesale for retail pricing. We saw this dynamic in May 2016, when we visited Tongle when the Dong Respect the Water Buffalo Festival (*Jingniujie*) was then underway (figure 19).[11]

Because of the nature of our fieldwork trips, our insights into basketry in use are weighted toward women's household experiences. Throughout Southwest China, we have seen baskets at use in construction, industry, and agriculture, but our deepest knowledge comes from in-home craft work and domestic labor. Examples of such Dong basketry uses include baskets for the in-kitchen storage of oil tea, for use as cradles, and to hold craft materials and tools. In Guangxi, we have undertaken three household basketry censuses. Ms. He hosted us for one of two such inventories among the Baiku Yao. Among the Dong, Mr. Qin's family was kind in allowing us to wander their home in search of baskets. In his family collection, we documented 109 baskets representing many forms. We note that very few of Mr. Qin's own baskets are in this count. While generalist basket makers exist in this region, most makers become proficient and efficient with just a few forms. Mr. Qin's family thus owns many baskets made by other makers over the course of many years. The stories behind some are remembered in great detail, while others remain utilitarian commodity tools en route, in time, to the trash heap.

As among the Baiku Yao, with the rice basket type that is Mr. Li's specialty, the Dong people of the Tongle area also give special attention to baskets used in ritual exchanges. In Sanjiang, round, wok-shaped baskets are used, carried from giver to recipient with a shoulder pole (figure 28). The ceremonial occasions for such food-

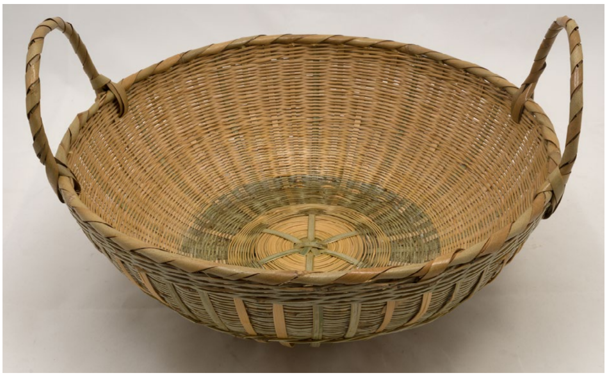


Figure 28. A wok-shaped basket of the type used for gift exchange among the Dong people in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County. Purchased in Tongle Miao Ethnic Township from Su Chengchang on July 19, 2018. IUMAA accession number 2018-07-0023, 39.5 x 37 x 23 cm. Photograph courtesy of the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Mathers Ethnographic Collections.

gift exchange are multiple, but the easiest example to narrate here surrounds engagement and marriage, with (future) co-parents-in-law signaling mutual respect for each other and binding their families together through the exchange of such basket-born gifts, particularly of special foods. Such matrimonial exchanges are not a one-time affair. As discussed in the general ethnographic works about the Dong, different kinds of goods are exchanged at different stages in a protracted period extending from pre-engagement all the way up to the arrival of a first child (Geary et al. 2003, 81–82; Ou 2007, 151–52). While we do not possess an in-process photograph of such an exchange underway, we can point interested readers to a paper on Kam rice in which steamed glutinous rice and rice wine is being carried in baskets with a shoulder pole to a family celebrating the one-month mark in the life of a new baby (Wang et al. 2018, 19; see also Su 2016).

Baiku Yao and southern Dong practice in this regard represents a localized instance of a broader set of basket-enhanced exchange practices in multicultural China (Knapp 2011, 100–101) (figure 29). Baskets for gift exchange is an example of the broader and deeper phenomenon of ritual and spiritual basket use that we have only begun to learn about in our fieldwork but that has been touched upon in the English-language ethnography, as noted earlier in the Baiku Yao context. It should not be surprising that throughout the Southwest, our consultants have had an easier time evoking for us basket-centered exchange practices on the human social plane. The place of baskets and basketry-woven objects in exchanges between living people and ancestors and other spiritual beings is exactly the kind of topic that is least suitable for survey research undertaken by large groups across multiple forms of linguistic and cultural difference. The available ethnography does make clear though that the Dong also include baskets and basketry-woven objects within their ritual and spiritual practices (see for example Rautio 2019, 188–91).

Comparison

While it often falls short in providing granular social and cultural detail, including the affective textures of local life, survey and controlled comparative research helps draw

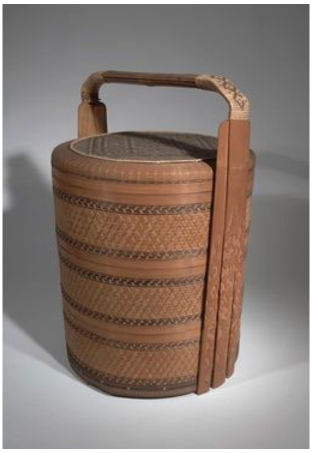


Figure 29. A Han-style "wedding basket" collected by Berthold Lauffer near Shanghai for the American Museum of Natural History in 1901. Accession number 70/4638 A-D. It can be compared to preferred Baiku Yao type in figure 5 and the Dong type in figure 28. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.

attention to basic similarities and differences between populations within a region (Eggan 1954; Fischer 1968; Urban 1999). When showing photographs of the baskets that we have collected among the Bai and Baiku Yao, for instance, Dong people are always quick to observe that they do not use backpack baskets, a basic type that is used extensively not only among the Bai and Yao but throughout the Southwest. They stress their own use of shoulder poles instead. Today such differences are sometimes highly self-conscious, taking the form of ethnic boundary markers, much like the more famous and oft-discussed differences in dress practices within this region. Some differences of this type seemingly go unnoticed. Despite its practicality, we have only seen basketry billhook carriers (*liandaolou*) being made, sold, and used among the Dong and some neighboring Miao groups, despite the fact that the billhook is an essential tool used extensively across Southwest China (and beyond). No one ever commented on this difference to us, although individuals outside the Dong area puzzled over the boot-shaped baskets in our collection photographs. Commonalities and differences in basketry repertories, techniques, and uses represent a line of evidence for understanding regional cultural histories and processes of cultural convergence and differentiation.

Such ethnological dynamics greatly interest us, but the manifest focus of our comparative work has centered on understanding commonalities and differences related to the impacts of the Chinese state's extraordinarily active national intangible cultural heritage policies on local life among the minority nationalities of the Southwest, particularly with respect to textile crafts, including basketry. As museum activities are one key vector for such heritage work, including the establishment of ecomuseums, such as those found in Sanjiang and Nandan and other local museums working at the nexus of cultural heritage tourism and cultural preservation activities, it seemed logical for our museums-based and museums-focused team to inquire at this intersection of processes and factors.

We have seen early indicators of change among the Bai in Yunnan, but in northern Guangxi baskets are—for the most part—not seen as heritage objects, and basket makers are not understood as candidates for intangible cultural heritage master (*feiyi chuanchengren*) status. Thus, basketry provides us with a strong contrast to our team's work with celebrated fabric artists. The work on basketry that we have reported on here is intentionally set, as we have suggested, in relation to parallel work that other members of our binational, multiethnic team have been doing with Bai, Dong, and Yao fabric craftspeople. A full comparison awaits the completion of work by both groups, but we can briefly here evoke what our colleagues have been doing and touch provisionally on some key differences separating these two very different sets of textile crafts.

Among both the Baiku Yao in Nandan County and the Dong people in Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County, our colleagues have learned about local practices of loom weaving, indigo dyeing, design pattern making, and the making of the local clothing styles that, as (localized) national dress, are so iconic of social identities in this region (An 2011; Bourzat 2016; Formoso 2013; Harrell 2009). Among the Baiku Yao, they have also learned about a remarkable type of non-woven silk used in decorating women's clothing (similar to that described for the Miao by Corrigan 2001, 18). In nearly all instances, their interlocutors have been celebrated women—such as He Jinxiu—whose expertise and artistry have come to be recognized through the layered intangible cultural heritage (ICH) system that now centers so much cultural and economic development work in rural ethnic China (Chen 2010; Kong and Song 2018; Zhang and You 2019, 15–16). They are designated as masters at the city/county, prefectural, provincial, and national level, and this fact has profoundly reorganized their work and the lives of their households. The impacts extend beyond the individual and her household. They increasingly permeate local communities, and they are increasingly visible in such domains as education, cultural tourism, museum work, ethnic representation and self-representation, local economic reorganization, and differential out and return migration from and back to rural areas.

While women sometimes make bamboo baskets in Guangxi and elsewhere in Southwest China, and they definitely use baskets in countless ways, the makers and sellers we have engaged are almost all men. Thus, for instance, basket making and selling is today mainly men's work, and it mainly falls outside the realm of ICH intervention. Embroidery, by contrast, is women's work, and it is eligible for, and particularly celebrated within, Chinese heritage interventions. As was true during the Republican period as studied by Fei Xiaotong and Zhang Zhiyi (Fei and Chang 1945, 173–76) in rural Yunnan, basket making today is either a source of supplemental income for farmers or a poverty- or near poverty-marked profession. For any North American accustomed to the market for heritage basketry in Native North America, the low prices at which baskets assembled with great skill sell in Southwest China is an unshakable shock, but local people there do not give these dynamics much thought. Baskets are ubiquitous and are largely unremarked upon commodity goods, despite their diverse and engaging forms and the deep knowledge that underpins their making. At present, in those parts of northern Guangxi that we have visited at least, they are mainly *habitus* rather than heritage (figure 30) (Jackson, Müske, and Zhang 2020). With the exception of particularly meaningful heirlooms, such as those that we noted in discussing Ms. He's collection, they are generally used until they are broken, and then they are tossed away and replaced. When they are preserved as heirlooms, it is usually because they are of an increasingly rare type or because they were made by, and associated with, a specific ancestor.

We aspire to say more about this in our future work, but there are some signs of change in terms of basketry. Even as they are still central to everyday rural life, baskets also now appear in museums, hotels, and retail settings, where they are deployed to give tourists and other visitors a sense of rural authenticity. While we

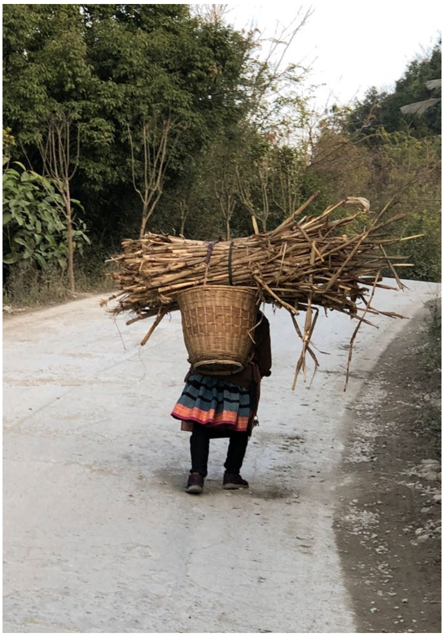


Figure 30. A Baiku Yao woman using a backpack basket to transport corn stalks near Huaili village in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township. Photograph by C. Kurt Dewhurst, December 17, 2017.

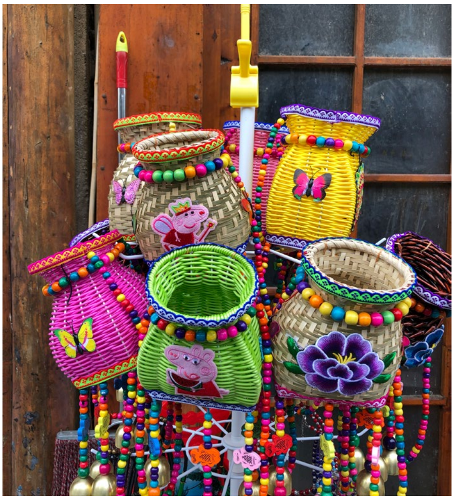


Figure 31. In the Dong town of Zhaoxing in Liping County, Guizhou and in other locations in Southwest China that are heavily visited by tourists, parents can purchase baskets such as these for their children to wear. Adapted from a common practical basket type often used for planting seeds and harvesting smaller crops such as chili peppers, these baskets have become small backpacks decorated with colorful patches and beads. Dangling bells help parents keep tabs on their tiny tourists. Photograph by Lijun Zhang, July 7, 2019.

have not yet found an official basketry master among the Yao or Dong, we have interviewed a remarkable Bai basket maker near the tourist hub of Dali who has received the lowest level of ICH master designation. This development has augmented his family's income in one modest way—he now occasionally receives guests from a local hotel who come for simple basket-making classes. Similarly, some Chinese scholars working elsewhere in China have also begun tracking a modest expansion of ICH discourse and engagement into the world of rural work basketry (Fan 2017; Xu and Xu 2020; Xu, Xu, and Wang 2020).

In tourism-prone locales in the region, we have also observed the rise of adapted basketry forms aimed at travelers seeking souvenirs (cf. Luo, Ahmed, and Long 2020). Such tourist baskets often take common work basket forms and layer on value-added decorations to enable makers and sellers to obtain higher per-item profits for the amount of labor invested in manufacture (figure 31). The use of baskets as heritage-inflected decorations and the rise of baskets as tourist souvenirs in heritage-tourism zones points to ways that the basket industry is being reshaped by broader heritage endeavors, even if this is not yet happening widely in terms of formally recognized, trained, and financially supported masters (ICH inheritors) who are called upon to train apprentices and to participate more broadly in the state's elaborate cultural heritage system.

In this article we have offered just a brief introduction to some of the people whom we have met, and it is only an evocation of some of what we have learned in our basket studies in Southwest China. We hope that international circumstances—both public health and geopolitical—will enable us to return to the region and resume again the studies on which we have reported here.

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NOTES

1. This article derives from a larger program of research considering basketry—and textile practices more broadly—in Southwest China. Both reviewers of this manuscript expressed enthusiasm for our work and sought, respectively, additional details on basketmaking and basket use (one reviewer) and on the relationship of basketry to tourism, community memory, and meaning-making (another reviewer). We share these reviewers' interests in all of these matters, and we hope that our broader studies and future writings, which include a hoped-for monograph now being authored by Zhang and Jackson, will provide space to explore these topics more fully outside the constraints of a single article and our narrower focus here on two communities in Guangxi.

2. The collections and staff of the Mathers Museum of World Cultures were made a part of a new university museum, the Indiana University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, during the fall of 2019. That change concluded the museum's involvement in the project discussed here, but the larger effort is ongoing, with the authors now participating as individual, university-based researchers.

3. We acknowledge, but pass over, the broader debates on how to best characterize this region—geographically, ethnologically, linguistically, and especially social historically. These debates are broader than those surrounding "Zomia," but the Zomia debates are central to, and emblematic of, the wider realm of scholarly exchange (Anderson and Whitmore 2017; Hammond 2011; Jonsson 2014; Scott 2009).

4. A weakness in our work is that we have not been able to join basket makers in the work of harvesting bamboo, and we have not conclusively identified the specific species being used by the makers whom we have interviewed. The most relevant source on this point—published recently and representing an area relatively close to our study region—is by Luo, Ahmed, and Long (2020). While the authors were not themselves able to confirm directly the species used by Mr. Li in his basketry, our research collaborator He Chun reports to us that the main species that he uses is *baizhu* (white bamboo) or *Fargesia semicoriacea* Yi, but that he sometimes also uses *jinzhu* (golden bamboo) or *Phyllostachys parvifolia* C.D.Chu & H.Y.Chou. While we did not confirm with absolute certainty the species used by our basketry consultants in Guangxi, we were impressed by their bamboo knowledge, including such issues as ideal harvest times and locations. In contrast to

basket makers we have met in Yunnan, all of those whom we have met in Guangxi gather their own bamboo rather than relying on bamboo sellers.

5. In addition to fifteen baskets purchased from Mr. Li's market stall, our collections gathered for Indiana University among the Baiku Yao include five additional baskets in three types gathered from the elder Mr. Li and one other maker. Additional baskets were purchased for the Michigan State University Museum.

6. Godchildren, godson, and goddaughter are conventional English translations from Mandarin Chinese (*guoji de xiaohai* "adopted children," *guoji de erzi* "adopted son," and *guoji de nv'er,* "adopted daughter") for an important kind of "voluntary" kinship relationship of the type that was referred to in older ethnological works as "fictive." Christian associations connected with these terms in English are not intended. At issue is an important relationship initiated by the parents of a child or group of children with honorary, reciprocal, spiritual, and ritual dimensions linking the godparent with the child or children.

7. There is also a small Dong population in northern Vietnam (Geary et al. 2003, 28).

8. We have not confirmed the species of bamboo used by Mr. Qin using botany field methods, but he explained to us that his preferred bamboo is *maozhu* (aka *moso*), which in China is widely used to refer to *Phyllostachys edulis* (Carrière) J.Houz., one of the most commonly used bamboo species (POWO 2021).

9. Prominently used and widely sold in every Dong community that we have visited; we hold that the boot-shaped billhook basket is an icon of the Dong farmer, but it is not solely used by Dong people. Zhang has observed such baskets in use among Miao farmers in Longsheng Various Nationalities Autonomous County, which is the next county to the west of Sanjiang in Guangxi. We have not established the current distribution of this form, but it has not been observed in the Bai, Buyi, or Guizhou Miao communities that we have visited. For a study of this basket type from the perspective of design, see Xie (2016).

10. Here we refer to collections made for Indiana University. Additional baskets from these southern Dong locales were added to the collections of the Michigan State University Museum.

11. In briefer English translation, local people called the festival simply the Water Buffalo or Bull Festival (*Niujie*). The festival in question, occurring in Tongle on the 8th day of the 4th lunar month, is cognate with the festival documented by Geary et al. (2003, 189–90, 210) as Water-Buffaloes' Birthday. The festival name points to the holiday's function as an expression of appreciation for the sacrifices made by water buffalo on behalf of people. The kind of market that we evoke here is a general-purpose market in which food, tools, clothing, and other varied goods—both locally and industrially manufactured—are on offer rather than being a more focused art or craft market.

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DOCUMENTARY NOTE

Craft and Fieldwork

Making Baskets, Mallets, and Videos in Upland Southwest China

This note introduces two short documentary videos made from recordings collected with two Baiku Yao craftspeople living in Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southwestern China. I discuss my background and approach to ethnographic documentary and contextualize my role as part of a binational research team. The first video features Mr. Li Guicai weaving a rice basket in Huali village and details the craftsman's practice. The second video follows Mr. Lu Bingzhao of Manjiang village as he makes a wooden mallet for a family member. While both documentaries foreground the creative process, they also provide a glimpse into the social lives of makers and the personal and cultural contexts of their craft work.

Keywords: Ethnographic documentary—videography—craft—Baiku Yao—basketry

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In December 2017, I joined a team of folklorists from museums in the United States to conduct research in Guangxi, China as part of the China-US Folklore and Intangible Cultural Heritage Project, a collaborative initiative undertaken jointly by the China Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society since 2007. The team included craft and material culture scholars from the Michigan State University Museum, the Museum of International Folk Art (Santa Fe, New Mexico), and the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University. This latter museum is where I served as the curator of Folklife and Cultural Heritage from 2015 to 2020. The US-based team members collaborated with folklorists and museum professionals from the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi (Nanning, China) and the Nandan Baiku Yao Ecomuseum (Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, China) to document the basket and textile traditions of the Baiku Yao people living in Nandan County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. As a non-China specialist invited to join this ethnographic work, I wondered what I could offer our research team. Having little knowledge of the region, I embraced the "work" of fieldwork. I committed myself to documenting the creative processes of local makers. Like the craftspeople with whom we collaborated, I shared my craft of video ethnography.

In this documentary note, I introduce two short videos and share my approach to videography, not just as a visual documentation tool but as an ethnographic approach and a collaborative method. My introduction to the video documentation of craft began when I was an undergraduate at Indiana University. I took a class with folklorist and cultural anthropologist Jerome Mintz, who produced several black and white documentaries including *The Shoemaker* (1978) and *Perico the Bowlmaker* (1987), which situated the production of traditional crafts within their social and cultural contexts. Although his films and instruction influenced my appreciation of ethnographic documentaries, it would be many years before I would start producing my own. In 2004, I was hired by Indiana University to direct Traditional Arts Indiana (TAI), a statewide public folk arts program. As the state folklorist for Indiana, I began work to identify, document, and support the folk and traditional artists working in the state. I recognize digital video as an effective tool for documenting traditional arts and sharing information with both the general public and a maker's home community. At that time, as I was beginning my work at TAI, digital video cameras and DVD replication were becoming affordable, and free online distribution platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo were beginning to emerge, positioning videography as an effective and affordable tool for public arts and humanities scholars.

My early video work was collaborative; I arranged and directed the video shoots and conducted ethnographic interviews, artists demonstrated their crafts and shared their insights and histories, and a videographer captured and edited the footage. Most of the early shoots were undertaken to make short documentaries for TAI's State Fair Masters award, a recognition of lifetime participants at the Indiana State Fair. From sheep shearers to quilters, I produced short video documentaries that heralded the lifetime achievements of the fair's most significant artisans, performers, and tradition bearers. Videographer Anders Lund partnered with me, helping me produce my first videos for the State Fair, as well as a series of videos with Indiana instrument makers. This later series focused on the creative processes that various builders used to make their instruments. When Anders moved away from Indiana, I began recording and editing my own documentary shorts, focusing on the various broom makers, blacksmiths, stone carvers, and other craftspeople I met through my work leading TAI.

In 2013, the Chipstone Foundation, a Wisconsin-based nonprofit dedicated to research on decorative arts in the United States, contracted me to produce a short documentary with master woodworker Randall O'Donnell, who lived near me in Indiana. I spent several weeks video recording O'Donnell as he made a reproduction of a seventeenth-century bible box from the Chipstone's collection. Making this thirteen-minute documentary helped me to hone a style that employed tight camera shots without background music, highlighting the sound of the tools in use and foregrounding the maker's craftsmanship. In 2015, I produced a video documentary for an exhibition with willow basket maker Viki Graber. The piece begins with sorting and clipping willows, and then follows her through the creation of a traditional stake-and-strand basket, like the ones that she learned to make from her father. The film uses a similar approach to that used in the earlier wooden box video—tight camera angles and natural work sounds. The willow basket documentary led to my invitation to join the research team in China. My colleagues wanted to have a thorough documentation of craft processes for the pieces that we would be collecting for the museums. My earlier documentary projects had allowed me to build my skills and to develop my approach for the work in Guangxi. As with my earlier films, I tried to foreground the artisans' command over their tools and materials, as well as to capture the poetry of motion in their creative practice. I worked in tandem with the makers, each of us independently experiencing the sense of flow in our craft. The two films, *A Rice Basket: Basketmaking in a Baiku Yao Community* (2019) and *The Mallet: Making a Maul in a Baiku Yao Community* (2018), present two elders skillfully making things useful to members of their community.

Working in the village cluster that is home to the Nandan Baiku Yao Ecomuseum in Lihu Yao Ethnic Township, the binational research team was too large to focus on one specific research topic at the same time. Based on my past work on basketry in the United States, I worked with a group focused on Baiku Yao basketry. Our team's first foray into the field was to Huali village to document Mr. Li Guicai making a rice basket. He was informed that folklorists from American museums, as well as

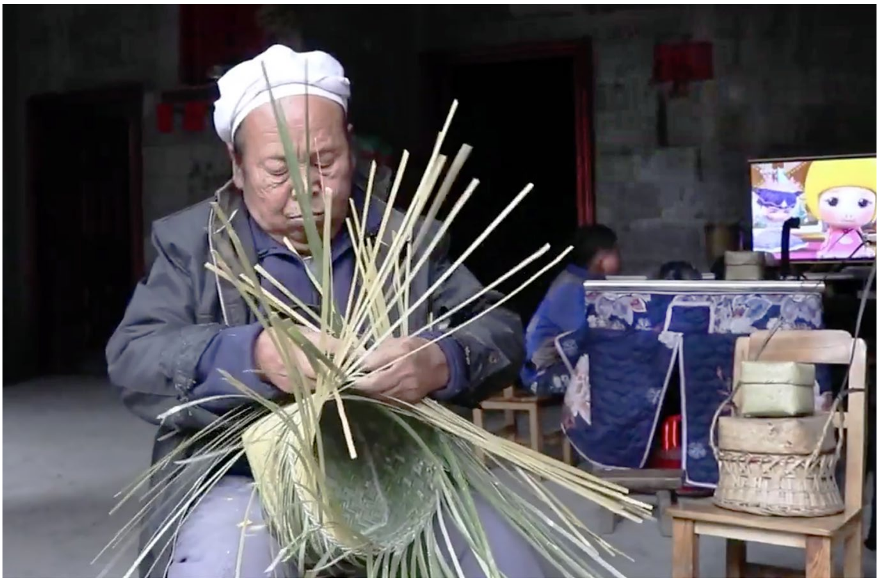

Figure 1. Still image captured from the *A Rice Basket* documentary, showing Li Guicai making a basket while his grandson watches television. Photograph by Jon Kay, December 14, 2017.

scholars from the Anthropology Museum of Guangxi and the local Nandan Baiku Yao Eco Museum, wanted to watch him make one of his special rice baskets. With the personal goal of completing the basket, Mr. Li had already started when we arrived, so I quickly began shooting. Wanting to capture every step in the process, I had little time to think about stowing my gear, let alone the best way to approach the subject. While the US-based team members worked to document the basket maker, our fellow researchers from the China-based museums documented us, documenting. This complex research collaboration presented a distinct set of challenges. From time to time, my fellow researchers crowded my camera, and the beeps and clicks of other cameras interrupted my soundtrack. These challenges were amplified by the natural context of the shoot, which is always associated with video in the field. Mr. Li worked by sunlight on the front edge of his home which opened to the street. This meant my options for shooting from the front were limited. Falling back on my method, I concentrated on close shots over his shoulder, all the while squeezing my fellow ethnographers out of the frame and focusing on the movement of his hands and the aesthetics of the craft. For the next day and a half, Mr. Li and I danced with the basket-making process. Just as he had to gather bamboo before beginning his craft, I was harvesting the raw material of what I hoped would be an ethnographic documentary.

Soon after I began shooting, word came from our local ecomuseum colleagues that government officials were coming for a special luncheon, and that we had to go back to the museum. I talked with the research team, and it was agreed that I would stay behind and continue shooting, so as not to lose the flow of the process. The elder basket maker and I worked through lunch, but Mr. Li's grandson came home to eat and to watch a few minutes of cartoons before returning to school. By the time the research team returned, the bottom and inner wall of the basket were nearly complete. Only taking one quick break in the middle of the day, Mr. Li worked into the evening. As it grew dark, I set up two small battery-powered lights that I had purchased for evening and interior recording sessions. Under the glow of these LED lights, we worked until he finished the bottom half of the basket as well as its matching lid. Because of the limited space, I had abandoned my tripod earlier in the day, which made the camera easier to maneuver but more difficult to hold steady. Weighed down by an extra battery and a stereo microphone, I held the camera close to my body, trying to minimize the shake of my hands. That evening I backed up my video files to a solid-state hard drive and went to bed early, feeling stiff and sore from that first day of documentary recording.

The next morning, we arrived at Mr. Li's house as he was preparing bamboo splints for weaving. This was the step in the process that we had missed on the previous morning. Using his billhook, he first scored the bamboo around the end to the desired thickness, then proceeded to split the bamboo into lengths, before separating the outer waxy layer from the inner woody layer. With his bamboo prepared, he then wove an outer wrapper for the basket with handles and a decorative skirt. As discussed by Zhang and colleagues in the present volume, Mr. Li devoted an intense day and a half to making this basket, a type that Baiku Yao people use to carry and serve sticky rice.

Later that afternoon, I accompanied our team to Manjiang village to inventory the various types of baskets used in a local home. As the fieldworkers photographed and measured baskets, Mr. Lu Bingzhao, the patriarch of the family, came into the house and picked up a mallet, which he enthusiastically showed everyone before quickly going outside. I did not speak the local language, but I felt he had something he wanted to show us. I followed him outside to see him lay the mallet he had retrieved from the house on the trunk of a small, felled tree in order to get a rough measurement. He was going to make another mallet.

I grabbed a camera and began shooting. While I had abandoned my tripod for the rice basket documentary because of the constraints of Mr. Li's workspace, this time I did not even have it with me. I had brought my camera to take pictures rather than video footage, and I just happened to have my microphone in my camera bag. When I began, I did not think I was going to make a documentary. I was shooting as part of my ongoing documentation of craft in the region. However, I was moved by the maker's interaction with his family and friends as he worked. His grandchildren played nearby. A neighbor stopped to visit after picking greens. All the while, Mr. Lu worked as people came and went. With heavy chops, he used a billhook to quickly remove the excess wood. With the same tool, he then shaved the mallet's handle smooth using a pulling motion. Finally, just as he completed the mallet, his daughter-in-law arrived and carried away the mallet that he made for her. A tree became a tool, and the mallet became a gift, all within little more than an hour. I was told that mallets like the one he made are commonly used to pound rice straw for sandals and to drive poles into the ground that are used in warping a loom. The latter activity is an elaborate and demanding one that I witnessed the next day when a group of weavers prepared a loom for weaving.

In sharing these two short documentaries, I hope they are received like the craft objects that they present—that is, as artful gifts, reflecting both the personal and social facets of my own craft. I thank the binational research team for inviting me to share in the important work of video ethnography. I am also appreciative of Mr. Li and Mr. Lu, who shared their talents with me.

AUTHOR

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RESEARCH NOTE

The Floating Existence of *Taraṅga*s

Appraising Local Deities and Social Meaning-Making on the Western Coast of India

Conversations around rites of possession and object animation within the Hindu performative sphere have a long history of being relegated to a marginalized space unworthy of academic investigation. Using the concept of dramaturgy popularized by Erving Goffman, this article shifts the gaze from object animation and spirit possession to its social performance, in which a temporary egalitarian social scheme is exhibited. In exploring the case of a specific possession rite locally called *taraṅga devatā*, which is practiced along the west coast of India, this article introduces the transformation of the deities housed in local shrines as entities capable of movement and communication known as *taraṅga*. In so doing, I reassess some local Hindu religious practices that were eschewed in the past.

Keywords: Hinduism—possession rites—object animation—vernacular religion—western India—dramaturgy

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Rites of possession, characterized by their "extreme multivocality, fundamental issues of emotion, aesthetics, language and personal identity" (Smith 2006, 15), have begun to gain momentum as objects of investigation in the early 21st century, particularly the veiled nature of these practices. Indeed, the relegation of the ritual category of body invasion and the use of material objects in South Asian religious traditions as "black magic" in earlier colonial sources as well as contemporary popular discourse in India has consequently led to a lack of dedicated academic study.[1] Arthur Coke Burnell (1894), one early colonial observer, refers to similar traditions in South Kanara involving *bhūta* (ghost) rituals as "devil worship."[2] In order to further uncover the veiled nature of such practices to do them justice, the intimate connection between praxis and local culture needs to be reassessed. One of the performative aspects of "vernacular" Hinduism (Novetzke 2017) on the coast of Maharashtra anchors itself in the performance of *taraṅga devatā*, which will be closely examined in this article.[3] In this tradition, a mobile deity (*taraṅga*) functions as an embodied form, communicating with practitioners through the agency of a medium. The transition from the stationary, formless nature of a deity residing in its shrine into a subsequent manifestation with form and mobility (*taraṅga*, lit. "wave") underpins a religious process mediated through what I am calling "social meaning-making." This article aims to understand the nature of *taraṅga* performances that were reduced to such questionable categories as "ecstatic" or "shamanic" by earlier observers and hence dismissed from any serious inquiry.[4]

My exploration of *taraṅga* deities worshipped in a specific district on the western coast of India preliminarily attempts to chart everyday practice set within the vernacular culture of Sindhudurg, the district in Maharashtra where I conducted my fieldwork.[5] The article first explores local village deities within their linguistic context and then considers the physical expression of these deities as *taraṅga*, explained via an abbreviated history of certain religious developments in western India. The article then highlights aspects of social entanglement that become apparent through the performance of the *taraṅga* tradition's processions, when stationary deities become noticeably mobile in nature.[6] The processional practice at the heart of such ritual performances takes on a form of unwritten social commentary, as this exploration seeks to convey. The article thus sets up the practice of *taraṅga* and attempts to flesh out a vocabulary to understand its social performance through the lens of Erving Goffman's notion of dramaturgy.

Goffman's theory of dramaturgy became popular after the publication of his book *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). His classic lends a vocabulary that is still useful today, I believe, for studying social customs across various regions and religions.[7] Along with the idea of material embodiment, the rite of *taraṅga devatā* as performed in the coastal villages of western India could be described through his dramaturgical lens. I attempt to peel away the layers of public performance in which *taraṅga* deities are displayed and paraded to highlight the modified presentation of social roles during the rituals that are mediated through material embodiment in *taraṅga*.

Introducing *taraṅga devatā*: Their linguistic background, form, and function

The deities popularly known as *taraṅga devatā* (*daivata* = deity [singular]; *devatā* = deities [plural]) in the district of Sindhudurg are depicted as transitory and momentary divine entities that make their presence known like "ripples on the surface of water." The tradition of *taraṅga devatā* as a syncretic or mixed form of community performance rooted in the acknowledgment of an invisible spirit world draws narrative strands from localized Hindu beliefs and practices in the region where fieldwork was conducted for this article.[8] The local deities in Sindhudurg take on the form of *taraṅga* during annual festivals conducted in villages throughout the district. *Taraṅga* means "waves" or "ripples" in Marathi, the dominant regional language. Another Marathi interpretation of *taraṅga* is the infinitive "to float," which is often how it is understood in colloquial usage. Local people speak of the deities expressing their presence in humans through the shaking of the body, as if waves or *taraṅga* well up in the body (Dhuri 2013, 22). Simplistic in their form, *taraṅga* deities are depicted by wooden poles capped by metallic or wooden masks that complete their deictic form to signify the containment of godly spirits temporarily residing within them (see figure 1). The three components of such a deity—wooden pole, drapery or cloth, and capping mask—fuse together to form a visual representation of the attendants for an otherwise immobile deity that normally resides within the confines of a sanctum sanctorum.

Local narratives told to me by villagers suggest an acute awareness of the distinction between the village deities and their movable forms as *taraṅga devatā*. Traditionally, the *taraṅga* form embodies a Hindu deity in its local shrine where it is normally worshipped, but when moving it acts as a liaison between the people and the divine. Oral narratives in Sindhudurg reflect the intermediary role of *taraṅga*s as *kāṭiche deva*s (pole deities), *khāmba-kāṭī*s (pillar-poles), and *devaskī*s (of the gods). The first two terms refer to the form—a pole (*kāṭī*)—while the latter refers to the agency of the given deity being activated through rituals allowing it to move about with the aid of a human bearer. *Devaskī* is thus interpreted as an agency emanating from the specific *deva* being worshipped at any given time. In most cases involving *taraṅga devatā*, *devaskī* refers to divine law animated through an object, which is to say the pole and the dressed garment. In the ethnographic context in which my research

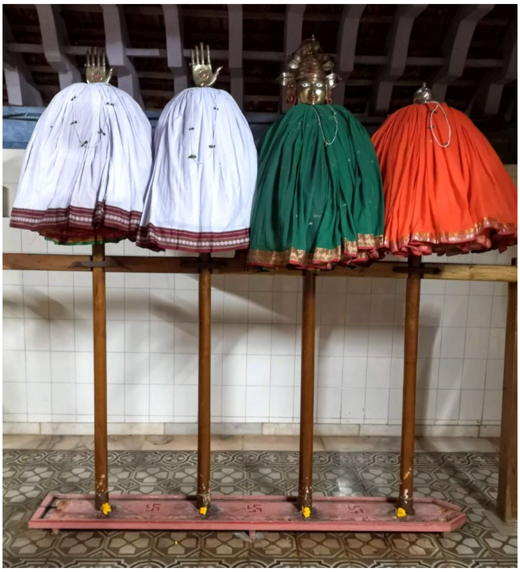

Figure 1. The *taraṅga devatā* at Achra, Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra. The female deity on the right is dressed in a red sari, and the other two (Shiva on the left, and alocal spirit deity in the middle) will be dressed for the performance.
Photograph by Durga Kale.

is situated, *devaskī* pertains to rites of possession and object animation that are practiced along the coastal regions of Sindhudurg, the main site of my fieldwork. The nomenclature used for the form and function of these rites points to the spirit world as a driving force for both good and evil agents that inhabit village settings in which the performances occur, a point made by John Stanley (1988), where he argues that although they are polar opposites, they both express first and foremost a religious experience.

Participants in the local festivals occurring annually in Sindhudurg described in the following paragraphs are very aware of the distinct differences between the deity in the central shrine and its embodied form as a wooden object that serves as a vessel for the deity spirit. They identify and describe consecrated wooden poles and their ornamentation as a temporary "refuge" for the deities processed during such ritualistic events. Identifiers such as *device taraṅga* (wave or whim of the goddess) and *ravalanāṭāci khāmba-kāṭī* (pole belonging to Ravalnatha) highlight the controlling agency that a deity has over its wooden pole when becoming the *taraṅga* manifestation. The embodiment of the deity as the *taraṅga* pole is completed with a capping element consisting of a mask affixed atop the wooden pole. The capping element of the mask is sometimes replaced by a horse rider or an astylar spire-shaped capping element to mark the presence of an aniconic spirit other than a female deity of a shrine. The mask (*rūpḍe*) hoisted up onto the *taraṅga* pole provides an anthropomorphic form to the material paraphernalia used in the processional rituals by graphically providing a face to a formless, invisible entity.[9] The *taraṅga* form thereby allows for the transition of an immobile deity into a wooden pole capable of being carried around to be shown to the audience participating in the deity's festival.

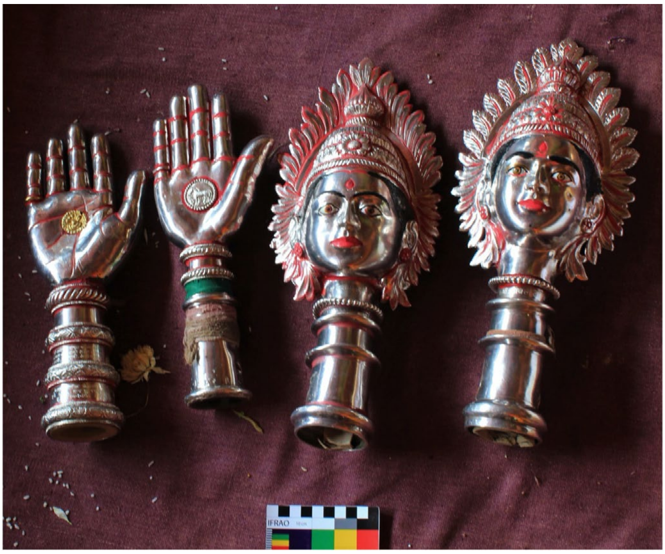

Figure 2. The capping elements, known as *rūpḍe*, for the *taraṅga devatā* located at Kamte Kot in Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra. Photograph by of Durga Kale.

This fluidity enables the *acala* (stationary) deity to transform into *cala* (ambulatory) form by changing the material in which it is embodied (figures 2 and 3).

In their exploration of masked rituals, David Shulman and Deborah Thiagarajan propose that theories concerning ritual masking are either symbolic, expressive, or performative (Shulman and Thiagarajan 2006, 6). In the parading of a *taraṅga* pole adorned with a mask, the symbolic and performative dimensions of the action take front stage. The *taraṅga* form enables the disengagement of the deity from its stationary form in the shrine, which allows it then to get carried around to visit groups of devotees in the form of the *taraṅga* pole. The mask completes the physical form of the deity, the embodied spirit, through the use of material objects mounted on the pole as well as the drapery ornamenting it. Taken together, the ornamented pole organically symbolizes the physical presence of the invisible entity, while the *taraṅga* masked pole functions or performs "as the deity itself." It thus transcends mere representation in that the object in its clothes and masked form undergoes an ontological transformation to literally become the spirit or deity in question.

Metallic masks and other totems are commonplace objects used for adornment in the lived religions of South Asia more generally, but they are quite ubiquitous in the region of coastal Maharashtra, where masking is a strategy for taking on a material form. This strategy is central to the annual village festivals played out all along the Maharashtrian coast in honor of highly localized deities. A majority of the village deities are simply represented as crude stone blocks or in the form of anthills in the coastal villages of the region.[10] In cases where a stone sculpture of the deity has anthropomorphic attributes, the icon is considered to be unapproachable by the devotees. The crude stone slab thus symbolizes the accessible presence of the deity, but without the active agency for its periodic movement and communication. The stationary forms of such local deities thus occasionally take on a celebratory

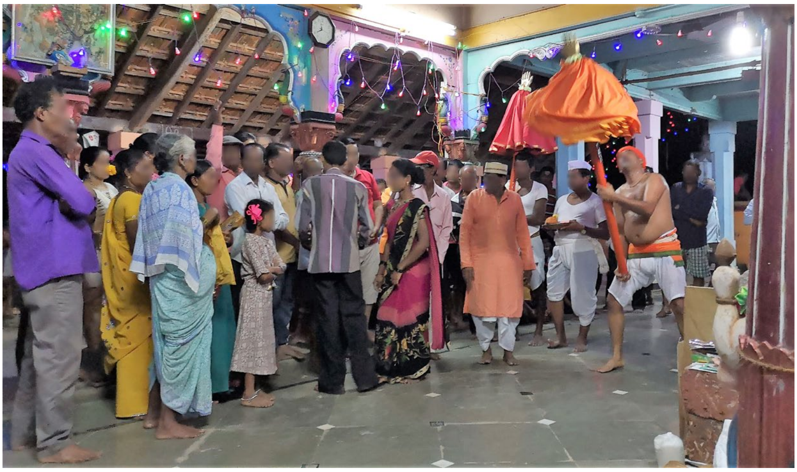

Figure 3. A typical *taraṅga devatā* performance. Notice the multiple *taraṅga* deities carried by respective *mānakarī*s from various villages. This moment captures the commencement of the performance. Photograph by Durga Kale.

anthropomorphic form during village festivals when the performance of *taraṅga* occurs. As hinted at in the previous paragraphs, the aniconic sculptures are adorned with metallic masks and nine-yard sarees (in the case of female deities) or *dhotara* (*dhotī*s, for male deities), transforming the seemingly inert objects into dazzling expressions of personhood. The elaborate ritual of adding a visage to an unadorned stone is aptly termed as *rūpḍe lāvaṇe*, to put on a face or beautify. *Rūpḍe*, or the mask for the deity, simultaneously envisages the abstract form of the spirit and the likeness of a human deity, which is reiterated through the narrative lore associated with the transformation of a shapeless object into a recognizable anthropomorphic form. Sight and sound therefore operate in tandem to allow the audience members to experience the transformation they are witnessing both visually and acoustically. The deity first takes form in its shrine, after which its mobility gets expressed through the *taraṅga devatā* rituals, during which it moves about and communicates to be seen and heard by devotees and other members of the crowds that gather for such spectacles. The specific deity going through the transformation assumes personhood as a result of two acts performed: the mask being hoisted onto the wooden pole and the ability to move that is brought about through the agency of the pole bearer. In the case of the *taraṅga* deities, the mask anthropomorphizes the formless deity or covers the otherwise invisible spirit that is being given form. In the process of personifying the deity, the mask as simply a "covering" could seem misleading, for the mask, in turn, uncovers the true form of the deity as an anthropomorphic entity capable of movement through human assistance. The adorned deity is now capable of communicating with devotees through the mediation provided by its respective pole bearer.

On the one hand, the female deities depicted with metallic or wooden masks as capping elements on their *taraṅga* poles complete the process of anthropomorphizing them as well. Standing almost seven feet tall, the wooden pole adorned with a human face and colorful drapery conveys the imposing image of a larger-than-life deity that stands in close proximity to its devotees. On the other hand, the male deity, who is an aspect of the pan-Hindu god Shiva in most cases, is depicted in the form of a right hand in *abhayamudrā* (non-fear hand gesture), which is locally understood as a blessing.[11] The capping element in the form of a blessing palm thus symbolizes the male spirits of the village, such as Ravalanata and Bhutanata. The signifier *nāṭa* conveys the sense of being a "master of" somebody. In this case, the spirits are described as the masters of *rāvala*s, Maratha administrative personnel during the medieval period in what is now the Maharashtrian state, and *bhūta*s (ghosts), thus suggesting agentic control both over deceased political rulers or administrators and the spirit world in general. A metallic or wooden representation of an open palm in *taraṅga* iconography seems reminiscent of the *pañjā* or *haṃsa* iconography popular in Islamic performative traditions (see Zaidi 2016). A close resemblance of raised-hand iconography with its Islamic counterparts (especially used during *muḥarram* rituals[12]) opens up a discussion on the significance of this motif, to which we shall return later. The third recurring totem for the deities with ambiguous forms is that of an astylar conical capping element. In some cases, the representation resembles a temple's spire. Several deity attendants I interviewed in Sindhudurg stressed that the conical capping elements on the *taraṅga* poles are an acknowledgment of the presence of known and unknown forces that inhabit the landscape. And assigning a *khāmba-kāṭī* or *taraṅga* form to these powers (*śakti*) keeps them propitiated.[13]

Taraṅga masks draw heavily from the local narratives and art of the region. The ceremonial mask for the female deities is distinct from the mask used as the capping element on the *taraṅga* pole. The respondents spoke of a past tradition, now extinct, concerning the village coppersmith or carpenter crafting the face of the *taraṅga devatā.* With modernization, these local craftsmen lost the patronage needed to produce specific masks, resulting in the *taraṅga devatā* gradually becoming adorned with mass-produced masks that were not made specifically for the *taraṅga* deities. The memory of a decline in locally made adornments in favor of mass-produced ones highlights an ambiguous attitude among participant devotees. According to them, the element of generic masking to denote a nondescript anthropomorphic form and the existence of a divine entity is of more importance today than the specific iconographic attributes of the female deities. It may further indicate the perceived oneness of the female deities (*devī*s) and their feminine power (*śakti*) across the performative spectrum in South Asia, which enables the repurposing of masks used for the representation of other Hindu *devī*s, such as Durga during Navaratri and Gauri during Ganapati festivals.[14] Although the provenance or place of manufacture for the mask of the *taraṅga* deity is not a point of deliberation, the place of artistic creation (of the mask, in this case) could influence some of the cultural performances that are integral aspects of the *taraṅga* tradition. For instance, the local guardian spirits envisioned variously as tigers, horsemen, or formless spirits translate into the material depictions of the capping elements adorning the wooden poles. As a general convention, then, the masks currently used depict female representations of the feminine divinities, while an astylar (or plain conical) top referred to as a *pañjā* (blessing palm) above is used for the poles representing a guardian spirit or male deity of the village.

The role of fluid transformation: *Nirguṇa/nirākāra* to *saguṇa/sākāra*

The nomenclature used by devotees conveys the inherently fluid form of the deities when they take recognizable shape as *taraṅga devatā* for a temporary period of time, which could last for one or two nights.[15] Dance performances with the *taraṅga devatā* highlight the movement and process of animating otherwise-inanimate objects such as the mask, drapery, and wooden pole. In this interaction that is fluid in its form, the *mānakarī* ("one who is anointed"), the one with the honor of holding and carrying the *taraṅga* pole, becomes a medium. Although the deity does not inhabit the pole bearer's body, the *mānakarī* affords movement and communication with the *taraṅga* pole. The *mānakarī*'s body experiences *kampa* (shaking), *laharī* (waves), or *taraṅga* (ripples) once the deity-spirit inhabits the pole and the paraphernalia that results in the *mānakarī-taraṅga* union as the *cala* (moving) deity.

The fluid transformation of immobile deities into *cala* forms with the mediation of the *mānakarī* proceeds through a milieu of negotiated meaning-making in the vernacular performative traditions. The processes operative in such a transformation further bring to light the background veiled by the performances in the foreground, in the Goffmanian sense of the term. To fully understand the ontological sense of this fluid transformation, the idea of "teeming place-world"[16] pointed out in William Sax's work (2009, 52) lends itself to approach the case of the *mānakarī-taraṅga* relationship. The presence and embodiment of the deity is rendered complete through the body of the pole bearer and his body alone—along with the family, ancestral history, and social position in the community that comes with it. The pole bearers and their public performance highlight the ontological grounding conditions for candidature as a *mānakarī*. In most cases studied in the Sindhudurg district of Konkan area, the *mānakarī* belongs to a non-Brahmin group in the community, and in four cases of eighteen, the position was rotated among Bhandari community members in the villages. Lower socioeconomic strata represented through the agency of the pole bearer favors the paradigm of social control by relegating possession to the non-Brahmin social castes (see Smith 2006, 51–58). A *mānakarī* lends his body to complete the animation of the deity, often lending his voice for the deity. In the partially oracle-like situatedness of this role, the *mānakarī* brings to the fore a microcosm (as used by Berger 1990) that momentarily inverts the societal normativity, while being acutely aware of the otherwise hierarchical social setup. This, to me, amplifies the deity's fluidity in form as well as the pole bearer's fluid role-playing in the temporary place-world.

The local deities' fluidity of form—from their stationary stone forms to mobile effigies that are the *taraṅga devatā*—anchors the moment(s) of transformation through a narrative discourse. The *taraṅga* "with form" (*saguṇa*) often represents ordinarily "formless" (*nirguṇa*) divinity. The binary employed here may seem to be a superimposition of a "classical" concept onto a vernacular one, but the language of the oral narratives I collected in villages where the festive pole rituals are performed actually speaks of this transformation with the very vocabulary of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa*. Some of the female village deities in the region continue to be represented as rough laterite stones or anthills, as stated earlier. At the same time, the male deities likened with Shaivite attributes are generally represented as *śivaliṅgam*s (elongated stones resembling the phallic symbol of the Hindu deity, Shiva). The spirits, when represented, are displayed as rough cobble or unformed stones in and around their shrines. The shrine representations thus adumbrate some sort of incipient form—but so unrecognizable as to often straddle the porous boundaries between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* modes of representation. The deities' form, as understood in the local context of Sindhudurg, is an anthropomorphic one, where we find a tautological presentation of deities both seated stationarily in their respective shrines as well as in motion as *taraṅga devatā*, which results in a play of form based on the continuing oscillation between *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* aspects of representation.

The *saguṇa* deity as the embodied form capable of direct communication (through the *mānakarī*) attempts to bridge the gap between the deity and the devotee. The deity crosses the threshold from its sanctum to the outer world and can be seen and touched by all sections of society. When seated in the shrine, the deity is in view of all the devotees from a distance, but it is only the designated priest who enters the sanctum and can approach the deity with a devotee's plea. The barriers of access that are broken during festive occasions, although temporarily, attempt a re-enactment of the egalitarian fervor fostered by the so-called *bhakti* movement in the medieval past. By no means complete, the mostly symbolic social shift from hierarchy to the breaking down of barriers concerning purity and pollution can be seen in its incipient stages through the tradition of *taraṅga*. Devotees in attendance at the festivities assert the instrumental role of *taraṅga* in "levelling the playing field"[17] for social and religious roles when in the company of the deity as one of the major purposes of the annual ritual events performed at Kamte-Kot. *Mānakarī*s who hold the position as a part of a hereditary post speak of the performance as representing their family and the community in the worship of the village deity through divination. Direct communication with the divine is, in this sense, the rationale behind pole performance traditions, since they allow everyone to communicate with the deities in their accessible forms during festivals; this suggests several dramaturgical axes, to which I will now turn.

Dramaturgical axes

Erving Goffman uses the concept of "foreground" to refer to the presentation of the unfolding self in his theory of dramaturgy. The foreground presentation, Goffman explains, is intimately tied to the background planes of activities that lend themselves to the description of social (and religious) performances, where the roles of actors are predetermined and are conveyed through the process of dramatic realization (Goffman 1959, 30–34). In the social setting of *taraṅga* performances, which are the foreground, the latent social hierarchies in the community that are the background become temporarily disengaged through ritual performance. The rite of *taraṅga* possession by the *mānakarī* enables a platform for all to interact with the deity in close proximity. The background associations of caste and creed temporarily get alleviated, but the awareness of belonging continues to remain intact throughout the performance. In terms of dramaturgy, the background is thus present and influences the foreground activities tangentially, thereby creating a façade for a novel presentation of a shared social performance.

Social interaction during pole festivals is a poiesis of socioreligious space characterized by momentary fluidity during which the *mānakarī*s and the audience members function as actors. Social performances pertaining to caste stratification have attracted Goffman's attention in terms of latent hierarchies influencing the status quo and the quotidian sphere of activity (Goffman 1959, 36–37). Goffman directs readers' attention to Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1952, 30) to elaborate on the logic of how caste hierarchies operate in social practice. Although Goffman takes the practice of social hierarchies as a representation of a dramaturgical axis, I argue that the status quo is normative, making special performances such as the ones under investigation here qualifiers for analysis through a dramaturgical lens. Impermanent performances, such as *taraṅga devatā*, that disengage from normative social performance and enter the domain of drama or non-routine performance of social roles exhibit distinct elements of dramaturgy when considered from a sociological perspective.

Taraṅga performances temporarily disrupt the privileged access to divinity monopolized by the so-called higher social classes to allow for the engagement in the practice of what he calls "secret consumption" by the subalterns who perform ritualistic functions during the festivals in which the poles are displayed in procession. Goffman outlines secret consumption as secret pleasures derived from a performance, but which are hidden from the public (1959, 42–43). High-caste Brahmins visiting low-caste Shudra establishments to consume intoxicating drinks, for example, is one such secret pleasure in the Indian context. Goffman's example suggests the disruption of ordinary social hierarchy for a moment of pleasure hidden from the public. In a similar vein, economic benefits in the form of donations and endowments given by patrons to *taraṅga mānakarī*s also suggest secret consumption after the performances. In most cases, if not all, the local Brahmin families claim their stake in the donations the *mānakarī*s receive, in exchange for supporting their position for the celebrations in the following year. Thus the rhetoric of training blends into the aspect of secret consumption (of wealth, in this context), whereby a *mānakarī* who is deemed worthy for the position he desires plays into the drama of accruing economic and temporary social benefits from the performance. The Brahmins bolster the rhetoric of enabling, and the *mānakarī*s adhere to that of training, so as to allow for mutual partaking in the socially negotiated performative space that is the *taraṅga* arena. The hypothetical reciprocity of the caste system is thus simultaneously reified and challenged.

The dramaturgical concept of "expressive control" (Goffman 1959, 51) provides for an explanation of how redefining performative moments during *taraṅga* influences the community in which the activities occur. For example, modulations in performance, along with doing away with some of the irregularities in audience-performer rapport, falls within the boundaries of the theoretical discussion on expressive control. A *mānakarī* often expresses the displeasure of the deity embodied in *khāmba-kāṭi* to address the tendency of secret skepticism among audience members. He also reiterates that the success of a *taraṅga* performance is based on faith. The process of mystification through gestures—both planned and unplanned—adds to the expressive control that anchors the *mānakarī*'s presentation of self through *taraṅga*. Goffman's thesis on dramaturgy then segues into the presentation of "team effort" and impression management (1959, 77–80, 208–20) that can be used to theorize some aspects of interaction that occur between participants coming from a variety of social strata.

As indicated by a narrative from Devgad, which is located in the Sindhudurg area, traditional ideas concerning purity and defilement extend to the practice of parading the *taraṅga* deities. *Taraṅga devatā*, although fluid in the form and gender that they espouse, are carried exclusively by heterosexual males. The male pole bearer holds the deity and dances with everyone, regardless of whether they are bearing male, female, or genderless spirits represented as *taraṅga devatā*. The notion of impurity attached to the female body extends to the taboo that forbids females to become pole bearers, among other social implications (Menon 2002, 140–57). *Mānakarī*s for *taraṅga* deities generally hold a hereditary position within the Dalit social groups residing in the region, as echoed in other academic studies (for instance, Harper 1963, 62). The male body of a Dalit person as vehicle for *taraṅga* deities thus opens up the conversation about social stratification embedded within the orthodox Hindu belief system that underlies Indian society at large.[18]

As a pole bearer, each *mānakarī* carries one *taraṅga* deity pole. The decoration on the *taraṅga* poles envisages the form of deities as expressed through narratives and traditional iconography. In addition to the masks espousing the gender of the deities, the drapery and manner of moving or performing dances with the *taraṅga* poles complete the gendered representation of the deity. A female village deity gets draped with a brightly colored sari, while a cotton loincloth or a pale-colored covering is associated with the male guardian deities. Additionally, the spirits embodied by the *taraṅga* pole often have colored drapery that does not outshine the female deities of the village. By dressing all of the deities in brightly colored garments, the *taraṅga* deities avoid the taboo of dressing in black or grey, which are considered to be associated with death and inauspiciousness.

A *taraṅga devatā* carried by its bearer creates a temporary setting for an egalitarian form of worship, a passing phase within communities where ritual performances based on social hierarchy are not a secret. Participants know all too well that their traditional Hindu communities are stratified based on hierarchical levels of occupational groups. Inherent hierarchies are therefore woven into the fabric of *taraṅga* performances. The Brahminical (or the priestly) community is considered to be the highest social group, which more or less dictates the rule-oriented modes of interaction among all residents in socioreligious settings on a daily basis. The Mahars (*mahār*), a Dalit caste relegated to an extremely low position in orthodox Hindu society, nevertheless are able to secure representation in the *taraṅga* performative sphere. The pole bearers drawn from the Dalit community perform the role of carrying the deities in the midst of people from all caste backgrounds. In the process of interlocution, being an extension of the deities themselves, the *mānakarī*s symbolically assume a visibly higher social role in this particular religious scheme because they function as interlocuters, which provides them with a privileged, higher status than they would normally have at other occasions. Their role as vehicles for the deities during *taraṅga* performances is absolutely necessary in order to grant mobility to the divine objects for the enactment of ritualized narratives. In addition, Dalit ritualists catalyze a temporary state of mobility within the variegated social groups in attendance that allows for a ritualized form of community participation less restricted to normal social rules pertaining to caste interaction.

The form and effective function of *taraṅga* deities rest on the relationship between the ritual pole bearer and the deity animated within the specific pole he is carrying. The *mānakarī* enters a state of trance, and the deity assumes its mobile form to animate the pole, thereby fully bringing alive the *taraṅga*. My field consultants address the *taraṅga devatā* as "humans living among us" (*āpalyatlī mānase*), who have "individual personalities" (*tyance tyance swabhāva*). The *devatā* behave as if "wind has entered their bodies" (*aṅgāt vāre śiralyāsārakhe*), which can be translated as being possessed.[19] The pole bearer and the paraphernalia that makes up *taraṅga devatā* fuse as one entity, resulting in the boundaries separating their individual existences becoming blurred, so that they bleed into each other temporarily for the duration of the performance. The aniconic deity thus becomes anthropomorphic in the truest sense through the process of trance and embodiment.

The word *laharī* (also meaning "wave" in Sanskrit, Hindi, and other Indo-Aryan languages) is used repetitively in connection to the "will" or "inclination" of the principal deity to act and perform as their self, which suggests an amplification the deity's agency. The village's main deity, for instance, could act on a whim and inhabit some object or a person's body, as some interviewees indicate. This whim is often described as *devīcī lahara*, which could be interpreted as whim or a wave of the goddess. *Taraṅga*, although a form of the deity in the shrine, is but a ripple in the massive ocean of devotion.[20] Frederick Smith (2006, 13–15), in his elaborate study on possession and divination that was cited in the preceding paragraphs, lays out the linguistic descriptors for the experience of divination. *Vāreśirale* ("the wind entered"), *bādhā zālī* ("contracting a malady"), and other linguistic markers are phrases used in Marathi that are linked with divination. The common thread in all these linguistic usages is that they collectively imply that an outside agency enters into someone's body. *Taraṅga devatā*, on very similar lines, exemplifies such a form of agency.

The entire performance known as *avasara* acknowledges punctuated time in the sense that the deity animating the consecrated paraphernalia of the wooden pole, garment, and mask is unfolding at the right moment. The Hindi word *avasara* stands for an opportunity, which the local dialect in Sindhudurg adopts to refer to the "right moment." The *avasara* for the *taraṅga devatā* performances is the period starting with the annual festive season in local villages that is marked by the pan-Hindu festival of Dussehra (*daśaharā*) observed in September-October.[21] If and when the transformation takes place at the right moment, the *avasara* of the *taraṅga* begins. The concept brings in a temporal axis for the beginning of the *taraṅga* performances. By retracing the axes of space, material, and time, the social performance as *avasara* denotes a break from normal life activities to a sacrosanct "liminal" (Turner 1969) time initiated by the object animation that is *taraṅga.* In Victor Turner's scheme of things, it is precisely this liminal period that allows for the breakdown of social norms and also for ontological transformations of ritual participants.

Annual village festivals honoring the local deities allow for the transformation from their *acala* forms housed in shrines to their *taraṅga* forms capable of movement, which must occur at the correct moment for the transformation to be auspicious and thus successful. Ceremonial consecration of the wooden pole, dressing it with fine drapery and a mask that reflects the anthropomorphic form of the deity, together render the animating process complete.[22] Assigned to a specific pole bearer or "anointed one" (*mānakarī*), a *taraṅga* deity embodies a certain kind of rhythmic movement while it is being carried in processions. The collective movement of each pole bearer within the local processions marks the presence of the spirits in human form. They become an integral part of the village congregation in their anthropomorphic form, allowing the main deities resting stationary in their respective shrines to be represented in village affairs. At this juncture, we may circle back to thinking along the lines of dramaturgy. The moment of transformation from background roles to performances in the foreground anchors the *avasara* of the *taraṅga* deity, which gives way to a fusion of the material and the spiritual—the topic of my next section.

Between the material and the spiritual

The dance and procession with the *taraṅga devatā*, the dressed wooden poles, marks a process of transferring the divine element from the shrines into the *taraṅga* manifestation. The pole bearers exhibit their physical strength by balancing the pole in specific positions during the rhythmic and vigorous dances performed during the processions. It is within this arena that the spectator gravitates toward the pole bearers' physical strength and competence to balance the *taraṅga* deities while transforming themselves into the objects they carry (Wagle 1995, 194–95). As the village festival progresses, the deity completely animates the wooden pole dressed in garments and masks, and the bearer becomes established as the medium. The *mānakarī*'s body makes the specific deity he is carrying accessible to the audience. In so doing, he establishes communication between the villagers and the deities.[23]

The performance unfolds through object animation combined with the transfer of agency. The pole bearer lends a human voice to enable the deity resident in the wooden pole to communicate with the audience. In the course of this transformative process, the *taraṅga devatā* mediums achieve a transition from the *nirguṇa* concept of a deity being formless to an anthropomorphized being capable of human communication in the *saguṇa* form. People in the audience with whom I spoke, for instance, mentioned a belief of "temporary form-taking" (*rūpagheṇe*) by the deity. The ritual of *rupaṇe*, which refers to putting the mask on the wooden pole, attests to this local belief. The embodiment of the deity as *taraṅga* could thus be thought of as a conception of "flesh" in the phenomenological sense proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1942, 1945). The focus of my discussion is, however, on the presentation of the embodied self in a ritualized social setting that engenders new meaning.

In addition to simply being paraded in the streets for the audience to see, the *taraṅga devatā* in their fully dressed form as mobile deities also dispense the role of judges within a temple environment. As has been shown to be the case elsewhere in India and other places in the world where law and ritual overlap (see Sax and Basu

2015; Berti, Good, and Tarabout 2016), *taraṅga*s also provide counsel on personal problems, land disputes, or local concerns about the weather and agricultural productivity. This aspect of their "human" selves highlights their legalistic function as part of a religious tribunal in which object animation reigns supreme. In recent times, interestingly enough, the Covid-19 pandemic and public health issues are becoming part of such discussions.[24] *Taraṅga devatā* in the role of judges thus suggests that they become entities capable of being called upon when needed to fulfil a specific role.[25] Although *taraṅga devatā* are manifestations of deities worshipped in shrines by their attendants, their moving form allows for fluid interaction with the devotees, as I have been arguing. The transition from an *acala* deity in a shrine to an animated *taraṅga* one also addresses the local need for a form that can relate to the people who worship them or depend upon them to adjudicate court cases.

It is also worthwhile to underscore the widespread belief elsewhere in India of temporary animation's role in the process of deities "taking shape." The terracotta effigies made for Durga *pūjā* in West Bengal and the Ganesh *caturṭī* festival in Maharashtra, for example, highlight the traditional backdrop for the practice of temporary material manifestation of deities brought out in procession (Feldhaus 1995, 76–84). Although the aforementioned deities are normally presented with form even when not being paraded, the idea is a similar one; namely, animating the gods for public processional purposes leads to distinct kinds of action and behavior. Following a similar belief, therefore, *taraṅga devatā* assume their full form only after being adorned with masks, drapery, and other paraphernalia during village festivals such as the one described. On conclusion of the festival, the *taraṅga* poles are either returned to their respective small shrines scattered across the village or are placed outside of public view, as if resting. *Taraṅga devatā* are, however, called upon when the village is in distress, or some sort of divine counsel needs to be sought. On such occasions, the *khāmba-kāṭi* is dressed and adorned with a mask. In such cases, a brief consecration ceremony activates what I have been calling "object animation," after which the *taraṅga* deities are presented as divine judges to rule over the matter at hand. The designated pole bearers or *mānakarī*s once again take their positions with their respective *taraṅga* deities to become divine media for the purpose of meting out decrees.

A striking difference between Hindu festivities in other parts of India such as the Durga *pūjā* and Ganesh *caturṭī* celebrations and the *taraṅga* performance is issues surrounding the moment or time of object animation. The *taraṅga devatā* could be summoned when the village needs divine intervention over a period of six months starting from Dusshera. The effigies of Durga and Ganesh, however, follow directives for installation and worship over a fixed period in the year. The terracotta effigies of Durga and Ganesh later return to their respective worlds after being immersed in water, while the *taraṅga* paraphernalia are disassembled and placed within their respective shrines for future access when summoned upon necessity by the village residents.

Unlike the ritual effigies for the Durga and Ganesh festivals, *taraṅga* representations indicate an acute sense of self-awareness by way of the act of possessing the *mānakarī*s, which is to say that the mobile deities borrow their carriers' speech to communicate with humans and utilize their physical strength to be danced about in public. The foreground performance featuring the *taraṅga* deities emerges as a specific type of social negotiation involving individual roles, during which participants self-monitor and play their respective roles.[26] These roles include that of attendants to the *mānakarī*s; that is, people who regulate the devotees by taking on clients sequentially for personal dialogues with the deities present for the occasion. The moment of *avasara* (when the object animation is activated) and the duration of *devaskī* allow for aspects of change to occur when people associated with the corresponding shrines assume their own roles in the context of the *taraṅga* performance. The presentation of self in this setting results in self-disclosure, for the devotees who voice their concerns and seek divine justice from the *taraṅga*s disclose their intimate details and concerns in a public setting, where all attendants are a part of the presentation. The invisible pact of ritual secrecy and sacrosanct confines of the temple where the action takes place binds the actors present to an unfolding, emergent performance.

Goffman's three dramaturgical principles of self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-disclosure (1969, 20–29) lay a fertile groundwork to situate rites of possession through the various *taraṅga* motifs that I have described. Although the *mānakarī*s report losing their self-awareness once the *lahara* (wave) of the deity washes over them, after which they are possessed, their awareness of being a *mānakarī* does not cease. They, and others around them, perform to keep the possession intact so that they may proceed competently throughout the remainder of the performance, thereby guaranteeing the efficacy of the ritual process. Through the temporary hypnotic enabling of embodying the material paraphernalia, the *mānakarī*s revivify the social status quo outside of the religious performance through their dramatic actions.

An entire body of enquiry in Hindu studies explores the deeper meanings concerning the form deities take in vernacular religious practices in India (for example, Korom 1999, 2002), and other scholars in general have long postulated the potential for a transformative liminal space between the mask and the wearer, in which the wearer eventually and temporarily becomes one with the mask worn (see Gill 1976). In the case of *taraṅga devatā*, the mask or the visage is that of the decorated deity in the form of a pole. The *mānakarī* transforms into the de facto voice of the divine, thus removing the barrier between the human and the possessing spirit. However, it must be noted that the bearer of the *taraṅga* pole almost becomes the deity, as my consultants would say, since there is a disconnect in form between the garbed pole deity and the bearer that acts as a barrier for a complete and absolute transformation. That said, during the courtroom performance of the deity, the bearer speaks on behalf of the deity, thus completing the partial possession as a form of mediation during procession into a full possession when entering the temple court, in which he embodies the deity by lending his voice.

The outside, the periphery of the performative space, influences the role of the *taraṅga devatā* in reasserting the need for liminal spaces. If *taraṅga* performance results in the embodiment of the shrine deities, it fits within the phenomenology of possible material forms a divine entity may take, but it also diverges from orthodox practice by being an antinomian kind of form-taking. The distinction between *taraṅga* and the ritual procession of the effigy in a palanquin, which is the norm, thus relegates the *taraṅga* ritual to a self-conscious re-enactment of exclusion in the

Foucauldian sense of the term (McNay 1991). Goffman's dramaturgical parameters aid us in analyzing how certain social groups are tied to the *taraṅga* ritual. The marginal specificity of occupational groups and lowly social status of the communities who are the custodians of the *taraṅga* phenomenon underscore their peripheral nature brought about by orthodox notions concerning low-caste impurity and the social taboos associated with it in the local communities that attend the village festivals. Some of the liminal social groups already discussed, such as the *mānakarī*s, take on the role of the front-stage actors who have some foreknowledge of the probable history of the embodied objects and their associated rituals. It is their views of origins to which I turn my attention in the next section.

A probable history of *taraṅga*

The *taraṅga* tradition of insignia in procession espouses a multi-layered local history of public performance through religious procession. The developmental stages of the unique form of wooden sticks embellished as a *taraṅga devatā* are shrouded in mystery full of speculations. In her influential work on sacrificial posts in Indic culture, Madeleine Biardeau (1989, 2004) charts the significance of wooden poles and posts in Hindu performative spaces within South Asia. The use of wooden poles in sacred and political performances as well as insignia in medieval (*c.* 800–1700 CE) India may hold some clues for the present form the *taraṅga devatā* take.

A probable candidate for the present form of the *taraṅga devatā* could be the *niśāṇa*s, flags offered to village deities or village spirits, a custom practiced by South Asian Muslims as well, for example when they perform rituals for venerated Sufis at their *dargāh*s (shrines) during annual *'urs* (death anniversary) processions (Saheb 1998). Late-medieval documents written during the Peshwa period (*c.* 1713–1818 CE) bring out the intimate association of local spirits or ghosts, village deities, and the Peshwa government. Some cases from nearby Konkan to the south, which is noted for the activity of spirits and village deities, mention the offering of a silken flag (*niśāṇa*) as a plea to the inanimate spirit.[27] Those accounts (*rumāl*) indicate the intent of propitiating a spirit so as to eliminate its malevolent activities from the sphere of the afflicted petitioner making the offering. In the Peshwa notes, one comes across the issue of ancestor spirits and unidentified ghosts (*bhūta*s), propitiated through material objects and animal sacrifice, serving as a lynchpin for the modern belief in spirit lore. *Taraṅga* could have possibly emerged as an innovative attempt at replacing the offering of a silken flag and staff with a wooden pole garbed in silk.

Taraṅga's other probable origin could possibly be traced to the practices of ancestor worship in western India. The popularity of memorials in the form of wooden and lithic slabs or poles for deceased ancestors in western India underscores their active agency in the local religious sphere (Settar and Sontheimer 1982). At least one of the *taraṅga* representations in temples across Sindhudurg district embodies a local ancestor spirit. These ancestor spirits function as interlocutors (through the agency of the pole bearer) as part of the tribunal setting during the village festivals described earlier in this article. The function of the ancestor spirit could have influenced the creation of *taraṅga* as a method to create an anthropomorphic form for the formless ancestors called upon to help the living.

Rich oral narratives current in the area attempt to trace the origin of *taraṅga* deities. A popular account from Devgad *tāluka* in Sindhudurg district, for example, includes an episode that connects the origin of the wooden pole with a person belonging to the socially oppressed group associated with the *taraṅga* today. The account, summarized from informants in several villages in Sindhudurg district, proceeds as follows:

> The legend goes that a village deity, preoccupied with some task at hand, decided to dispatch her attendant to the neighboring village as a response to a call for help. The attendant deity was a shapeshifting spirit, but the deity feared that the villagers would mistake the attendant for a malevolent spirit. To avert such an occurrence, the deity asked the attendant spirit to animate the objects lying within the shrine and to wear the deity's ceremonial mask so as to take on her form for the people. The deity also revealed herself in a dream to a Dalit cleaner in the village and commanded him to carry the wooden pole, drape, and mask as the deity's "emblems" (*niśāṇa*). The cleaner feared for his life as a result of defiling the divine paraphernalia through his touch, as Dalit individuals were prohibited from entering the sanctum of a Hindu temple or to even touch any ritual objects that would lead to defilement. The deity responded that his grandfather and great grandfather had previously carried the *taraṅga* on the deity's behalf and prosperity filled their household. Thus relieved, the Dalit individual began to carry the *taraṅga* animated by the attendant spirit. On reaching the neighboring village, the *mānakarī* carried the *taraṅga* pole and presided over a temple courtroom. A traditional courtroom of the deity thus proceeded with *taraṅga* as the judge, and the squabbles were resolved.[28]

This story may indicate that *taraṅga* performances were not initially annual affairs but took place only when the spirits—both benevolent and malevolent—were to be consulted for legalistic reasons.[29] If that is indeed the case, then the elements of ritual drama elaborated in the preceding paragraphs must have served to further induce the fostering of specific performances as Goffmanesque foregrounds within religious and ritualistic environments.

Discussions concerning the expressive forms of spirit-deities raise the question of the historicity of this practice. The local gazetteers published during the British colonial period attest to the prevalence of *taraṅga*s in the shrines of Sindhudurg and the surrounding area. The spirits manifesting themselves as *taraṅga*s are akin to the objects used in puppetry and the performance of *daśāvatārī* [30] (ten incarnations). The perceived importance of wooden poles utilized in bodily practices to represent the totems of the spirit world (Bhattacharya 2000, 41–50) could plausibly compound the material choices practitioners had to make in constructing the effigies used in processions. For instance, masks and other capping elements used for the *taraṅga* deities are influenced by the local iconography of female deities in their masked *rūpḍe* forms, and the symbol of *pañjā* or *haṃsa* for spirits and male deities could very well be a borrowed influence from local Islamic practices (Zaidi 2016, 19), as was also suggested for the shared use of flags. The overlap between the *pañjā* hoisted on the wooden pole used for Shi'i Muslim practices and that of *taraṅga*s cannot therefore be overlooked. Rigorous fieldwork in the future and directed ethnographic data-collection in this regard will certainly prove useful to establish the existence of an overlapping artistic sphere shared by local Muslims and Hindus. However, it remains to be seen how the mediation of orthopractic social hierarchy entered the *taraṅga devatā* ritual complex.

Concluding remarks

The tradition of *taraṅga* deities in the annual festivals of coastal western India is an ongoing process emerging historically from a cumulative understanding of disparate religious movements and developments that apparently cut across caste, class, and creed lines. Although the influence of Islamic iconography on *taraṅga* representations remains to be studied, the extant practices as described here suggest a body of cross-cultural and diachronic influences. As I have argued, the basic form of wooden poles to represent the deities of *khāmba-kāṭī* is very likely a development that grew out of the traditional *niśāṇa*s, indexical pendants used in the medieval period. If Biardeau (1989, 2004) is correct about the religious significance attached to wooden posts and poles since the Vedic period, then this powerful symbol gets translated through the form and function of *taraṅga* iconography in modern-day Maharashtra, at least along the coastal regions where I conducted my fieldwork. The *taraṅga* form draws from the symbology attached to a pole or a sacrificial post in Hinduism, or effigies hoisted on poles to allow for movement.

A play on the ritual masking and unmasking of the pole maintains the distinction between the pole bearer and the dressed object that becomes the vessel for the deity spirit being carried in procession. The play further continues with the delicate dance between the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* forms of divine expression, highlighting the fluidity of *taraṅga* deities as fixed forms. The ritual practice of performing the fluid transition of the *taraṅga* deities from the *acala* or fixed deity represents a change in the socioreligious history of the region. The medieval period (*c.* 1000–1600 CE) in western India that probably shaped the modern practices associated with the *taraṅga devatā* provides the historical background for situating the contemporary need for the construction of approachable deities on a vernacular level, as pointed out for other deities in Maharashtra by Christian Novetzke (2017). Moreover, by filling the roles of judges to counsel devotees within a temple tribunal setting, *taraṅga devatā* add yet another dimension to their social role as aniconic mediating forces who need anthropomorphic form in order to be approachable, which then allows them to adjudicate cases for the masses attending the annual festivals arranged to bring out the mostly stationary, formless deities that spend the majority of their time in shrines dedicated to them.

The phenomenology of presenting the local deities to the public during annual village festivals could be extrapolated as a kind of dramatic performance embedded with devotional and philosophical notions rooted in Hinduism, such as *bhakti* ontological concepts concerning *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* that I have defined and explored in this article. In closing, I propose that Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy that

I employed in my analysis of *taraṅga devatā* offers us a useful lens to view a set of modern practices performed along the coast of Maharashtra that have to do with the symbolic untangling of complex hierarchical relationships that regulate everyday social interaction throughout the region where such practices occur. Similar to the *avasara* of *taraṅga* deities when they animate the material paraphernalia, *taraṅga* festivities offer a momentary egalitarian refuge from an otherwise stratified society. This is especially noticeable when Dalit members of the local communities who participate in the festivals described in this article act as *mānakarī*s, who express the mitigation of social boundaries in the foreground performances that I identified in my analysis.[31]

The social background of the performers involved in such village-wide, multi-caste religious performances highlights the significance of the temporary status change achieved by low-caste members that participate ritually in their *mānakarī* roles. By reducing their own sense of agency to be a co-producer of spirit animation during *taraṅga* performance, they play a key role that elevates their status for the duration of the ritual. Just as the stationary *acala* deities ontologically manifest themselves anthropomorphically then move about through the *taraṅga* medium, so too do participating Dalits go through a transformation when they symbolically change their ontological status by “moving” up to a higher position in the social hierarchy vis-à-vis the ritually pure castes that are also engaged in the same event that includes all members of the surrounding communities in one way or another, regardless of caste, class, or other forms of social status. It must be said, however, that the change in status among select males from the Dalit groups who share divine agency as *mānakarī*s is only temporary, since the end of the *taraṅga* festival reinstates the status quo, due to the ideology of purity and pollution propagated by the dominant groups.

The performances described in this article that use objects as vessels for the spirits being displayed in human form and that allow for the temporary status increase of the *mānakarī* pole bearers suggest precisely those aspects of Goffman’s dramaturgical thesis that emphasize continual self-awareness of the participants’ sociological background and a self-consciousness of the actors’ positionality within the local hierarchy involved. Symbolic meaning-making in the *taraṅga* performance is thus a temporary departure from social reality that displays a dramatic form of ritual possession that affects all members of the participating communities, regardless of social or economic status. Despite the fact that some scholars have criticized the opinion that possession rites are attempts to dismantle various forms of social hierarchies, the specific case that I have discussed here presents some preliminary ethnographic and historical data for rethinking how such rites do indeed act in a utilitarian fashion—they bring about a temporary state of fluid boundaries through performance that does not permanently eliminate the rules governing social categories but at least loosens those rules up long enough that the rites may have longer-term social and political consequences in western India. In embodying the spirit of *khāmba-kāṭi*, the *mānakarī*s embody the fluidity of *taraṅga* to move seamlessly between the material and the spiritual, as well as the background and the foreground, for the entire duration of *avasara*, thereby performing an auspicious service for community members in the specific region investigated here.

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NOTES

1. For a cross-cultural overview written by an Indologist concerning some of the issues involved, see, for example, the review article by Smith (2001).

2. Between 1894 and 1896 he wrote a series of articles on the topic, only one of which is cited here, where he equates the Indic term in question with “devil.” Shields (1987), however, much more benevolently refers to the same class of entities as “healing spirits.” Two important studies worth noting that treat *bhūta* worship in Maharashtra specifically from a non-evaluative position are Stanley (1988) and Wagle (1995).

3. The term “vernacular” is gaining traction in many areas of study to replace other terms, such as “folk” or “local.” See Primiano (1995). Novetzke uses it specifically for Maharashtrian culture.

4. While missionaries often referred to such practices as “devil worship,” scholars such as Lewis (1971) used “ecstatic,” while Eliade (1964) used “shamanic.”

5. It is roughly 5,200 square kilometers in size with a population of approximately 850,000. The district has a very small urban population, with almost 80 percent of the residents living in rural areas made up of villages.

6. The study of religious displays during processions has also more recently come into sharper focus in the study of Hinduism. See, for example, Jakobsen (2008).

7. Other works in the social sciences, such those by as Goffman’s contemporary Victor Turner (1969), opened the door for the investigation of ritual drama as performance. Their seminal works and the flood of books that followed all by and large emphasize the kinds of power that

performance space provides for the transformation of reality, even if only temporary, as I shall suggest in the following paragraphs.

8. I use the adjectival form of the noun "syncretism" in quotation marks, since it is a contested concept in the academic study of religion. However, a discussion of the central issues involved in the debate over whether or not to use it is beyond the scope of this brief study. For a suggestive and incisive critique, see Stewart (2001).

9. The term *rūp* (shape) in Marathi can refer adoringly to physical beauty when addressing a woman. The diminutive *ḍe* is added to emphasize the affectionate nature of the term. *Rūpḍe* can therefore be interpreted as "affectionately beautifying" the (little) pole.

10. On the symbolism of anthills and their ritual usage, see Irwin (1982), who traces their significance back to Vedic times.

11. Some of the Indic terms used here are borrowed from Haas (1912).

12. See, for example, Korom (2003) for an extensive comparative study of *muḥarram* rituals in which the open palm motif is used to cap standards that are carried annually in Shi'i processions performed throughout the world as well.

13. This general belief is recounted on the basis of ethnographic interviews I recorded in Sindhudurg district in 2019.

14. The reader should be familiar with the public festivals celebrating Ganesh, particularly the *ganeṣotsav* in Maharashtra and the celebration of *navarātrī* in honor of the goddess Durga. I skip over the history and details of these two well-known performance traditions owing to a general familiarity with such celebrations among the public, so as not to detract the reader from the topic at hand. I simply introduce the Ganesh and Durga festivals solely to highlight the performative differences.

15. The terms *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* for form and formless, respectively, were popularized during the *bhakti* movement in India (*c.* 1200–1800 CE). This well-known socioreligious movement witnessed the involvement of saints, bards, and religious thinkers who resisted oppressive religious norms and sought to break the social hierarchy that dictated access to religious and social participation by oppressed groups, such as the Mahars referred to in this article. Here, I use the terms as they are deployed in local discourse and the popular belief systems in the region where I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork.

16. William Sax, in his work on healing rituals in Chamoli, charts the boundaries of spatial anchors for performative and possession rites that simultaneously address the narratives of possession, healing, as well as embodiment as agencies of this change. Sax effectively uses Edward Casey's (1996; cf. Sax 2009) piece for this positionality to explore the rituals "from the inside" for the community, which I continue for the case of *taraṅga* performances in Konkan area. I bring out the point of positionality in relation to the *mānakarī*'s embodiment to stress the reflexivity of positionality of the pole bearer in the social space more so than the physical/territorial space that dictates the effectiveness of the fluid transition in question.

17. The respondents worded it as "*sagale sārkhe vāṭāt*" or "*bhed kāhī nāhī*." Interestingly, the members of non-Brahmin communities describe this seemingly egalitarian performance as a win, and the Brahmin respondents tried to highlight this as a reflection of the usual state of affairs, where the non-Brahmin townspeople are treated as equals by the Brahmins. The

narrative analysis could reflect further attitudes of perceiving egalitarian participation in Konkani villages, which will be dealt with separately in future research pieces.

18. There is further scope for future research that could extend into the colonizing of the human body for *taraṅga* practices and ritual performances. Unfortunately, it cannot be discussed here.

19. Supported by similar descriptions included in Smith (2006, 120–22).

20. It is a literal translation from Marathi of an interview conducted during fieldwork in 2019: "*Taraṅga mhanje shevṭi kay, eka choṭi lāta, hyā bhaktisāgarātil. Hya devānce paṇa taseca*." The speaker is a priest at the Bhagwati temple, Kamte-Kot, Devgad *tāluka* in Sindhudurg.

21. It is celebrated on the tenth day of the lunar month named Ashvina, which is the seventh month of the Hindu calendar. Overall, it symbolizes the victory of good over evil.

22. Saldanha (1911) notes the practice of *avasara* (object animation) and *taraṅga* performances in Sindhudurg district.

23. For similar performances in Tamil Nadu, see Biardeau (2004).

24. The presence of *taraṅga devatā* in ritual courtrooms deserves a separate exploration but is outside the purview of the current article. It would, however, make for an interesting future study in the post-pandemic future.

25. The idea of being "called upon" to descend into a human assembly to perform a specific function is known from elsewhere in India. In West Bengal, for example, the ritual of *nāmḍāk* (name call) for the village deity known as Dharmaraj is also performed annually in a similar manner. See Korom (2002, 436–37).

26. Korom (1999) explores the relationship between play and ritual during such Hindu festive occasions in much greater depth.

27. Noted in a 1786 court case as a *peśve daftar ghaḍṇi rumāl* in Marathi. See Wagle (1995, 182). The presence of traditions popularized during the Peshwa period in Maharashtra is apparent in the tradition of *taraṅga* deities under investigation here.

28. This is an oral narrative that I collected in the villages of Mitbhav, Devgad, Naringre, Kamte-Kot, and Kudal in 2019. I thank Mr. Bapat, who assisted me with interview recording and arranging meetings with *mānakarī*s in Sindhudurg district.

29. *Taraṅga-mānakarī* presiding over a courtroom scene makes for a substantial analysis into the overlap of local tribunals and rites of possession, along with the inversion of social hierarchies. This piece of the performative tradition is best explored as a dedicated research paper and has not been dealt with in this article, in the interest of time.

30. *Daśāvatārī* as a form of offering to the deity in the form of theatre performance is typical of the area (South Konkan, in particular). Although it literally means "ten incarnations," referring to the popular *avatāra* theme in Hinduism, the theatre performances are based on any chosen religious theme. The colorful drapery and some props used in the theatre performances resemble the paraphernalia associated with the *taraṅga* performances.

31. For parallels concerning the temporary change of low-caste devotees into high-caste ritual officiants, see again, for example, Korom (1999, 2002).

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RESEARCH NOTE

Sri Lanka’s Ahikuntika and Kuravar Communities

Language and Culture

Sri Lanka’s small native population of Ahikuntika and Kuravar itinerant communities continues to be a very visible part of Sri Lankan society, with snake charmers and monkey dancers a common sight in Sri Lanka’s tourist areas. Sri Lanka’s Ahikuntikas and Kuravars speak a highly idiosyncratic dialect of Telugu that has never been fully documented. Based on ethnolinguistic research carried out in Sri Lanka during the first half of 2015 and in the summer of 2017, I tentatively conclude that Sri Lanka’s Ahikuntikas and Kuravars probably originated from Telugu-speaking populations in Tamilnadu between two and three hundred years ago; that the continued viability of the Sri Lankan Ahikuntikas’ and Kuravars’ traditional lifestyle is increasingly precarious; and that their language Sri Lanka Telugu (formerly known as Sri Lanka Gypsy Telugu) may be in danger of disappearing within a generation or so. I also examine the question of ultimate provenience, enquiring whether this itinerant caste may bear any ethnic kinship with other itinerant castes on the mainland subcontinent.

Keywords: Sri Lanka Telugu—Telugu—dialectology—Kuravar—Ahikuntika

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Although the South Asian nation of Sri Lanka has many cultural and linguistic similarities with India and the rest of South Asia, it does not have any large itinerant communities such as are to be found elsewhere on the subcontinent. Indeed, Sri Lanka appears to have no native itinerant communities of any great antiquity; in this it stands in stark contrast to India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. Sri Lanka does have a small semi-itinerant population of Telugu speakers, however, who are known in Sinhala as the *ahikuntikayo* ("snake charmers"; Anglicized as Ahikuntikas) and as *pāmpāṭṭikaḷ* ("snake dancers") in Tamil. They themselves sometimes use the dialectal Telugu term *pāmuloru* ("snake people") to describe themselves. Such communities from Tamil-speaking areas of Sri Lanka are also sometimes referred to as "Kuravars" (from the Tamil, meaning "diviner"; this term, also used in Tamilnadu to denote itinerant castes like the Narikkuravars or Kuruvikkārans, was popularized by Sabaratnasinghe Thananjayarajasingam, who worked exclusively with the Tamil-speaking Kuravars in the Akkaraipattu area in southeast Sri Lanka). I shall use hereafter the term "Pamuloru" to refer to members of the Sri Lanka Telugu-speaking community, in general; "Ahikuntikas" will refer only to Pamuloru from Sinhala-speaking areas, and "Kuravars" to Pamuloru from Tamil-speaking areas. As suggested by some of their demonyms, the Pamuloru still actively practice snake charming, in addition to monkey dancing and palmistry. Men are typically practitioners of the former two activities, and women the latter.

Sri Lanka's Pamuloru, as already mentioned, have in common the use of a peculiar and little-documented dialect of Telugu. This article will show further on that—based on linguistic evidence from this dialect—the Pamuloru likely have not been in Sri Lanka for more than a few centuries.[1] Their dialect, while distinctive, appears to be derived from a comparatively modern form of Telugu, not from any classical dialect—although it does exhibit certain features of Telugu no longer standard in most Telugu-speaking areas in India. It is my purpose in this article to give an overview of the status of this community in Sri Lanka, including its language and culture, as well as the prospects for its long-term survival.

My first acquaintance with the Pamuloru was in 2001, when I was in Negombo, Sri Lanka, doing field research for my PhD documenting a local Tamil dialect. My advisor, the late W. S. Karunatilake, told me about the Pamuloru and their Telugu dialect, mentioned that he had done a very small amount of preliminary work with the help of a single informant who had visited his home in Colombo, and advised me to conduct further research on them. Later that year, I met a man on the Negombo beach unlike anyone I had ever seen before, carrying a python, monkey, and circular basket in which a rather docile cobra was coiled. I interacted with him long enough to ascertain that, indeed, he spoke Telugu. Intrigued by my first-ever meeting with a snake charmer (which included the opportunity to handle his animals), I made a mental note to return sometime in the future to learn more about this enigmatic group of people.

The opportunity came fifteen years later, with the help of a five-month Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship. Once again in Negombo, I quickly found an Ahikuntika man on the beach with the usual accoutrements. I was surprised at his ability to interact with foreign tourists in several languages, and, after watching a performance featuring both monkey dancing and snake charming, in which his macaque, dressed in miniature clothes, tumbled about on the sand in response to commands while his cobra swayed above its basket, I learned from him about Kudagama, the village that he called home in north central Sri Lanka, located near the famous temple city of Anuradhapura. A few weeks later, I managed to reach Kudagama via a series of bus rides and a knowledgeable tuk-tuk driver, where I was introduced to Puncibanda, one of the most prominent members of the community and proprietor of its only general store. Puncibanda proved an affable and very helpful language consultant, and it was through him that I was introduced to many other members of the community—although he clearly regarded me as “his” friend, and made sure that all my meetings with other community members were through him. My primary objective being linguistic rather than ethnographic research, I never lived in the community but instead made frequent visits to Puncibanda’s home, often staying for meals and for an entire day. Puncibanda’s home was one of the largest in the village, although the second floor was unfinished. He in turn frequently took me to others’ homes in the village to meet family members and to visit the museum described elsewhere in this article. His wife, mother, young daughter, and youngest teenage son were all frequently present in the home, while his older sons—none of whom plied any of the traditional trades—visited occasionally from elsewhere in the country where they worked. It is perhaps worth mentioning that his daughter, who attended the community school, had six toes on each foot—possibly indicative of excessive endogamy—which Puncibanda regarded as a mark of beauty. In addition to immediate family members, other curious community members occasionally visited to see the visiting foreigner. We interacted exclusively in Sinhala, without a translator.

During these five months, I spent many hours eliciting information—primarily from Puncibanda, but also from some of his other family members—about Sri Lanka Telugu, recorded both in notebooks and audio. For two months in the summer of 2017, I returned to Sri Lanka with funding from the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies. On that visit, I returned to Kudagama and renewed my relationship with Puncibanda and his family (his oldest son by that time was working in Dubai). I also made one trip to remote Alikambe in southeast Sri Lanka, where I spent a single afternoon with a few rather reluctant community members finding out what I could about their community and use of language. Rather than Sinhala, I spoke

Tamil with them, since most of them spoke comparatively little Sinhala. Because of the remoteness of the location from either Negombo or Colombo, I only visited this location once.

Previous scholarship

Prior to my own fieldwork, modern scholarship on Sri Lanka's Pamuloru communities has been extremely limited. Thananjayarajasingam (1973a, 1973b) published two brief ethnographic accounts of the Kuravars of southeastern Sri Lanka in the 1970s that describe a social structure that no longer exists, although efforts have been made for the last ten years or so to revive aspects of it. Karunatilake (1974, 1982) published two very brief descriptions of the phonology and noun inflection in what he came to call "Sri Lanka Gypsy Telugu" (Karunatilake 1982), a term I have rejected owing to its pejorative connotations. Dennis McGilvray's valuable (2008) book on caste in eastern Sri Lanka gives some very useful information on the Kuravars, but much of it is based on a single visit with a Kuravar man near Akkaraipattu, on the east coast south of Batticaloa, in the 1970s. No in-depth ethnographic work has ever been done on the Ahikuntikas of the Sinhala-speaking areas of Sri Lanka.

More recently, the Pamuloru have attracted some journalistic interest in Sri Lanka, and the Dilmah Conservation group published a lavishly illustrated "coffee table book" on them in 2013 titled *The Ahikuntika*, with no credited author, which contains a good amount of information and even scholarly data in a lengthy socioeconomic survey carried out by Ranjith Bandara of the University of Colombo.

Existing settlements and population

Although no accurate census data on the Ahikuntikas and Kuravars exists, the total surviving population of Sri Lanka's Telugu-speaking Pamuloru does not likely exceed five thousand, and is probably significantly less than that. There are no more than a half-dozen communities of Ahikuntikas and Kuravars in Sri Lanka, of which the largest of them, Kudagama (near Thambuttegama in the Anuradhapura District) has around 1,500 total inhabitants, according to Bandara (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 70), although Kudagama residents have told this researcher that only about six hundred people reside there. According to the traditions of the residents of Kudagama, the site has been inhabited by Ahikuntikas for around two hundred years. Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa authorized a permanent grant of government land in Kudagama to the Ahikuntikas. It is presumably the proximity of this site and several other nearby settlements (for example, Andarabedda and Kalawewa) to Anuradhapura, with its throngs of pilgrims (and, nowadays, tourists), that has made it attractive for people like the Ahikuntikas, whose traditional livelihood has depended on public performances. Kudagama also lies close to a large reservoir and is surrounded by agricultural land, while the bustling town of Thambuttegama provides access to a full range of stores for groceries and other household items.

The next largest settlement appears to be the Kuravar double community of Alikambe and Kanchirankudah near Akkaraipattu in southeast Sri Lanka. These communities are both quite remote from the sizable seaside city of mostly Tamil-speaking Muslims; Alikambe is connected only by very infrequent bus service and has very few stores of its own.

Smaller communities may be found at Maduragama, which has sixty families (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 40); Mahakanadarawa, which has thirty-four families and more than two hundred individuals (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 42); and several other communities named in the "Kudagama Charter" of 2011 (the Andarabedda and Kalawewa, as well as Sirivallipuram). Aside from these, I was told in Sri Lanka that there are Telugu speakers in the western coastal, mostly Tamil-speaking Muslim city of Puttalam, but was unable to locate any of them.

According to the residents of Kudagama, at least one former Pamuloru settlement in north central Sri Lanka has disappeared in recent years. The town of Vavuniya, located north of Anuradhapura on the boundary between Sinhala-speaking and Tamil-speaking Sri Lanka, once had a settlement of Pamuloru (it is not clear whether they were Ahikuntikas, Kuravars, or both) but no longer does. During Sri Lanka's long civil war, Vavuniya was a major flashpoint. As a result, the Pamuloru living in the area—like many other residents—abandoned their homes and moved to other settlements further south, including Kudagama, and have so far not attempted to return to Vavuniya.

Lifestyle and traditions

These communities vary widely as to the degree to which "traditional" lifestyles and customs are still observed. The so-called "Maddili" community at Maduragama, for example, apparently no longer practices monkey dancing, snake charming, palmistry, or any other traditional Pamuloru occupations and has entirely adopted Sinhala names. However, they still speak the Telugu language among themselves (Dilmah Conservation 2013, 40). According to Puncibanda, my primary consultant in Kudagama, the Maddili have a reputation among other members of the Ahikuntika community for violence and criminal behavior.

Some of the inhabitants of Kudagama, including some of the members of the family who served as my primary language consultants, have likewise abandoned the professions of their forefathers. The father, Puncibanda, aged thirty-eight, operates a small general store in Kudagama with his wife—the only general store in the village, in fact—while his three sons mostly do day labor (primarily construction) in various parts of the island. However, Puncibanda always had cobras and monkeys at his house and occasionally still traveled to other communities to make extra money plying his traditional trades. I was unable to ascertain how many other men in Kudagama may have practiced snake charming and monkey dancing as sidelines to more permanent work. Like other Sri Lankan men, young Pamuloru are increasingly drawn to work opportunities outside Sri Lanka in the Middle East, especially the Gulf states. One of Puncibanda's sons, for example, had moved to Dubai for work on my second extended visit to Kudagama. However, many of Puncibanda's extended kin in Kudagama still journey around the island practicing monkey dancing and snake charming, and many homes throughout the village still have pet monkeys, cobras, and pythons, which are obtained on trapping expeditions in the nearby forests and hills.

Moreover, Pamuloru snake charmers and monkey dancers can still be found at major tourist attractions, like Galle-Face Green in Colombo, the Fort at Galle, Nilaweli Beach north of Trincomalee, and the beaches of Negombo. These come from settlements like Kudagama to earn what they can, especially during peak tourist seasons. Whether there remain in Sri Lanka any truly homeless, completely itinerant groups of Ahikuntikas or Kuravars is difficult to ascertain, but it is extremely unlikely; Puncibanda assured me that, while there are homeless individuals here and there who suffer from alcoholism and drug addiction, there are no longer any completely itinerant families or family groups. Still, some Sri Lankan Pamuloru families continue to make lengthy forays around the country from their residences, and at such times will often encamp beneath bridges and other sheltered spots, much as their ancestors once did.

Like Sri Lanka's Vedda aboriginals, the Ahikuntikas and Kuravars once practiced hunting and gathering, but even when Thananjayarajasingam was documenting the Kuravars of eastern Sri Lanka almost five decades ago, the traditional hunting lifestyle, together with the social structure built around it, had already all but vanished, in no small part because of blanket prohibitions on hunting by Sri Lanka's postcolonial government (Thananjayarajasingham 1973a, 124). Originally, the *vedikkāran* or lead huntsman was one of three categories of officials that constituted traditional Kuravar tribunals (ibid.). Thananjayarajasingam's vivid description of such Kuravar hunters is of a lifestyle that has vanished completely:

> The weapons they carry are the hunting spear mounted on a wooden pole and the light battle-knife called "musket." Each member of the expedition brings with him three or four wild dogs. . . . The prey is killed by aiming a spear at it, care being taken not to injure any of the encircling dogs. . . . The battle knife is used for clearing the path and for cutting the carcase [*sic*]. If a boar or any other big animal is killed, the surplus flesh is sold at the local markets. Catapult, snare and trap are hunting implements used for small game. (Ibid.)

Interestingly, Thananjayarajasingam recorded "musket" for "large hunting knife"; this term is nowadays simply the word in Sri Lanka Telugu for "knife."

The nearest that most modern Ahikuntikas and Kuravars come to the hunting activities of their forebears is in the collection of wild toque macaques and snakes (usually cobras and pythons) for their traveling performances. Like snake charmers in India, they are also sometimes called upon to remove poisonous snakes from inside and near human residences. But even this aspect of their lifestyle is under severe threat inasmuch as the Sri Lankan government, which is one of the world's most conservation oriented, has sought to prohibit the capture and taming of wild monkeys and snakes. In a country where even the casual collection of insects and plants by Sri Lankan citizens (let alone foreign visitors) is strictly prohibited by law, it is difficult to imagine that monkey dancing and snake charming will remain viable professions for much longer.

The example of India, which has outlawed the private ownership of snakes since the 1970s and has been actively persecuting snake charmers since the 1990s, is suggestive of what may happen in Sri Lanka. As a result of legal harassment, snake charmers, once a cultural fixture, have virtually disappeared from major tourist and pilgrimage sites in India, as remaining snake charmers have been forced to ply their trades in remoter areas where they are less likely to attract unwanted attention from the authorities. Snake charming, which probably originated on the subcontinent millennia ago, may well disappear altogether from India during this century.

According to Thananjayarajasingam, whose 1973 ethnographic paper will probably remain the only description of Sri Lanka Kuravar social structure in its original form, Kuravars governed themselves with popularly elected tribunals consisting of three categories of representatives; besides the *vedikkāran*, these tribunals included a *vidāne* (judge) and *sēvakan* (fiscal authority), all of whom served indefinitely in these capacities, as long as they enjoyed favor in the Kuravar community (ibid., 125). Such tribunals were called upon to adjudicate cases involving (1) assault and theft, (2) adultery, (3) problems with marriage negotiations, and (4) "breach of social rules, norms, etc." (ibid.). Penalties imposed, which were binding, were limited to fines and excommunication from the community; husbands were responsible for paying fines incurred by wives. Trial by ordeal was formerly practiced in cases of suspected adultery, but this practice had fallen completely into disuse by the time of Thananjayarajasingam's research (ibid., 126).

The Pamuloru have no official status as an ethnic minority and are still subject to significant discrimination in employment and education, but most of their children are now able to attend school. The village of Kudagama has a large primary school, and many youths go on to attend secondary school in the area. Indeed, adults in Kudagama over thirty mostly recognize that, thanks to a growing population and ever-stricter laws, the way of life they knew as children is no longer practicable. Puncibanda's children are all as well-educated and literate as their Sinhalese counterparts, although Puncibanda himself is unable to read and write.

The Ahikuntikas and Kuravars were originally Hindu, but a large majority of them have converted either to Buddhism or Christianity. Kanchirankudah, a small settlement of Hindu Kuravars near Alikambe, appears to be the last community of Hindu Pamuloru in Sri Lanka. The cults of various Hindu deities, like the goddesses Kali and Pattini, and the popular Tamil god Pillaiyar (the Tamil name for Ganesh), persist even among some of the non-Hindu Pamuloru, however. Kudagama and other Ahikuntika communities in the vicinity of Anuradhapura have large numbers of Buddhists and some Catholics, but few to no Hindus. In Kudagama itself there is a large Buddhist temple, while Catholic villagers attend church in nearby Thambuttegama.

Sri Lanka Telugu

The one significant distinguishing feature of Sri Lanka's Pamuloru that does not appear to be in immediate danger of disappearing is their language, a dialect of Telugu, a Dravidian language akin to Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada, that they sometimes refer to as *mānamāṭla*, or "language of the heart." Most if not all Pamuloru can speak Sri Lanka Telugu, although for the younger generation working outside the home in non-traditional professions, the pressures of Sinhala (an Indo-Aryan language related to north Indian languages like Hindi and Bengali, but long isolated geographically) and Tamil are causing them to forget Telugu. One of the sons of Puncibanda attended school and works away from home and, when interacting with this researcher, struggled much more than his father to remember how to speak *mānamāṭla*. None of the Pamuloru that I met were able to read or write the Telugu script used on the Indian mainland, however. As Pamuloru children continue to be assimilated into mainstream Sri Lankan society via the public schools and subsequent employment outside of Pamuloru society, they may abandon their native language as well. In Kudagama I observed that many in their teens and early twenties preferred to speak Sinhala, older adults seemed equally comfortable with both languages, and some of the very aged (like Puncibanda's mother), who grew up in traditional Pamuloru society with little intimate contact with outsiders, did not speak Sinhala at anywhere near a level of bilingual proficiency.

Still, another trait of Sri Lanka Pamuloru culture afforded optimism that their native tongue will be preserved: the remarkable proficiency for language demonstrated by many of the men who still ply the traditional itinerant trades. Among such, it is not unusual to speak both Sinhala and Tamil proficiently but also a significant amount of various foreign languages, including English, German, French, and Russian. A typical Ahikuntika man in the course of a few months' work may well travel from Sinhala-speaking Anuradhapura to Negombo, Colombo, and Galle, interacting with Sinhalese and foreign tourists at every turn. Or he might travel eastward to Tamil-speaking Trincomalee and the beach-resorts northward, like Nilaweli, where he must speak Tamil while hoping to make money entertaining the throngs of mostly European tourists who flock to the beaches. In the course of such travels, many Ahikuntikas learn enough English and other important European languages to hold simple conversations, suggesting a considerable cultural disposition for attracting business by learning language. One Ahikuntika I met on the beach at Negombo, a very popular destination for international tourists, not only spoke a surprising amount of English but appeared to have picked up some Russian as well. Another, who lived in Kudagama but made frequent forays as a snake charmer and monkey dancer, spoke English quite well, despite having little formal education.

Sri Lanka Telugu (SLT) itself has many distinctive traits in comparison with the Telugu spoken on the Indian mainland and has also imported many Sinhala and Tamil words. For example, in the version of SLT spoken in Kudagama—for which Sinhala is the lingua franca outside the home—Sinhala words like *pota* ("book"), *yaluwa* ("friend"), and *puṭuwa* ("chair") have replaced the original Telugu words.

A few words in SLT appear to be neither Telugu/Dravidian nor Sinhala in origin and may perhaps be remnants of a primordial, pre-Telugu Indo-Aryan language akin to those spoken by most other itinerant groups on the subcontinent. These include *dunga* ("lie, falsehood"), *lækka* ("money"), and *bunnæo* (a greeting). In particular, *lækka* may be distantly related to *love* (and its variant forms), the word for "money" in the many dialects of European Romani, although it may also be related to Telugu *lekka*, "calculation," a word itself of Indo-Aryan origin.[2]

SLT has developed certain distinctive traits that are apparently the result of innovation in isolation from the mainland. A number of noun inflectional suffixes, including the instrumental case (*–tō* in Mainland Telugu [MT]; nonexistent in SLT), the dative case (*–ku* or *–ki* in MT; *–gu*/*–gi* in SLT), and the plural affix (*–lu* in MT; usually *–la* in SLT), have undergone significant change in SLT.

The SLT simple past tense is noteworthy for being divergent from MT and affords an important clue to the origin of SLT and its speaker community. In MT the simple past tense is typically indicated by the tense marker [*–ǣ–*] interposed between the stem and the personal ending, as in *tāg–ǣ–nu*, "I drank": *tāg*[*u*]– ("drink"), *–ǣ–* [past tense], *–nu* [first person singular]. By contrast, the SLT form is *tāgiti*, "I drank." The full SLT simple past tense paradigm for *tāgu–*, "drink" is shown in the following table, with MT forms shown in parentheses for comparison:

Table 1. Sri Lanka Telugu (SLT) and Mainland Telugu (MT)
simple past tense compared (tāgu–, "drink")

	SLT (MT)	**SLT (MT)**
1st	*tāgiti* (*tāgǣnu*)	*tāgitimi* (*tāgǣmu*)
2nd	*tāgitiwe* (*tāgǣwu*)	*tāgitiri* (*tāgǣru*)
3rd	*tāge*/*tāgæ* (*tāgǣḍu*, *tāgindi*)	*tāgiri* (*tāgǣru*)

It will be seen that, whereas all MT simple past tense forms clearly have a single morpheme, *–ǣ–*, as a past tense marker, SLT displays no such consistency. For the SLT first and second persons, the simple past tense marker appears to be *–iti–*, with the first person singular being bereft of any personal ending,[3] and the others showing a clear delineation between the past tense marker and the person or subject agreement marker (first plural *–mi*, second singular *–we*, and second plural *–ri*, all of which are clearly related to their MT counterparts *–mu*, *–we*, and *–ru*, respectively). In the third person, however, the situation is different. The third person singular *tāge*/*tāgæ* appear to have some relationship with MT *tāgǣḍu*, such that the SLT form has lost the MT third singular subject agreement marker *–ḍu*. The SLT third person plural *tāgiri* may also be related to MT *tāgǣru*, but in this case, the MT third plural subject agreement marker *–ru* is preserved in SLT as *–ri*. Thus the SLT simple past tense has innovated in the following areas:

1. The subject agreement marker has been lost in both the first and third persons singular.
2. SLT has created a new simple past tense marker *–iti–* for the first and second persons.

As it turns out, there are a set of past tense Telugu inflectional forms that closely resemble those found in SLT, but they are found in Old Telugu, not the standard modern dialect of the Indian mainland. According to Krishnamurti (2003, 319), the past tense in Telugu is indicated by forms such as *–e–*/*–iye–*, *–iti–* ~ *–ti–* ~ *–ṭi–*. Krishnamurti gives the following Old Telugu past tense verb paradigm for *waṇḍ–* ("cook"), *an–* ("say"), and *cūc–* ("see"), for which the similarities between the Old Telugu and SLT past tenses are apparent:

Table 2. Old Telugu past tense forms (with SLT forms for comparison)

	Singular	**Plural**
1st	*waṇḍ–iti–ni*, *aṇ–ṭi–ni*, *cūc–iti–ni* (cf. SLT *tāg–iti*)	*waṇḍ–iti–mi*, *aṇ–ṭi–mi*, *cūc–iti–mi* (cf. SLT *tāg–iti–mi*)
2nd	*waṇḍ–iti–wi*, *aṇ–ti–wi*, *cūc–iti–wi* (cf. SLT *tāg–iti–we*)	*waṇḍ–iti–ri*, *aṇ–ṭi–ri*, *cūc–iti–ri* (cf. SLT *tāg–iti–ri*)
3rd (m. sg.)	*waṇḍ–e–nu*, *an–e–nu/an–iy–enu*, *cūc–e–nu* (cf. SLT *tāg–e/tāg–æ*)	*waṇḍ–i–ri*, *an–i–ri*, *cūc–i–ri* (cf. SLT *tāg–i–ri*)

Comparing these with the SLT forms given in Table 1, the only noteworthy divergences are to be found in the first person singular, which in SLT lacks the affix *–ni* found in Old Telugu, and the third person singular, for which SLT lacks the Old Telugu affix *–nu*. But Krishnamurti also indicates (ibid.) that the final *–ni* of the first person singular is frequently dropped altogether, leaving the third person singular as the only point of divergence. It seems very clear that the past tense of SLT is very conservative, mirroring the past tense of Old Telugu from five or more centuries back instead of the past tense of modern Telugu.

But it turns out that this conservative past tense formation, while not typical of most modern Telugu dialects spoken in the Telugu heartland (the Indian states Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), is widespread among outlier Telugu dialects found outside this area on the mainland, especially in neighboring Tamilnadu and Karnataka. According to Subrahmanyam (2013, 360), "[t]he Old Telugu past tense forms still survive in the dialects of Tamilnadu and Karnataka with the addition of minor morphophonemic changes," including "changes like c > s . . . corresponding to OTe *cēs-iti-ni* 'I did', *cūc-iti-ni* 'I saw', etc., [for which] these dialects [in Tamilnadu and Karnataka] have *sēs-ti-ni*, *sūs-ti-ni*, etc." In my own documentation, I observed the changed c > s that Subrahmanyam mentions. It therefore appears probable that the speakers of Sri Lanka Telugu came to Sri Lanka not from the Telugu heartland but from the Telugu-speaking minority population of Tamilnadu. This makes sense geographically as well as historically, because Tamilnadu is much closer to Sri Lanka than the Telugu states of India, and because Tamilnadu saw large influxes of Telugu speakers from the north several centuries ago, when economic conditions in India's far south offered better opportunities than in Andhra. The result is that there are millions of Telugu speakers living in Tamilnadu even today, some of them in concentrated populations. I well recall once making a bus transfer in a remote part of Tamilnadu, a town of at least ten thousand people, where everyone spoke Telugu instead of Tamil. The neighborhood adjacent to where I once resided in the city of Madurai, Tamilnadu, was occupied by a Telugu-speaking caste. So it is not at all implausible that the speakers of SLT came from Tamilnadu, not Andhra, in the comparatively recent past; the peculiarities of their dialect, as well as their own traditions, make their arrival in Sri Lanka more likely between two and three centuries ago, not in hoary antiquity.

Whatever its duration in Sri Lanka, SLT has also imported some features of Sinhala morphosyntax; in Sinhala, for example, numerals and other adjectives of quantity normally follow the nouns they modify, whereas in Telugu (like other Dravidian languages) they precede them. Thus in Sinhala one says, in effect, "books three" (*pot tunak*; *pot* = "books," *tunak* = "three"), whereas in standard Telugu the order is "three books," as in English. In SLT either order is acceptable.

Perhaps the most striking and subtle instance of the conditioning of SLT morphosyntax by contact with Colloquial Sinhala is the novel way in which SLT uses so-called "focus" verb forms. In both Sinhala and in Dravidian languages, including Telugu, verbs have "focus forms" that are used to create clefted sentences, where special emphasis is given to one of the arguments (as in English sentences like, "It is to *Colombo* that I am going" or "It is *he* that is going to Colombo"). For such uses, Sinhala focus verb forms typically end in *–ne*, as in *yan–ne*, "go" (focus, from stem *ya–*, "go"), whereas Dravidian languages typically use the neuter form of the verbal noun, which in SLT typically ends in *–idi–* (as in SLT *celcidi*, "knowing," or *waccidi*, "coming"). In Sinhala, however, these focus forms have an additional use: they are obligatorily used in WH-questions; so, for example, to ask in Sinhala, "Where are you going?," it is necessary to say *kohēdə yanne*? (*kohēdə* = "where?"), where *yanne*, as we have seen, is the focus form of the verb *ya–*, "go." The same form would be obligatory with other Sinhala WH-words like *kawudə*, "who?," and *kohomədə*, "how?"

In the Dravidian languages in general, and in Telugu in particular, the focus form is used only in cleft sentences; WH-questions deploy the normal, non-focus form of the verb. But in SLGT, the focus form is very frequently used in WH-questions in a very clear instance of a Sinhala-inspired reconfiguring of Telugu morphosyntax. Thus the above-given Telugu focus verb forms *celcidi* and *waccidi* might find expression in SLT in WH-questions like *nīgu yalla celcidi?* ("How do you know?"; *yalla* = "how," *nīgu* = "[to] you") and *nūwu yæntæppodugu waccidi?* ("What time are you coming?"; *nūwu* = "you," *yæntæppodugu* = "what time?"). The SLT use of focus verb forms in WH-questions, although inspired by the Sinhala template, appear to be unique among Dravidian languages and dialects.

Many Telugu words that have been preserved in SLT are significantly changed or reduced in form. For example, "know" (as in "I know") is *telusu* or *telusunu* in mainland dialects, but in SLT it is almost unrecognizable as *celcu*. Sri Lanka Telugu exhibits many other deviations from the "standard" language, as would be expected after several centuries of separation from the parent tongue. Overall, however, its status as an offshoot of a relatively modern mainland form dialect, albeit an outlier dialect from Tamilnadu, strongly suggests that Sri Lanka's Pamuloru are relative newcomers to the island, rather than the descendants of some ancient migration of millennia past, as is popularly believed by many non-Pamuloru Sri Lankans and occasionally alleged in locally published history books.

Comparison with other itinerant castes in South Asia and the question of provenience

Sri Lanka's Pamuloru appear to have no obvious relationship with various of the major itinerant castes on the Indian mainland. Even in southern India, where Dravidian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam are spoken, many of the larger itinerant castes still speak Indo-Aryan languages and dialects that (like Romani itself) must have originated in the Indo-Aryan north, whereas, as already noted, few apparent traces remain of any language spoken by the Sri Lankan Pamuloru prior to Telugu. For example, in nearby south India in Tamilnadu, the so-called *Narikkuravar*s or *Kuruvikkāran*s (literally, "fox-Kuravars" and "bird catchers"), an itinerant caste that traditionally made its living by selling the skins of foxes and jackals and by catching birds, speak a language, Vāgri-boli ("bird-catcher's language"), that is related to Gujarati, an Indo-Aryan language, albeit with substantial borrowings from Tamil (Varma 1970).

The Lambadis or Banjara, the largest itinerant society in India, have substantial populations in Dravidian-speaking Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka, where they speak their own Indo-Aryan language in addition to local Dravidian languages Telugu and Kannada.

It is worth noting that various forms of divination are popular across Tamilnadu, as elsewhere in India, and may or may not be associated with itinerant castes. For example, *kiḷi jōsiyār*s, or "parrot astrologers," are extremely popular in the bustling streets around major urban temples in Tamilnadu such as Madurai's Sri Meenakshi Temple. These diviners use trained parakeets to select tarot cards used to tell fortunes, but it is not clear that such practitioners are in any way associated with itinerant or otherwise non-Tamil castes. At the same time, a popular and somewhat feared caste of diviners in Tamilnadu, the *kudukuduppaikkaran*s, are known for going about at night playing finger drums and whispering divinations through open windows, for which people will pay—in no small measure to induce them to leave! The *kudukuduppaikkaran*s are Telugu speakers and tend to live in particular neighborhoods. They also earn money producing *tayattu*s, or tiny consecrated copper scrolls used as good luck charms. This caste clearly originated in Andhra but, despite its reliance on divination, does not appear to be an authentic itinerant caste either.

Still, one cannot altogether discount the possibility that the Sri Lanka Pamuloru were, in fact, an offshoot of an Indo-Aryan itinerant caste in remote antiquity. Their peripatetic lifestyle and reliance on fortune telling and animal performances are all characteristic of the Roma people, and their South Asian provenience certainly leaves open a possibility of ancestral kinship that would be excluded for itinerant communities (like the Badjao of the Philippines) from other parts of Asia unconnected with the subcontinent. Certainly they acquired their skills at divination, snake charming, and monkey dancing somewhere, but whether by inherited tradition, imitation, or outright innovation has yet to be shown. An important (and, as yet, little prosecuted) work going forward is the in-depth study of such outlier itinerant communities around South Asia (including other Telugu-speaking itinerant castes on the mainland, if such are still to be found), to ascertain whether, indeed, practices like snake charming and monkey dancing, associated with different itinerant castes, may have originated from a single source, or whether they were independently developed by various castes.

A likely clue to the kinship of Sri Lanka's Pamuloru with mainland castes may well be their snake charming, but literature on snake charming castes in south India is almost nonexistent, and, as mentioned previously, snake charmers themselves are difficult to locate in modern-day India.[4]

Prospects for the cultural and linguistic survival of Sri Lanka's Pamuloru

Many itinerant castes the world over have proven resilient in the maintenance of such aspects of their traditional languages and societal structures as changing conditions allow. In particular, they have preserved a sense of their ethnic identity as well as many of their languages, despite various forms of persecution and discrimination and being forced by changing laws to abandon their itinerant lifestyle. Sri Lanka's Pamuloru seem to be no exception in any of these regards. Despite their small numbers, they retain a strong sense of community and apartness from the Sinhalese and Tamil populations and continue to use their language in the home in both Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking areas. In 2011, thanks to the efforts of Sri Lanka's Dilmah Conservation organization, the various Pamuloru communities from across Sri Lanka held the first *Variga Sabha*, or intertribal council, since the mid-twentieth century at Kudagama. Hundreds of Ahikuntikas and Kuravars attended. The resulting "Kudagama Charter," written in both Sinhala and Tamil and signed by representatives from five Pamuloru settlements (Kudagama, Andarabedda, Kalawewa, Aligambe, and Sirivallipuram), pledged to "strive towards re-establishing our diminishing culture" and to "continue our peace-loving lifestyle with no involvement in uprisings of any kind against anybody or any authority." Speaking on behalf of the "Ahikuntika community" (which includes the Kuravars in this context), "a minority group . . . of which the number of families does not exceed thousand [*sic*]," the charter was accompanied by a list of grievances, directed to the "relevant authorities," and included a plea to "assist us in preserving our precious traditions and culture while going hand in hand with modernization" (English translation in Dilmah Conservation 2013, 56–57).

Following the 2011 *Variga Sabha* at Kudagama, a small museum displaying aspects of Ahikuntika culture was built on the outskirts of the village. It contained such items as antique musical instruments, items of clothing, and the round baskets used to carry trained cobras. When I visited the site several years ago, however, the facilities did not appear to have been well cared for and the displays were in disarray, reflecting, perhaps, a lack of continued government commitment to past promises. It should be noted that, for the last ten years or so, a major emphasis of the Sri Lankan government nationwide has been the elevation and promotion of traditional Sinhalese Buddhist culture, to the comparative neglect of some of the country's non-Sinhalese minorities.

In the long run, the social, linguistic, political, and legal pressures mentioned may well succeed in erasing much of what remains of the Sri Lanka Pamuloru language and culture within a couple more generations. It is thus no mischaracterization to regard both the traditional occupations of the Sri Lanka Pamuloru and the language they speak as acutely endangered.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sri Lanka's small Pamuloru community is under significant social and legal pressure and has abandoned many of its traditions and customs since the 1970s. Their Telugu dialect, while not in immediate danger of extinction, may dwindle away over the next several generations if the remainder of traditional Pamuloru occupations—in particular, snake charming and monkey dancing—are outlawed by the Sri Lankan government, as they have been in India. It is worth noting that some countries, like Canada, have found a middle ground for minority cultures inextricably intertwined with animals, such as the relationship between the Canadian Inuit and the animals they traditionally hunt, like caribou, bowhead whale, and walrus. Permitting otherwise strictly protected species to be hunted by cultures that have done so traditionally has been found to be a felicitous solution, ensuring the preservation of both the animals and the cultures that depend on them. Whether such a compromise is attainable in Sri Lanka with respect to the Pamuloru and their relationship with snakes and monkeys remains to be seen.

Additionally, the true provenience of this fascinating itinerant caste from southern South Asia has yet to be ascertained, and the obscurity of its origins points to the need for much more ethnographic and linguistic work among similar groups on the mainland, in a long-needed effort to truly sort out and establish the extent and origins of the culture of South Asian itinerant castes.

NOTES

1. Thananjayarajasingham (1973a, 123; 1973b, 276) characterizes the "theory that they migrated to Ceylon during British rule" as unproven, while Karunatilake (1974, 420) alludes to the "traditional lore of the Gypsies" pointing to "the second century A.D. as the time of the arrival of the earliest band of Gypsies to Ceylon," without specifying a source for this lore. The linguistic evidence points to Sri Lanka Telugu being an offshoot of modern Telugu, not of any of the well-attested earlier or classical forms of the language, whose literary and inscriptional record on the Indian mainland extends all the way back to the fifth century CE (Krishnamurti 2003, 78–84). See also discussion of the linguistic evidence in the following sections.

2. SLT words are represented phonetically using IPA characters, since SLT is not a written dialect, and its speakers are unable to read and write standard Mainland Telugu. Middle Telugu examples from the tables are reproduced as presented by Krishnamurti.

3. This is also the case in the simple present/future tense in SLT and also in many MT dialects. Thus, for example, the SLT present/future first person singular form of *tāgu–*, "drink," is *tāgitā*, where *–tā–* is the present/future tense marker, and the first person singular *–nu*, used in more educated MT dialects and in written Telugu (whence *tāgu–tā–nu*, "I drink," in "standard" Telugu), is absent. This suppression of the first person singular subject marker *–nu* is pervasive in SLT and contrasts with the retention of subject markers for most other persons or numbers; other SLT examples in the present/future tense include *māṭlāḍ–tā*, "I speak" (*māṭlāḍ–*, "speak, talk"; cf.

"standard" Telugu *māṭlāḍ-tā-nu*) and *pā-tā*, "I go" (SLT *pā-*, "go"; cf. "standard" Telugu *pō-tā-nu*; *pō-*, "go" in some dialects).

4. I never encountered a single snake charmer during twelve months of residence and travel in Tamilnadu and Kerala in the late 1990s (although street performances using other animals, particularly the popular "parrot astrologers" [parrots trained to select tarot cards for the purposes of divination; Tamil *kiḷi jōsiyār*] may still be seen with some frequency in the temple cities of Tamilnadu).

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Reviews

General

Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Skateboarding and Urban Landscapes in Asia: Endless Spots*
Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2021. 210 pages. Hardcover, €106.00. ISBN 9789463723138.

Skateboarding and Urban Landscapes in Asia: Endless Spots is a difficult book to pigeonhole, let alone summarize. While at its core it is a study clearly rooted in human geography, it is also significant parts Asian studies, ethnography, film studies, and social theory exploration, with a short history of skateboarding added for good measure. Yet, despite this breadth of focus, Duncan McDuie-Ra writes in a fluid style, that, as outlined in the following paragraphs, unfolds a bit like street skating itself with all of its mini-victories and road rash. It is an extremely ambitious passion project and, full disclosure, one that resonates with this reviewer as an over-fifty-year-old skater himself.

The monograph examines how skateboarding can be viewed as an alternative way to think through urban cartography, modernity, and globalization. In the opening chapter, the author frames his argument and the theoretical lexicon that rises and falls as a leitmotif throughout the book. Skating was initially popularized in California in the late 1950s, and by the 1990s the state became the key site of material-cultural output related to skate subculture—from boards to clothes to music to attitude, and important for the case at hand, the global circulation of skate videos. In so becoming, California concomitantly emerged as a global pilgrimage site for aspiring or dedicated skaters. It became skate culture's Mecca so to speak, a place of "spots" (13) (assemblages of material and social connections) that were "enrolled" (15) (reimagined and reinterpreted) through a particular "below the knees" (42) "gaze" (33) (skating as an embodied ethnographic method rooted in the appropriation of hegemonic place and purpose) to form alternative cartographies of urban landscapes or, as McDuie-Ra frames it, "shredscapes"(22) that are ever-emergent in modernizing cities. Without the conceptual shorthand, the argument could be roughly outlined as: the faster locations are thrown into an engagement with modernization, the faster urban landscapes change with the potential for a reinterpretation of urban features envisioned and repurposed as *skateable*, which results in the development of local skate cultures influenced by global skate culture. Locally and globally, and notably via the global exchange of video recordings, such locations become recognized as part of an always-changing alternative mapping of urban space.

This process of mapping spots first emerged in the United States, followed by Europe, and most recently, as the book details, East Asia and beyond. With the circulation of videos, first VHS then DVD and now on online platforms, come ideologies and material culture moving from the shifting core to the shifting "frontiers" (139), such as the Middle East or South Asia, where it is sometimes mimicked and sometimes appropriated and reinterpreted. With this theoretical framing outlined over the first two chapters, the book focuses on the recent past, present, and possible future of skateboarding spots and how their emergence is entwined as local and global encounters with modernity. Each chapter moves from the core to the periphery across location and time. First, China emerged as rife with spots in the 2000s (and slightly earlier Japan and Korea, though these regions are not focused on in this book due to an abundance of previous studies). Some of these locations were original, while others, like Shanghai's LP, modelled on a well-known historic skate spot by then defunct in Philadelphia, became "approximate assemblages . . . reborn in China" (78). Chapter by chapter the book focuses on cross-cultural and comparative encounters with skaters and varied environments (usually through analysis of video). McDuie-Ra notes, "skaters care little about the complex causality that produces a landscape: they care about the assemblage of spots" (93). This claim is underscored as the book moves through Central Asia (Astana and Baku), Dubai, post-Soviet spaces (Tashkent and Abkhazia), Iran, and India, and the "endless search" for "endless spots" (171). In this quest the focus is skating, not local culture or politics; a host of positive and negative interactions with locals are highlighted, from lighthearted encounters such as security guards bribed with beers or local children becoming impromptu cheering obstacles to more serious confrontations over the below-the-knees vision of a depoliticized shredscape and local vision of a pain-ridden "memoryscape" (131). In sum, skaters, often from affluent countries with a relatively turbulence-free recent history, come to see that not every monument or temple is virgin marble waiting for the slap of wood and the squawk of urethane wheels.

As a reviewer, I am admittedly predisposed to enjoy this book. And I did. First, I am familiar with the theoretical language. Second, I possess some of the below-the-knees habitus discussed in the book; at least I can envision some of the tricks mentioned in the book performed on the surfaces mentioned. And third, I have lived in or visited several parts of Asia discussed in the text. Moreover, as a somewhat dedicated backcountry skier, I suspect there could be a similar comparative aspect to this sort of autoethnography for some readers. I view mountain vistas with a similar below-the-knees gaze in the summer, imagining powder lines, avalanche chutes, and easy approaches where I suspect many see a picturesque range and greenery. However, I wonder how many readers will come to the text with this sort of background. In short, the thicket of theoretical terms, skate culture terminology, and embodied/affect-oriented observations may (or perhaps may not) be hard for some readers to follow.

As an anthropologist, and writing this review for a journal dedicated to ethnography, I imagine another key issue some readers might have is with the lack of firsthand ethnographic fieldwork or anthropological sources. For example, reference to Ingold's "wayfaring" (2011) or Stoller's "sensuous scholarship" (1997) would have added more theoretical gravity to the concept of a below-the-knees skater's gaze. And, with the notable exception of chapter 6, which offers outstanding insights into the personal lives of skaters in Iran and India, the ethnography is descriptive and evocative but lacking in interpersonal depth, especially in regard to what individuals *other* than skaters might think, for example about the repurposing of spots. Finally, there is a sprawling introduction and a concise conclusion, but the chapters in between read more like a compilation of stand-alone papers on a set of theoretical themes. Despite being a bit repetitive, there is nothing wrong with this, but it returns to my opening point of reading it being a little like street skating itself. Each sandwiched chapter is like running a line of tricks—bailing back to earlier sections, regrouping, trying again—but in the end, McDuie-Ra lands it and earns a requisite pat on the back for making what seemed impossible at the start of the run, possible and enjoyable.

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China

Stephan Feuchtwang, ed., *Handbook on Religion in China*
Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2020. Xii + 472 pages. Hardcover, £148.50. ISBN 9781786437952.

Edited by one of the foremost anthropologists of China and containing contributions by a mix of well-established and junior scholars, this fabulous handbook presents the state of the art of research on religion in China. One particular strength is its organization along sociological topics in addition to institutionalized religions. This allows for several of the chapters to be read in tandem. Besides an all-pervading focus on the politicization of religion, two further concentrations connect the individual chapters, namely the relationship between tradition and modernization, and the complex connections and contrasts between rural and urban China. In his introduction, Stephan Feuchtwang sets the tone, adopting a broad definition of religion as "ways of transmitting and forming moral personhood, transcendence and immanence" based on "principles of change" and "circuits of vital and substantial energies (*qi*)" (2). As he points out, in a secular state that aims to regulate both public and private realms as well as the "religious" and "cultural" spheres, it is close to impossible to meaningfully separate the religious from the secular.

The rest of the book contains four parts, with four to five chapters each. In this reader's opinion, parts 1 and 2 are of especially high quality and make for good reading materials in introductory classes on "popular" religion in contemporary China. In chapter 1, on religious policy, Richard Madsen gives an overview of the major policy shifts in the People's Republic of China since 1978. First, the "1982 framework" (17) adopted an ambiguous attitude based on shifting definitions of what constituted "normal" religious activities protected by the constitution. However, controls have systematically become tighter and geared toward the nationalist goal of homogenizing culture under Xi Jinping. Nevertheless, despite the state's ambitions of interfering in the everyday activities of its citizens, the following chapters show that "many rituals . . . , most forms of divination, and many continuing forms of self-cultivation . . . escape [its] controls" (14).

The making of (religious) selves takes center stage in the next two chapters. Chapter 2, co-authored by Robert Weller, C. Julia Huang, and Keping Wu, deals with the growth of religiously motivated philanthropic activity since the 1980s. While acknowledging continuities with earlier forms of philanthropy, they highlight the larger scale and bureaucratic organization of what they term "industrialized charity" (38). This form of charity is based on the idea of autonomous individuals acting on cosmopolitan ideals of civic responsibility and the "political merit-making" by which charitable organizations frame their interactions with the state (39). Based on a Buddhist idea, the latter concept—shown to exist in a "defensive" guise in China and a "collaborative" one in Taiwan—offers an evocative theoretical tool for understanding state-society relations. Chapter 3, by Anna Iskra, Fabian Winiger, and David Palmer, focuses on several "fevers" of "remaking the self" (54), such as Qigong, Crazy English, and Success Studies. These self-cultivation methods have in common that they help individuals deal with the rapid changes in contemporary China. In contrast to older techniques of the self, however, the authors note that they are no longer premised on an overarching cosmo-political order, such as the "cosmological language" of Confucianism (69). As suggestive as this point is, it could have been elaborated further and validated empirically; how are contemporary individuals any more conflicted in their worldviews than those of imperial times? And how do we know this? Perhaps reflecting the self-centered nature of these techniques, the authors forward a critical interpretation that decries their commercialization, guru followership, and success worship. This contrasts with chapter 2, which, while not uncritical, recognizes the positive contributions of charity to society—whence its use of the term "civic selving" over individual-centered "moral" selves (45).

In chapter 4, Sebastien Billioud puts the Confucian revival of the 2000s in historical perspective. He argues that, rather than top-down, it started out as a grassroots (*minjian*) movement that was subsequently supported by "massive elite involvement" (87) in academic and economic circles and finally adopted into political propaganda. Chapter 5, by Yijie Zhu, discusses the impact of the discourse of intangible cultural heritage on religion. This new category has offered an avenue toward quasi-legalization of religious practices and sites, particularly those of "popular religion" not institutionalized within the Buddhist or Daoist national associations. At the same time, such "culturalization" has placed many of the practices and sites in question under direct state control. Seen in this light, Zhu argues that "heritagization" (96) continues the imperial policy of cultural standardization, to the effect of symbolically displacing local cultures in favor of national(ist) heritage.

Part 2 engages the modernization of widespread, popular traditions. In chapter 6, Ellen Oxfeld introduces life-cycle rituals with a focus on the differences between urban and rural areas. Following an insightful discussion of the family as a "moral universe" (111) founded on relations of moral debt and obligation between generations of members, she notes that burial and wedding rituals have changed more profoundly in urban than rural areas, especially because traditional hierarchies within the family have flattened here. Some changes have been drastic, such as replacing the traditional rituals celebrating the first month of a newborn with birthday parties, preferably at McDonald's. Adam Yuet Chau then discusses deity worship and temple festivals in chapter 7. He outlines the central sociological value of a deity's ability to respond to requests and prayers (*ling*) and the "tyrannical force" of a cultural imperative toward "hot-and-noisy" (*honghuo*; *renao* or *lau-jiat*) festivals (146). He notes the involvement of "religious entrepreneurs" in rural temple rebuilding (138) and the professionalization of temple leadership due to state pressures. By contrast, religious life in the cities is much more subdued and privatized.

Continuing the topic of the urban-rural divide, William Mathews examines the "massive resurgence" of divination practices (156) in chapter 8. Based on whether such techniques involve communication with gods, he distinguishes correlative and communicative types. The former include calculative techniques, such as *suan ming* or *ba gua*, and *fengshui*, and have become increasingly privatized and individualized in urban settings, partly due to their contested status between science and superstition. Communicative divination involves equipment or a human medium and is more visible in rural areas but simultaneously more unambiguously "superstitious" and thus vulnerable to persecution. An ambiguous existence on the verge of superstition also characterizes the redemptive societies introduced by Matthias Schumann in chapter 9. In a largely historic overview, Schumann describes redemptive societies as a specific phenomenon of the Republican era with roots in an earlier tradition of syncretic, millenarian movements. The apocalyptic and eschatological legacy of these groups lives on in other movements of self-cultivation, like Qigong. This chapter fits better next to those on self-cultivation and Confucianism in part 1.

Parts 3 and 4 are dedicated to more institutionalized religions. Stephen Jones starts off part 3 with chapter 10 on (Daoist) household ritual specialists in rural areas, often families of peasants rather than temple-based specialists. The author relies on his material from northern China in part as "an attempt to rebalance a picture largely conditioned by southern Daoism" (226). One of his key points concerns the centrality of sound as what "animates" ritual performance (223), and this should thus be an integral part of analysis. His fieldwork shows that only "ritual fragments" have withstood the loss of knowledge and personnel even in the Chinese countryside (240). The following chapter, by Stephan Feuchtwang, concentrates on the organizational side of Daoism. With visible regret, he notes that the Daoist Association's training programs for new monks have elevated textual-theoretical, even political, learning over ritual and musical training, and thereby increased the "quality" of adepts largely according to secular standards of education. This centrally planned education system is progressively replacing the older line of religious transmission based on master-disciple relations. Secularization also affects Daoist sites, such as holy mountains, which have been remade into tourist spots but have driven away many monks.

In chapter 12 on Chinese Buddhism, Daniela Campo investigates Buddhism's ability to recover from the destructions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which she illustrates through the life story of a successful abbess. Part of the abbess's strategy was, as in the case of Daoism, to focus on intellectual learning over religious practice. However, more optimistic than Feuchtwang's critique of materialist changes, Campo attributes Buddhism's success to its ability to adapt to modern changes while retaining its religious core. Chapter 13, by Chen Bo, turns to Tibetan religions, which the author characterizes as cultural hybrids between different schools of Buddhism and the Bön religion. The chapter is a rough overview, but it notes transformations such as the eastward migration of Tibetan Buddhist ideas among Chinese intellectuals in Mandarin and to the West via the emigration of critical figures from China. In chapter 14, Peter Guangpei Ran discusses the origin myths of people from southwest China and how these continue to shape social lives, for example by determining the seating order inside the home and during mourning rituals that narrate these migration myths in reverse order, so that the soul can find its way back to the ancestral lands in the north.

The first two chapters in part 4 deal with Islam, and the last three with Christianity. Chapter 15, by Guangtian Ha, explores the fundamental paradox in Hui, or "ethnically Chinese" Muslim, identity. He argues that, by adopting a narrative of superiority over other Chinese, the Hui sought recognition from the majority Han while simultaneously reifying them as an ideal-typical Confucian society excluding the Hui. Following the otherwise interesting discussion of the Hui "savior complex" (323) is made difficult by a vocabulary indulging in paradoxical statements, such as: "His Han ethnicity was both unmarked and hyper-marked; he became so non-Han that he could not escape being a Han. He was set free from and held captive by his ethnicity at one and the same time" (329). Interestingly, Hui Muslim identity is completely disconnected from non-Sinophone Muslims, such as the Uyghurs, the subject of chapter 16 by Ildikó Bellér-Hann. Narrated in a more traditional, historiographical style, the author argues that "Uyghurs today thus find themselves in a double bind" between being granted rights on religious and ethnic grounds on one hand, and growing state repression on the other (347). Although critical of state suppression, Bellér-Hann barely mentions the labor camps, which by comparison receive more direct treatment even in Madsen's overview in chapter 1.

Chapter 17, by R. G. Tiedemann, takes an in-depth look at Protestant Christians since 1978, but I am not sure why this chapter should be twice as long as the other contributions. Tiedemann discusses the post-denominational, national-patriotic church organizations at some length. The seeds for Protestantism's growth post-1978, however, had been laid in the cessation of official activities during the Cultural Revolution, which in some sense opened spaces for clandestine congregations, predecessors to today's unregistered "house churches," which are the subject of Jie Kang's chapter 18. Both descriptively and analytically, she distinguishes urban from rural types that appear to be dichotomous in an ideal-typical fashion. Rural and urban environments inform entirely different lifestyles, to the extent that "conversion" between them takes place in rural-urban transitions: while people in the countryside seek physical healing and expect their preachers to be charismatic amateurs, as urban folk they look to reconcile materialist desires with spiritual meaning and follow properly educated, professional pastors. Finally, Richard Madsen's chapter 19 provides a historically and sociologically informed account of Chinese Catholicism. Due to separation from the Vatican and its reforms, the official church retains a very conservative outlook in China, which may be one of the reasons for its stunted growth, compared with Protestantism, even while the church has found more common ground with the Chinese government recently.

The exceptional quality of the chapters, particularly parts 1 and 2, makes this handbook an excellent introduction to religion in China. The book contains a useful index, and each chapter features its own glossary of Chinese terms, although in many cases these glossaries are regrettably incomplete.

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Hon-Lun Helan Yang, Simo Mikkonen, and John Winzenburg, ***Networking the Russian Diaspora: Russian Musicians and Musical Activities in Interwar Shanghai***

Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press, 2020. 286 pages, 5 black and white illustrations, 6 tables. Hardcover, $68.00; paperback, $30.00. ISBN 9780824879662 (hardcover), 9780824889784 (paperback).

Between the "October Revolution" of 1917 and the end of World War II in 1945, tens of thousands of "White" Russian refugees and several thousand "Red" Soviet citizens emigrated to China. Most of them settled either in the Manchurian frontier city of Harbin or in the treaty port city of Shanghai. Those who lived in Shanghai contributed substantially to the cultural and social life of the city and to its reputation as a cosmopolitan Asian metropolis. Russians trained in music and performance (dance especially) in the conservatories of St. Petersburg and elsewhere made deep and long-lasting contributions to the modern musical culture of Shanghai and that of China as a whole. This excellent book tells the story of how a highly trained and talented community of exiled, stateless Russians proved crucial to the creation of modern Chinese music. They did so in particular through their participation in the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra, the leading orchestral body in China and East Asia, and through their pedagogical contributions to the National Conservatory, which was established in Shanghai in 1927 and developed a Western-style music program and curriculum to educate the first and subsequent generations of Chinese musicians and composers. With three authors, each contributing his or her own field of expertise, and the use of archival sources in English, Russian, and Chinese, this book makes an outstanding and unique contribution to the cultural and social history of Shanghai as well as enhancing our understanding of the Russian diasporic experience.

Chapter 1 provides a background to the Russian diaspora and the emergence of a Russian community in Shanghai while arguing for the importance of music in creating and sustaining communal identities among the otherwise disparate ethnic groups that constituted Russian society. This chapter notes that there was a general flow of Russian refugees in the 1920s and 1930s from Russia to Harbin and then from there to Shanghai, where most of the community collected over time in the area known as the French Concession. Like other long-term settlers, Russians who settled in Shanghai built schools and churches, organized their own societies and clubs, and became deeply involved in the cultural and social life of this multinational metropolis. Yet unlike most other foreign nationalities, the Russian refugees arrived in Shanghai relatively poor and powerless, and they had to carve out their own lives as "second-class Whites" in a city in which the British dominated, with their racist colonialist ideology and their general antipathy toward Chinese culture. Positioned in between Europe and Asia, and identifying with both parts of the world, Russians were able to bridge the wide gaps between Euro-American settler societies and the Chinese population of the city, which dominated in sheer numbers if not in cultural or political power.

Chapter 2 offers us a broad survey of the different musical societies, institutions, and performances in which Russians actively participated, which included a Russian choir, a Russian opera, as well as dramatic and musical-education societies. Already it becomes clear that Russians were making a substantial contribution to the highbrow musical culture of the city by the 1930s. Chapter 3 then focuses on the most important cultural institution in Shanghai: the Shanghai Municipal Orchestra (SMO). This orchestra arose out of the Municipal Band that was supported and funded by the Municipal Council, the governing body of the British-run International Settlement. The arrival of exiled Russian musicians in Shanghai after 1917 coupled with the decision to hire the Italian director Mario Paci in 1919 (he would remain in that position until the orchestra was dissolved in 1942) resulted in the best symphonic orchestra east of St. Petersburg. By the 1920s, Russian musicians made up more than half of the orchestra. The authors take pains to reveal how the precarious status of Russian exiles made it harder for them to negotiate decent salaries and earn a living for themselves and their families. Indeed, many Russian refugees, musicians included, fell prey to alcoholism and depression. Nevertheless, Russians constituted the backbone of the orchestra for nearly three decades. In chapter 4, we find that their presence, and that of a relatively large Russian community in the city, encouraged the SMO frequently to perform orchestral works by Russian composers, which helped to solidify the communal identity of the Russians in Shanghai, as a long table in the chapter reveals.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus to the National Conservatory. Founded in Shanghai's French Concession in 1927 by leading Chinese educator Cai Yuanpei and by China's leading musicologist Xiao Youmei (both men earned their PhDs in Germany), the new national conservatory was intended to educate a new generation of Chinese musicians in Western classical music as well as training them to modernize China's own age-old musical traditions. Russian musicians served as the first generation of teachers and contributed substantially to the curriculum and the pedagogy of the conservatory. Among them was the pianist Boris Zakharov, originally from Russia, where he trained in the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Arriving in Shanghai in 1929, he trained a whole generation of Chinese musicians in classical pianism. According to his Chinese students, Zakharov and the other Russian masters blew both hot and cold depending on the talents and performances of their students. If a student performed well on a given day, she might be swept up in a bear hug by the imposing master. If a student shirked his duties, he might be subject to a berating, or even slapping of the hands or head. It is little wonder that some Chinese students hoped that the next generation of teachers would be from their own country. Nevertheless, students treated Zakharov with great admiration and respect, especially since he went to great lengths to assist and support his students both on and off campus.

The final two chapters of the book focus on two Russian musicians who made a substantial and unique impact on the musical culture of Shanghai and of modern China. The first is the Russian concert pianist and composer Alexander Tcherepnin. Unlike most of the other Russian masters, Tcherepnin was only a temporary resident of Shanghai, having arrived there in 1934 during a world tour. He subsequently spent the next three years moving between Shanghai, Beiping (Peking or Beijing today), and Tokyo, where he performed, composed new works, and trained Chinese students. Tcherepnin proved open to Chinese musical influences, and indeed he sought them out actively, studying popular and folk music on the streets and in the opera houses, and befriending Mei Lanfang, the famous opera star, among others. Recruited to teach at the National Conservatory, Tcherepnin helped a young and talented generation of Chinese composers to blend their own folk heritage and musical traditions with the structures and methods of the Western classical tradition. One result was the famous piano work by He Luting, "Buffalo Boy's Flute," which won a composition contest judged by Tcherepnin, Zakharov, Xiao, and other masters (he would go on to become a famous composer and eventually the president of the Shanghai Conservatory, which lost its "National" status after 1949).

Meanwhile, Tcherepnin composed his own pieces out of an amalgam of Chinese musical traditions, borrowing techniques from the Chinese instrument known as the *pipa* and transferring them to the piano. The result was a stunning piano suite known as the "Homage to China." The key influence behind the creation of this set of tone poems was not the country itself but rather the female piano student Lee Hsien-min (Li Xianmin), who eventually became Tcherepnin's second wife after his first marriage to a wealthy American woman, Louisine Peters Weeks, dissolved. She continued to support her exiled Russian ex-husband and his new family long after their divorce.

Another Russian musician is the subject of the final chapter of the book. Aaron Avshalamov was a Russian Jewish exile who was raised in Siberia by a Jewish merchant family. Surrounded by Japanese and Chinese communities and nursed by a Chinese amah, he grew up with a fascination for Asian culture and music. After traveling abroad for many years and studying music in the United States, he returned to China with a renewed zeal for Chinese folk music. In 1931 he arrived in Shanghai and spent the next fifteen years there, eventually moving back to the United States in 1947. While in Shanghai, Avshalamov composed orchestral works that blended Chinese folk opera styles with Western symphonic styles. These included the symphonic suite "The Soul of Chin," a symphonic poem called "In Hutungs of Peking," a ballet called "Incense Shadows," a piano concerto, and a music drama called "The Great Wall," among many others. His compositions, performed in the city's theaters and symphony halls, and his friendships with leading Chinese composers, performers, and educators such as Nie Er, He Luting, and Mei Lanfang proved influential and helped to shape the course of modern Chinese music for generations to come. Nevertheless, upon returning to the United States after World War II, he eventually sank into penury and obscurity.

While this multi-authored book is a remarkable combination of musicological, ethnomusicological, and historical studies, it does leave the reader with a few caveats. As I have made clear, the focus is on the relatively elite sphere of Western classical music rather than on the popular sphere of music that famously existed in the city's ballrooms and cabarets. Here one detects a significant bias of the authors toward the Western classical tradition, even though they acknowledge that Russian musicians and dancers also contributed to the popular music sphere by working in nightclubs and cabarets.

Unfortunately, we learn very little about this world of popular music, since the book focuses almost entirely on the musicians and the institutions that promoted the highbrow musical arts associated with symphony orchestras, chamber orchestras, operas, and music conservatories. An additional chapter focusing on Russian contributions to the popular music and nighttime entertainment world of Shanghai would have further enriched this study of Russians' contributions to the musical life of Shanghai. One final caveat is that the long tables in the middle chapters might have been better positioned in an appendix, since they get in the way of reading the text. Regardless of these two points, the book does a remarkable job of synthesizing archival sources in multiple languages to provide us with a detailed account of the musical life of the city in the 1920s–1940s and the substantial role played by Russians in making that world as well as helping to create modern music for China.

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Fang Xu, ***Silencing Shanghai: Language and Identity in Urban China***
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. 276 pages, 10 illustrations. Hardcover, $105.00;
ebook $45.00. ISBN 9781793635310 (cloth), 9781793635327 (ebook).

Between 2000 and 2010, roughly 5.5 million people flowed into Shanghai, sanctioned by reforms to the system of urban resident permits that long kept China's population movement in check. Whether poor migrants destined for manual labor in the construction sites raising a new global metropolis or wealthy and highly educated migrants attracted by employment opportunities, these new urban citizens brought with them languages from all over China. In *Silencing Shanghai*, author Fang Xu notes that contrary to both popular belief and official policy about a unified national language, China is a linguistically diverse nation. One of the most prominent examples of that diversity is Shanghainese or, as Xu calls it, "Shanghai dialect." The use of that term might cause some confusion for the uninformed reader, because while speakers of different northern Mandarin Chinese dialects can often understand each other, Shanghainese is actually unintelligible to speakers of the national language, Putonghua.

The impacts of this massive population influx on Shanghainese are paired with a more overlooked internal migration as residents of Shanghai's urban core, whom Xu labels "native Shanghairen," have been displaced into the suburban periphery to make way for the gleaming skyscrapers, opulent shopping malls, and luxury apartments that are part of Shanghai's transformation into a "global city." Therefore, even as millions of non-Shanghainese speakers have flooded the city, the core of the Shanghainese-speaking population has been dispersed among them, minimizing the language's imprint on the urban imagination. Xu's book is, in a sense, both a paean to the legacy of Shanghainese as a language of place, intimacy, and familiarity, and an autopsy of the language's demise at the hands of urban planning and state policy.

That policy is the 2001 Language Law that codified Putonghua as the national language of China—and not simply in an abstract way. As Xu documents, the full power of the state's propaganda has been dedicated to twinning national unity with linguistic unity. Celebrations are held each year for Putonghua Promotion Week, while signs and voices throughout public space regulate the recognition of certain speech as legitimate and other types of speech as illegitimate. This leads to a predominant language ideology that associates Putonghua with social mobility, sophistication, nationalism, and modernity. "Public measures are seeping into private life, as adoption of the dominant language ideology increases in native Shanghairen's homes, where they pass it down to their children" (74).

The introduction and subsequent two chapters outline the issues and concepts at the core of Xu's argument along with a history of the region and recent state efforts at linguistic homogenization within the city. Xu then turns to the linguistic consequences of the government's relocation of the core population of Shanghainese speakers away from the city center to the suburban periphery. Chapter 4 discusses how native Shanghairen encounter and interpret the motivations of newcomers, particularly wealthy migrants, often critiquing their apathy—and sometimes outright hostility—toward the city's vernacular. The final chapter contrasts the perspectives of natives with those of the newcomers themselves, who often feel marginalized through the use of Shanghainese as the basis of local identity, forever outsiders in their new home. The conclusion summarizes the arguments of the book while reflecting on the language's future.

Studies of Chinese linguistic diversity written in English are sparse, and Xu's book does an admirable job of recording the aspirations and anxieties of Shanghairen toward this ongoing language shift. Methodologically, Xu conducted a large-scale survey of language attitudes among Shanghai residents, but later chapters also make extensive use of interviews and ethnographic observations as Shanghairen reflect on the sociolinguistic context. The book also draws upon and interprets some of the vast Chinese scholarship on this topic, bringing new Chinese perspectives to linguists studying language change in other settings. The discussion of Shanghainese itself is, unfortunately, relatively brief; what counts as Shanghainese (its phonology, lexicon, and syntax) is limited to a few examples provided throughout the book.

Recent sociolinguistic research on China highlights the hybridity of everyday discourse and strategic use of various languages and registers as speakers shift among different conversational stances and identities in various settings (Dong 2017). In this sense, the book is somewhat more static in its approach. Xu sets up a distinction early in the book between native Shanghairen, who speak Shanghainese, and non-native Shanghairen, who speak other Chinese languages. The natives "have been displaced from the urban center, their linguistic right to the city threatened, and they have experienced relative deprivation of privileges in terms of once exclusive access to top-quality social services" (202). Yet the language itself, despite its roots in the Yangtze Delta region, really only came into being in the 1920s, when many of the "native" Shanghairen families migrated to the city (34). By tying nativeness to dialect proficiency, Xu effectively delegitimizes the claims of more recent migrants in terms of belonging in the city.

Compare that perspective to the one offered by Chu Xiao-quan, who characterizes the linguistic situation in Shanghai as one of intense diversity: Shanghaiers are often fluent in multiple languages, including Putonghua, Shanghainese, other regional Chinese dialects, and, increasingly, English too. "Boundaries between these varieties are not fixed and the evolution of these varieties in practical use appears to be the most noteworthy sociolinguistic phenomenon in contemporary Shanghai" (Chu 2001, 19). Even the data collected in Xu's survey (despite self-reporting being a notoriously unreliable guide to how speakers actually use language) show up to two-thirds of speakers mixing languages in various settings. In that sense, more attention to how Shanghaiers speak, and how they blend and shift among available linguistic resources, would have been welcome.

Xu is pessimistic about the future prospects of Shanghainese. Most households are already shifting away from the language, and the speech of children is almost entirely dominated by Putonghua, despite the efforts of some dialect preservationists. The native Shanghairen have lost their attachment to the dense urban neighborhoods that shaped both their language and experiences in the Maoist era. The voices recorded and analyzed by Xu in this book poignantly attest to the grief of that passing and counter the dominant narrative of Shanghai's economic and cultural renaissance.

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Chen Ajiang, Cheng Pengli, and Luo Yajuan, eds., translated by Jennifer Holdaway, Qi Di, and Wei Han, *Chinese "Cancer Villages": Rural Development, Environmental Change and Public Health*

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 304 pages. Hardcover, €109.00, eBook, €108.99. ISBN 9789089647221 (hardcover), 9789048524570 (eBook).

The phenomenon of "cancer villages" in China became a popular topic that triggered widespread discussion in the 2000s. The general public considered "cancer villages" to be polluted places with a high incidence of cancer cases due to China's rapid industrialization and agricultural development. Since 2004, Professor Chen Ajiang and his colleagues Chen Pengli, Li Caihong, Li Qi, and Luo Yanjuan have conducted field investigations in villages to analyze the impact of pollution on health. Based on the information they collected, the edited volume *Chinese "Cancer Villages": Rural Development, Environmental Change and Public Health*, originally published in Chinese in 2013, explores the variable relationship between pollution and disease. Using an interdisciplinary approach combining natural and social sciences, Chen and his team members argue that the emergence of "cancer villages" is both a scientific and a social problem. "Cancer villages" are associated not only with chemical substances in the biological world but also with the economic activities, social structure, and cultural heritage of rural China.

This book is built upon extensive field research conducted in villages in Henan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, and Guangdong. Chen and his team consulted a variety of sources, including reports of medical tests conducted by government agencies, historical documents concerning local development, and informal data gathered by villagers. The book contains ten chapters. Except for chapters 1, 9, and 10, each chapter focuses on one specific "cancer village." Chapter 1 introduces the origin of the study and the research process of "cancer villages." Chapter 2 discusses the multiple factors that contribute to cancers in Huangmengying Village (Henan), including industrial pollution from upstream of the Shayin River, unusual chemicals resulting from geological factors, and the lifestyles villagers.

Chapter 3 uses the case of Dongjing Village (Jiangsu) to show the conflicts between local officials and villagers, the limitations of media reports, and the incapability of environmental laws to handle the actual situation concerning industrial pollution. Chapter 4 includes new research added to the English version of the book. The chapter examines the impacts of floods, waterlogging, and a water engineering project on the environment of Lianshui County (Jiangsu) in historical context. Particularly, the penetration of fertilizers and pesticides into the drinking water supply after 1949 caused a high incidence of esophageal cancer. As economic circumstances had improved since the 1970s, water-related health risks declined due to the construction of tap water plants and deep wells.

Focusing on the Xiqiao Village (Zhejiang), chapter 5 explores villagers' understanding of health risks from daily experiences, such as the extinction of fish and shrimp in rivers and the appearance of red rashes on their hands and feet. After active resistance to pollution failed to bring results, villagers switched to less intense measures to avoid contact with polluted water. Their selection of resistance strategies was influenced by the fact that most enterprise owners were locals. These owners were both beneficiaries and victims of industrial pollution, and they had strong social ties with the ordinary villagers around. Chapter 6 concentrates on a state-owned farm (Jiannan Village) in

Jiangxi. This case demonstrates that the scientific correlation between cancer and pollution was not the villagers' main concern. Instead, their complaints and petitions put pressure on the local government to increase access to running water and receive financial compensation from factory work. Chapter 7 compares two different attitudes toward environmental protest in Guangdong. Liangqiao villagers, troubled by the pollution of the water supply, used every means to inform the public of the terrible situation. Unlike Liangqiao villagers, Shangba villagers worried about the negative impacts of being labeled as a "cancer village" by the mass media. As the problem of water pollution was eventually resolved, Shangba villagers were more concerned with the local image and the sale of farm products.

Chapter 8 discusses Guangdong residents' complaints and growing mistrust of waste incinerator plants and the local government. In this case, rumors and misinformation in media fostered people's anxiety and restlessness. They believed the existing waste incinerator plant was responsible for the high incidence of lung cancer and opposed any plans to construct a new plant in the city. Chapter 9 provides a summary of three cases discussed in chapters 5, 6, and 7. Chapter 10 then examines the various strategies villagers adopted to mitigate environmental health risks. It is argued that there are two major obstacles for common villagers to understand the relationship between pollution and disease—one is the lack of professional medical knowledge, and another is the low information transparency concerning pollution. In this situation, villagers tended to rely upon common sense knowledge and news collected from acquaintances to avoid exposure to the harmful effects of industrial pollution.

The authors present "cancer villages" from multiple perspectives and discuss how local government officials, usually under the pressure of investment targets and of political performance evaluations, allied with polluting enterprises to not disclose information to the public. For villagers, their claims about the cause of disease came less from scientific knowledge than from anger toward unresponsive governments and factories, worries about health hazards, and discontent with the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits of pollution. Additionally, the authors discuss the duality of mass media. Positively, new media platforms offered an outlet for repressed voices and attracted public attention to the problem of pollution. Negatively, media reports sometimes contained false information that easily misled the public, which later posed obstacles for local economic development.

Another intriguing aspect of the book is the application of historical research methods to the experiential approach used in "cancer village" research. In Chen Ajiang's latest study (chapter 4), environmental history provides a new dimension to understanding the long-term interactive process between environmental change, social development, and public health. In this process, natural changes in the water environment of Lianshui County led to the construction of water engineering projects with the aim of disaster prevention, disease control, and agricultural intensification. However, the conversion of dry fields to rice paddies polluted farmers' drinking water sources and caused new health risks. Although the historical narrative is more descriptive than argumentative, the combination of historical analysis with the sociological study of environment and health issues greatly expands the source of information and the scope of the investigation.

The book's clear language, rich photos and charts, and vivid descriptions of villagers' lives make it a helpful resource for undergraduate and graduate students in both natural and social sciences. Common readers who are interested in industrial pollution, public health, and environmental protests, even without much prior knowledge of Chinese "cancer villages," would also find the contents of this book interesting.

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Eric S. Henry, *The Future Conditional: Building an English-Speaking Society in Northeast China*

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021. 222 pages. Paperback, $27.95. ISBN 9781501755163.

This book provides a vivid depiction of the spatiotemporal hierarchy of language practices in Shenyang, a northeastern provincial capital in China. His extensive and expansive field research over twelve years illustrates how English, as a global language, provides aspirations for a cosmopolitan identity and upward social mobility while sustaining a multi-million-dollar language-training industry in China's rust belt. Furthermore, Henry contributes to the dialogue concerning the definition of modernity from a sociolinguistic perspective against the backdrop of neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics.

The vernacular in Shenyang and the surrounding region, *Dongbeihua*, or northeastern speech, is set against both Mandarin Chinese, China's official language, and English, the global language. Henry highlights how not only kinds of speech are spatiotemporally organized but also people's geographical and socioeconomic mobility too. The countryside in northeastern China—bordering both North Korea and Russia and characterized by the memory of socialism—is associated with backwardness and heavily accented *Dongbeihua*. The provincial capital Shenyang represents progress and Western modernity, despite its decline since the 1990s due to industrial restructuring in the economic reform era. The languages associated with urban public spaces are standardized Mandarin Chinese, and occasionally English in bilingual store signs and public transportation announcements. In chapter 3, Henry provides rich stories of his participants' reflections on their lives in the West and how those experiences shaped who they are now in Shenyang. From those lived experiences, Henry skillfully weaves their narratives of personal growth and life trajectories with boundary crossing and transcendence through language acquisition. Leaving Shenyang to visit or live temporarily abroad because of English proficiency and personal transformations that result from that experience serves as yet another example of the spatiotemporal dimension of language proficiency—namely "recursive enclosure," to use the term coined by the author.

Henry provides nuanced accounts of how Shenyangers define and deploy their linguistic capital in domestic spaces, residential communities, and retail settings, corresponding to their performances of lived or aspirational identities. *Dongbeihua* is a regional dialect of Mandarin characterized by certain unique phonetic, lexical, and syntactic features (33). Unlike regional dialects in southern China, such as Cantonese, *Dongbeihua* is not incomprehensible to Mandarin speakers, but its varied accents and forms of expression could confuse those who are not familiar with it. Heavily accented *Dongbeihua* indicates the speaker's rural origins, age seniority, and lower level of education. Standardized Mandarin is expected from urban residents and those of higher educational level. Among urbanites, those who can speak English with little-to-no Mandarin accent are recognized as a modern global citizen (34). Furthermore, the qualities attributed to *Dongbeihua* in Shenyang resemble the classical connotations associated with a regional, local speech. Shenyangers find *Dongbeihua* "natural, warm, and comforting and less pretentious than Mandarin. They recognize its lack of status in the linguistic marketplace but praise its sincerity and simplicity . . . its innate beauty and authenticity" (40). One theoretical concept, language ideology, is manifested throughout the book, such as the given quote; however, this framework is not explicitly employed.

In terms of foreign language use in urban China, Henry considers "English a quasi-official language with an extensive public mandate" (3). This assessment, though supported by street signs and public announcements, as well as the curriculum of elementary school through graduate school, sits awkwardly with the state's nationalist agenda and language policy. The state promotes Mandarin Chinese intensely, at the expense of regional dialects, and associates Mandarin proficiency with the realization of the "China Dream," as my investigation of the fate of another regional language, the Shanghai dialect, shows (Xu 2021). The People's Congress has been discussing the elimination of English from college entrance examinations in recent years. Given this trend, the enthusiasm and anxiety associated with English acquisition depicted in Henry's book might be a short-lived phenomenon characterizing one phase of China's rise to global prominence, instead of the beginning of a broader societal and ideological change in China's engagement with the rest of the world or the English-language-dominated West. As the author insightfully points out, the presence of English in public spaces communicates the modernity of these spaces as well as the expectation that Shenyang urbanites should understand it, instead of being intended only for the convenience of foreign visitors. Therefore, English proficiency in Shenyang and urban China at large is a form of Foucauldian self-governmentality in cultivating a neoliberal self within the rapidly transforming chronotopic landscape (27). Henry "examines how the body of the foreigner comes to act as an iconic representation of the related values of whiteness, modernity, fluency, and cosmopolitan subjectivity" (145). In his writing, "foreigner" or "foreign" reads "white" and "Western." This problematic tendency is evidenced when the author stresses the racial identity of a teacher from South Africa as white but does not specify such detail about a teacher from Australia, or those from Canada and the United States. Glossing over like this, though it might be unintentional, diminishes the author's critical engagement with racial identity and racism in contemporary China, especially in a northeastern city such as Shenyang, which has historical connections with Russia, evidenced by the Russian fluency of older street vendors (169).

Henry's ethnography of English language teaching and learning in the private sector, which has flourished across urban China since the 2000s, is unprecedented in its scope and depth. The investigation of the spatiotemporal dimension of language practices is truly interdisciplinary. This book is a much-needed addition to the scholarship concerning urban soundscape in China and will interest students of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, cultural geography specifically, and urban China in general.

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David R. Stroup, *Pure and True: The Everyday Politics of Ethnicity for China's Hui Muslims*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022. 246 pages. Hardcover, $99.00; paperback, $30.00. ISBN 9780295749822 (hardcover), 9780295749839 (paperback).

As a historian who has a lot of distance from her subjects (they are all long dead), I sometimes find that ethnographers overstep into the lives of their subjects, providing too much analysis from one-time observations. At the same time, the methodological boundaries between history and anthropology often seem almost insurmountable, as if the two disciplines barely have anything to say to one another. I am very happy to report that neither of these remarks ring true with David Stroup's new book on Hui Muslims living in urban China.

Stroup does a fabulous job personalizing his subjects while keeping a professional distance from them. He also grounds his observations in history, rooting his research not only in the field of Hui studies but in the history of urban development in China more broadly (see, for example, Friedman 2022). His deep and thorough fieldwork allows him to draw from a multitude of different interviews from his four research sites (the Chinese cities of Beijing, Jinan, Yinchuan, and Xining) to make insightful and thoughtful conclusions about the ways that Hui Muslims negotiate the expression of their "everyday ethnicity" (27).

After two introductory chapters, Stroup divides his book thematically. Chapters 2–5 focus on different themes named after active verbs: "Choosing," "Talking," "Consuming," and "Performing." The conclusion and the epilogue tie together his observations and provide an ominous report on developments in Hui communities since he finished his fieldwork in 2016. He centers his analysis on understanding "how the complex interactions between changing urban landscapes and tactics of authoritarian governance influenced the daily expression of Hui identity" (xv).

In the introduction, Stroup argues that by focusing on urban Hui in four very different Chinese cities, he gets at the ways that "cross-cutting identity cleavages like class, region, education level, and sect" provide urban Muslims with enough ways to "express their Hui identity" without coming into direct conflict with the state (6). This isn't always the case though, as the authoritarian party-state looms heavy in the daily lives of Hui Muslims. As Hui navigate their status as one of the fifty-six state-designated ethnic groups (*minzu*) in China (with the Han being the largest), Stroup explains the peculiarities and particularities that distinguish the Hui from the other Muslim minority groups in China, such as the Uyghurs or the Tajiks.

Throughout the introduction, Stroup also offers historical context about the ways that the relationship between the Hui and the state have vacillated over time—at times being more congenial and at others being both violent and oppressive. This provides a setting for the current "de-Islamification" campaigns being carried out in Hui communities, as the party-state attempts to lessen expressions of Islam in public spaces by doing things like removing Arabic signage from shops and taking minarets off mosques. Yet, Stroup also shows how the Hui themselves sometimes underpin, and are often complicit in reinforcing, state-crafted narratives about the place of ethnic minorities within the People's Republic of China, especially if it proves to be economically advantageous for them.

Chapter 1 explains some of the ways that the current regime under the leadership of Xi Jinping deals with Islam. Stroup argues that because the state officially recognizes the Hui as an ethnic group, the CCP can "assert control over the expression of ethnicity and reinforce narratives that downplay ethnic resentments or cause for conflict with the state" (35). In essence, there is an ongoing tension between the state-proscribed visions of what Hui ethnicity should be and the ways that the Hui themselves live in their everyday lives. By presenting the officially sanctioned view of what is both expected from the Hui and provided for them by the state, Stroup uses this first chapter to frame how expressions of everyday Huiness either conform to or diverge from state-sanctioned categories (55–57).

Chapter 2 covers how Hui express their own religiosity in their choice of marriage partners. For instance, many Hui living in urban environments make the choice to marry non-Muslim partners. For Hui Muslims, choosing a partner also relates to questions of citizenship, because their ethnic status is listed on their national identification cards. This means choices of marriage and childbirth are "linked to the survival of the group and to the transmission of culture," because the state classification maintains that you can only choose one ethnicity, even if you are multiethnic (say, Hui father and Han mother) (55–56). Of course, in real life, these rigid categories are surmountable, but it still requires a degree of choice, turning "the process of self-identification into an ethnically motivated choice for reasons of self-preservation" (57).

Chapter 3 deals with the issue of Arabic literacy. The paradox is that most Hui do not read or speak Arabic, even though it is an important marker of religiosity among Muslims. This means that varying levels of Arabic proficiency are spaces for Hui to contest the religiosity of other Hui (86). Chapter 4, titled "Consuming," deals with notions of Islamic purity and *halal* food consumption among the Hui. In Chinese, *halal* is rendered into two Chinese characters: *qingzhen*. The characters *qing* and *zhen* provide the title for Stroup's book—"pure" (*qing*) and "true" (*zhen*). For Hui living in urban Chinese cities (where eating pork and consuming alcohol are staples in daily life), adhering to a *halal* diet can be both difficult as well as one of the most outwardly apparent markers for non-Muslims to identify them as Hui.

In chapter 5, Stroup addresses the performance of faith in daily life. He distinguishes between public rituals (which, as he says, "hold an important place in an authoritarian state's toolkit" [112]) and private expressions of Islam. For many Hui, dressing is also an outward expression of religiosity, and the individual choice to wear a white skullcap (for Hui men) or a headscarf (for women) is a personal decision that can carry many different meanings. Overall, the chapters show that there are many ways for individuals to express their Huiness in urban spaces. This reader was struck by the ongoing tensions and contradictions for the individuals portrayed in the book about what it means to be Hui in day-to-day life.

In the conclusion, Stroup explores how the mass migration from rural areas to cities that has characterized China's development over the past thirty years has altered "the way that boundaries of Hui ethnic identity are formed and maintained" (129). Stroup also notes that the contestation of new identities can potentially "present limited opportunities for disruption of CCP authority" (130). Essentially, migration is changing what it means to be Hui and could even be used as a way to contest authoritarianism.

The epilogue addresses the post-9/11 global war on terror and the illegal arrest and subsequent incarceration of Uyghurs (as well as other Muslims, like Kazakhs) living in Xinjiang and what this means for the Hui, who have until now avoided these roundups. Stroup also explores how the surveillance technology that is deployed to monitor

Muslims throughout China is reason for concern. The convergence of these two issues, he argues, might provide a catalyst for resistance against state-imposed categories, although I do not think either of us are overly optimistic that this will be the case in the foreseeable future.

Overall, the book is a welcome addition to the growing field of Hui studies. *Pure and True* joins an impressive list of books in the Studies on Ethnic Groups in China series edited by Steven Harrell. It is clearly written and easy to read, making it accessible to advanced undergrads and non-specialists. This is no small feat, given the complexity of the subject matter. Stroup deals with a difficult and potentially volatile subject in a professional and intellectually engaging manner. He also recognizes the limitations of his own research as a white, non-Muslim, American male.

Another strength of the book is the end matter, an aspect of academic publishing sometimes overlooked by reviewers. After the narrative ends on page 165, there are still almost eighty pages including three appendixes, a glossary of Chinese terms, notes, a bibliography, and a very useful index. The appendixes include a list of anonymized interviewees, a list of research sites, and a chart tracking the inflow of migrants into Beijing, Jinan, and Xining between 2006 and 2016. These details might seem small, but they both make the book more readable and accessible to non-specialists and show just how much research Stroup did to write this book.

It is also worth noting that this might be one of the last in-depth ethnographic research projects conducted by a foreign researcher in China about the Hui to be published in the next few years. Stroup notes that most of his fieldwork was conducted in 2015 and 2016. It would have been impossible for him to do the same research in 2019 and 2020 given the increasingly stringent political climate in China. Unfortunately, this book and a few others coming out this year (Ha 2022) might be the last deep ethnographies of Hui communities that we see published in the coming years. I hate to leave the review on such a pessimistic note, but I think David Stroup would agree with my assessment.

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Nicole Karapanagiotis, *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. Xii+270 pages, 56 illustrations.
Hardcover, $85.00; paperback, $32.00; eBook, $31.99. ISBN 9780253054883 (hardcover),
9780253054890 (paperback), 9780253054920 (eBook).

In this accessibly and engagingly written monograph, Nicole Karapanagiotis makes several excellent contributions to the study of Hindu and Hindu-inspired movements in the United States and the study of religion more generally. In terms of the study of Hindu movements in America, this work addresses a very central, timely, and controversial issue: namely, the relationship between those practitioners who were born to a Hindu tradition and who are primarily of Indian or other South Asian descent and those practitioners who have come to the tradition from outside and who are non-Indian. In discussing these two sub-groups within Hindu and Hindu-inspired movements in America, it quickly becomes evident that there is a great deal of awkwardness, as well as capacity for causing offense, in describing these groups simply as "Indian" and "non-Indian," or "Indian" and "Western." Given that a growing number of these movements are multigenerational (including the subject of this study, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON), there are, today, non-Indian practitioners who were born into and grew up with their tradition, no less so than those practitioners who may have immigrated from India. For the same reason, practitioners are also present in these movements who were born and who grew up in America and who may never have been to India but whose parents or grandparents were Indian immigrants. Are these practitioners "Indians" or "Westerners"? Are they not, in some sense, both? Amanda Lucia (2014), in her work on the devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi—popularly known as Amma—has helpfully coined the terms "adopters" and "inheritors" to refer to the respective groups we are discussing. These terms help to identify these two quite distinct sub-groups while at the same time avoiding the awkward and often inaccurate—and perhaps even inadvertently racist, or at least racially insensitive—designations of "Indian" and "Western" devotees.

In *Branding Bhakti*, Nicole Karapanagiotis delves into this issue as it is being worked out in real-time in the contemporary ISKCON community in America, in all its messiness and its very real potential offensiveness. Specifically, Karapanagiotis's book is focused on a conscious trend among certain ISKCON practitioners to make their movement more ethnically diverse. She traces the history of ISKCON, a Vaishnava organization established by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in the 1960s, from its founding to the present. In the early years of ISKCON, most members were not of Indian descent. Indeed, Swami Prabhupada saw his mission as being primarily to bring Krishna consciousness to Westerners. However, as Indian immigration to the United States grew, so did the number of ISKCON members who were devotees of Indian descent: Hindus who had grown up with Vaishnava devotion and who found a home in ISKCON that enabled them to adapt to living in a foreign land. As Karapanagiotis narrates, these Indian devotees did a great deal to help the organization survive when it fell on hard times after the passing of its founder. They also helped to normalize ISKCON and enabled it to be seen as a more mainstream part of American religious life, in contrast with earlier perceptions of it as a "cult" involved in the "brainwashing" of its American adherents.

The sense that ISKCON needs to be more diverse (i.e., less Indian) is of course one that can easily come across as racist (and that, in some cases, may be precisely true as Karapanagiotis shows). At the same time, as the author also shows, this sense is also rooted deeply in the way that Swami Prabhupada conceived of his mission: as an outreach beyond India to the Western world.

In terms of the study of religion more broadly, this book's contribution, as its title indicates, is an illuminating study of the ways in which religious communities "brand" and "market" their ideas and practices. This way of speaking, in terms of religions having a "business model," may sound crass to many. At the same time, however, it has always been the case that religious leaders have sought to present their traditions in ways that are appealing to others, either to win adherents or to be accepted in the wider society in which they exist (or, in the case of ISKCON, both). Karapanagiotis thus documents the ways in which ISKCON has gone from an organization that is associated with people dressed as medieval Bengali Vaishnava devotees, with shaved heads and orange robes, loudly chanting "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama" on street corners and airports and trying to sell books, to an organization that teaches meditation and mindfulness in order to help people to cope with the stresses of contemporary life, with its adherents dressed in conventional Western business attire. The core theology of *bhakti*, of ecstatic devotion to Lord Krishna, has not changed. What has changed is its outward appearance: the way in which it is *marketed* to a wider public.

Karapanagiotis covers these fascinating and important topics in a way that manages to be both empathetic and critical. Her book is a model of anthropological engagement. She describes her methodology of participant observation clearly and consistently, bringing in her first-person experiences as appropriate. She writes with sensitivity while simultaneously utilizing her critical theoretical tools to maximum effect. There is very little, if anything, to criticize about this book. It is worth noting that Karapanagiotis's own positionality with regard to the material does not intrude into her account. While this is admirable given that she does speak of her active participation in the ISKCON communities that form the topic of her book, it would have been interesting to know how she conceives of this participation beyond its scholarly uses. Is she a Krishna devotee? What are her views on the controversies that she recounts so clearly and so well? Or would knowing the answers to these questions perhaps create an appearance of bias (or a suspicion thereof in the mind of the reader)?

All in all, this is an excellent book that will be useful to the research scholar, student, interested lay reader, and even, one suspects, to the ISKCON community itself. It is, in many ways, a model work for anthropologists of religion who are engaged in participant observation.

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Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism: From a Dominant Minority to an Ethno-Religious Diaspora*

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 250 pages. Cloth, $89.99. ISBN *9781107136540.*

Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani aspire to present a "comprehensive analytical appraisal of Sikh nationalism," arguing that earlier studies have not adequately employed "frameworks of ethnicity and nationalism" (2) to understand the development of Sikhism. Covering the time of the Sikh gurus to the present, Singh and Shani summarize theories of nationalism and their applicability to the study of Sikhism, contending that the Sikh religious minority in India and the Sikh ethnoreligious diaspora community have in interaction created a "deterritorialized nationalism" (1).

Singh and Shani assess how theories of ethnicity, nationalism, ethno-symbolism, and various postcolonial approaches have been applied to the Sikh case, highlighting what they view as the limitations of existing narratives of Sikh identity (e.g., Sikhs as solely a religious community). Using Anthony D. Smith's "ethno-symbolic approach," they delineate what they term the Khalsa "ethnie" and the forces in India and the diaspora that have shaped Sikh nationalism.

In chapter 2, Singh and Shani quickly sketch the early development of Sikhism from the fifteenth century to the 1890s, critiquing existing approaches to Sikh historiography. Sikh studies scholars may find this discussion somewhat oversimplified, but the analysis strengthens as Singh and Shani begin to assess Sikhism in the colonial period. Chapter 3 charts the rise of modern Sikh nationalism from the 1890s to the 1930s. Singh and Shani argue that Sikh nationalism is unique in that it arose at the same time as both Hindu and Muslim religious nationalisms were developing, with each group deeming the Punjab a strategic region and thereby relegating the Sikhs to minority "other" status. They contend that previous studies have overstated the role of elites in shaping Sikh identity and emphasize the importance of addressing caste, views on gender and patriarchy, and sectarian groups to understand the evolution of Sikh nationalism. Chapter 4 focuses on the crucial pre-partition period from 1940 to 1947, when the Congress Party and the Muslim League maneuvered to define what British India would become at the end of British colonial rule. Marginalized in their Punjab homeland, some Sikhs began to call for Khalistan, a separate state for the Sikhs. Ultimately the partition of British India into India and Pakistan divided the Punjab, amid horrific suffering and violence.

Chapter 5 covers the period from India's independence in 1947 until 1984, presenting various ways that Sikh groups sought greater representation and autonomy within the Indian state. Singh and Shani note that India's constitutional definition of Sikhs as a religious community delegitimized Sikh political demands as "communal." They further chart the complex developments among different political parties and factions, and the 1966 redrawing of state boundaries on the basis of language that created the Sikh-majority state of Punjab. This linguistic reorganization of the state did not adequately address Sikhs' calls for greater autonomy, leading to protracted political negotiations as well as the rise of militant movements. Singh and Shani argue that as law and order collapsed in the Punjab, Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party were constrained by both national and state politics that left them no room to make any meaningful concessions, setting the stage for the Indian army attack on the Golden Temple in 1984.

The attack on the Golden Temple and Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguards and subsequent riots targeting Sikhs in Delhi and other areas led to thousands of deaths. In the period that followed, thousands of young Sikhs were detained on suspicion of terrorism. In chapter 6, Singh and Shani cover the tragedy and violence of this period from 1984 to 1997 and how it affected Sikh nationalism, detailing the shifting political alliances and accords among Sikh groups and the national government, as well as calls for an independent Sikh state of Khalistan. They make the case that the Indian state's strategy marginalized moderate Sikh leadership and emboldened Sikh militants, who had the support of the diaspora. They show that in the 1990s, once counterinsurgency efforts had quashed Sikh militancy, the Indian state shifted from "violent control" to "hegemonic control" through ethnic management policies designed to quell challenges. Singh and Shani argue that existing accounts of the decline of Sikh ethnonationalism are insufficient and must be seen in light of the Indian state's ethnic conflict strategies and structural fault lines within Sikh nationalism that dated to the 1920s.

Chapter 7 examines Sikh nationalism from 1997 to the present. The rise of Hindu nationalism as the legitimizing ideology of the state continues to challenge Sikh autonomy, and its assimilationist inclusivism threatens Sikhism's distinct identity. Ever-shifting coalition governments, economic mismanagement, and corruption further erode the Sikh cause. Singh and Shani see the possibility of Sikhism relapsing into Hinduism. Chapter 8 highlights the role of the Sikh diaspora in shaping the deterritorialized nationalism of Sikhism. Singh and Shani evaluate immigration patterns and demographics, as well as diaspora support for Khalistan from 1984 until the end of militancy in the Punjab in the 1990s. They note that diaspora groups have sought to preserve and protect Sikh culture and have shifted from a "politics of homeland" to a "politics of recognition" in nations such as the United Kingdom and United States since 9/11. In their conclusion, Singh and Shani call for a move away from the dominant emphasis on critical theory in Sikh studies to an approach with greater emphasis on Sikh nationalism, arguing that the Sikh case offers much for comparative studies of ethnicity, nations, and nationalism.

Each chapter is clearly structured, with useful tables, maps, and concluding summaries, though the many misspelled words from Indian and other languages throughout are an unfortunate distraction. Select chapters could be useful for advanced undergraduate courses studying ethnic and religious nationalism, though the detail and complexity of the ever-shifting landscape of political parties, factions, and coalitions in the Punjab's politics might be daunting for readers without some prior knowledge. Singh and Shani provide substantial evidence for their argument for the significance of Sikh nationalist visions in understanding Sikhism. This richly detailed study is a must-read for scholars in Sikh studies and anyone with interest in South Asian nationalism.

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Parul Bhandari, ***Matchmaking in Middle Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage***

Singapore: Springer, 2020. Xiii + 188 pages. Hardcover, €84.99, paperback, €74.99, eBook, €50.28. ISBN 9789811515989 (hardcover), 9789811516016 (paperback), 9789811515996 (eBook).

Based on an interdisciplinary approach that weds sociological analyses with ethnographic methodologies, *Matchmaking in Middle Class India: Beyond Arranged and Love Marriage* focuses on interwoven narratives of romantic desires, family values, and middle-class aspirations to highlight the matchmaking practices in urban India today. Parul Bhandari's work underscores the continuities found in middle-classness, family, and modernity as she not only explores the relationship between the middle class and the claims to modernity but also indicates the multiple ways in which individuals construct their sense of self vis-à-vis social expectations and family values. Bhandari elaborates on the notion of a "good match" by "tracing its four main constituents—caste, class, 'exposure,' and good looks," all of which not only possess a class-based undertone but also maintain class boundaries and status (87). Through participant observation and in-depth interviews with more than one hundred individuals, families, and professionals like matchmakers, Bhandari argues that while the criteria of what constitutes a "good match" is flexible and ever-changing, class category remains the dominant criterion for urban middle-class individuals and families involved in the matchmaking process. This book, therefore, provides rich ethnographic data centered around the matchmaking processes to display the continuities between the individual and the family, and the middle class and its complicated claims to modernity.

Bhandari does not place matchmaking processes into the categories of love versus arranged because she problematizes the notion of "individualistic choice" that is associated with love marriage and considered absent from arranged marriages. Since love marriages have become synonymous with individuality and arranged marriages with the family and are often seen in contradiction to each other, Bhandari does not use such a dichotomous model in her own analysis. Instead, she explores matchmaking through the avenues of "formal" and "informal" processes of spousal-selection to highlight how the "individual-informal practices of spouse-selection interact with the family-formal-arranged practices, not always challenging each other but working in tandem" (2). She views these formal and informal processes as "analytical prisms rather than deterministic or idealistic approaches to matchmaking" (176) to capture the variety of experiences and priorities that middle-class individuals and families have while finding their "good matches." Bhandari's decision to use these processes as analytical prisms is productive in highlighting how individuals' desires and expectations coexist with those of their families. Even in many "love" marriages, the individuals' choice of spouse is based on characteristics—such as caste endogamy or class homogamy and/or hypergamy—that their families also consider important. Therefore, Bhandari makes these continuities between the individual and the family visible through her discussion of the formal and informal processes of spousal-selection.

Furthermore, Bhandari engages with the discourse on the "new" middle class in India that became visible in the post-liberalization period of the 1990s. Even though she explores the aspirations and anxieties of the "new" middle class as they navigate the matchmaking processes, she does not use the "new" middle class category as central in her analysis. Bhandari argues that even though "post-liberalisation has shaped the social and cultural orientation of the middle class in a certain way" (10), for instance, their aspirations to become global citizens, it has not reduced the importance of family ties, values, and cultural identity that have existed since before the 1990s. By mapping this continuity between the various middle classes in India (old and "new" in scholarly discourse), Bhandari effectively complicates the "newness" of the middle class in contemporary urban India. Therefore, for her, the "new" middle class is not a new category in and of itself but rather refers to a subjectivity that caters to new aspirations, values, and morality. These new aspirations and morality are deeply embedded in the matchmaking processes and become visible through the emphasis placed on the middle-class status and its reproduction while finding a "good" match by its several actors—individuals, families, and matchmakers.

Lastly, Bhandari persuasively complicates the notion of "modernity" as she traces continuities between ways in which individuals themselves identify as "modern" and their preferred criteria during spousal-selection processes that align with their family values and cultural identities. Bhandari disagrees with modernization theorists by treating the modern as not "a neat category which only champions values of rationality and progress" in her analysis (9–10). Instead, she argues that the idea of being "modern" is never disconnected from one's social and cultural values and backgrounds. While couples display their desire to be "modern" and act in ways that facilitate such associations, like engaging in premarital relationships, their ideas about who is a "good" match are never too far removed from the characteristics that their families or kin group would hold as valuable. Bhandari even considers the increasing role of technology and online professional matchmaking services in aiding couples to find romance but grounds her analysis in the evidence that suggests that technology "can ascertain 'old' values as it can also enable new imaginings of companionship and practices of romance" (12). Therefore, the claim to modernity for middle-class individuals and families is not based on tensions between individual and family values but rather in the coexistence of the two.

Bhandari's work highlights how the "modern" couple in India that comes out of the matchmaking processes remains closely tied to "the social histories of being Indian middle class" (111) and embedded within strong networks of family ties and cultural identity. It is important to acknowledge that her powerful analysis is based on evidence collected mostly from urban centers like New Delhi in North India and from upper-caste Hindu families. How would this analysis change for urban centers in South India, especially in terms of importance given to caste status during matchmaking? How would the matchmaking processes look for other religious communities in India who also constitute the middle class and claim to be "modern"? These questions foreshadow avenues of constructive future inquires.

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Susanne Klien, *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-Growth Society*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020. 232 pages. Hardcover, $95.00;
paperback, $32.95. ISBN 9781438478050 (hardcover), 9781438478067 (paperback).

Susanne Klien's readable and useful book explores the experience of domestic migrants from urban centers to less populated areas of Japan, a topic deserving research and reflection. It is interesting that John Traphagan's (2020) new book deals with many of the same themes but in a very different way. A great strength of *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-Growth Society* is its readability. Klien paints a very interesting picture of a specific subset of urban-rural migrants using a variety of different examples to demonstrate her points. The geographic range, from the Oki Islands in Shimane Prefecture through Iwate to Hokkaido, allows a fairly substantial picture to be drawn. The informants come across as real people dealing with real lives, and the qualitative material is well presented. While I am not very interested in most applications of what is called "social theory"—I find it often jargon-laden and unhelpful—I am especially interested in Klien's application of Victor Turner's concept of "liminality" (1996), the idea that migrants are neither here nor there. It is particularly applicable to many of her somewhat marginal (in the economic sense) migrants, but it applies to all of us who are "strangers." As Georg Simmel's classic essay (1972) points out, outsiders have distinct advantages and disadvantages, but the movement away from the category of "outsider" is difficult and often quite long.

This book will be valuable for many audiences in different ways. While many will find the range of experiences recounted to be valuable, undergraduates may find the "reality" of many of the areas discussed novel and important. The perception of Japan, particularly from outside of the country, but also in the great metropolitan centers, seems to be that the Tokyo metropolitan area is Japan and nothing else really counts. Japan's non-metropolitan areas are largely ignored by much of the English-language literature. Peter Mantale and Anthony S. Rausch's (2011) book on "shrinking regions" is one of the better recent contributions on this issue. Professionals will appreciate the breadth of the research effort as well as the exploration of what has been hitherto essentially ignored.

The geographic spread is very useful and gives a picture of more than just one place. Klien also rather nicely distinguishes between "lifestyle" migrants and migrants with other motivations. However, information on economic circumstances of the informants seems a bit limited. Most of these migrants appear to be economically marginal with temporary or unstable employment living in share houses. While the qualitative data is extremely interesting, the book could use quantitative support. Klien does not really provide much context concerning how the migrants she is describing fit into larger patterns. Are all the urban/rural migrants of this socioeconomic grouping? Are they all relatively young? This returns us, again, to the idea of "liminality." These seem to be largely people who are "in between" in many senses, not just migration.

An area where some may quibble is that Klien defines neither what she is considering "urban" nor "rural." This makes it difficult to consider the significance of what she is describing. Part of this is a very confusing system Japan has adopted to describe various civic units. Since political consolidation in 2005, whereby the government bribed or coerced smaller civic units to form larger ones, huge areas of Japan are now officially "cities" (anything more than thirty thousand people, regardless of density). Apparently, Klien refers to Japan's great metropolitan centers as "urban," as she mentions Osaka and Tokyo frequently. However, it is not clear just what is considered "rural." As an example, Kitaakita City has a population total of more than thirty thousand, but this population is spread out over more than 1,150 square kilometers, giving a population density of only twenty-seven people per square kilometer. Therefore, it is officially "urban" (i.e., a city), but most of it is most definitely rural with a couple of very small towns scattered about. In fact, nearly 92% of Kitaakita City is forested mountains, hardly what would normally be referred to as a "city" in most places.

The lack of precision in Japanese law and politics is hardly the author's fault, but she could have done more to discuss just what sort of places she is exactly talking about. To be fair, some are really obvious. The Oki Islands, off the coast of Shimane Prefecture, are both remote and rural by any definition. However, she also refers to Tono City in Iwate, which has both urban and rural components, similar to Kitaakita City. "Downtown" Tono is obviously a small city, but the whole *shi* (city) only has a population density of slightly over thirty-one people per square kilometer, so much of it is clearly rural.

Another area where some may quibble is the author's repeated use of the word "empirical" for her material. While it is "empirical" in the sense that the research is based on real observations grounded in the author's actual fieldwork experience (which is a very major strength), it is not really something that could be verified or replicated, particularly given the author's vagueness about the fieldwork locations. This is not, in this sort of work, a major weakness, but it is brought into focus because the author uses the term often.

Overall, however, this is a very interesting and useful book. It shines a light on a population that while not terribly large in and of itself is moving "against the trend" of continued urbanization in Japan.

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M. W. Shores, *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan: Satire and Social Mobility in Kamigata Rakugo*

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 223 pages. Hardcover, £75.00; eBook, Unknown. ISBN 9781108831505 (hardcover), 9781108917476 (eBook).

Matthew W. Shores' *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan: Satire and Social Mobility in Kamigata Rakugo* is an engaging study of the comic Japanese storytelling art of *rakugo* in Western Japan. What makes this book unique is that the author, a professor of Japanese studies as well as an amateur performer of *rakugo*, focuses on Kamigata *rakugo*, which is a particular form of *rakugo* from Western Japan, commonly referred to as Osaka *rakugo* or Naniwa *rakugo* prior to 1950. English-language literature on *rakugo* generally has been somewhat sparse and, as Shores notes, has tended to focus on the Tokyo tradition. The book consists of five eminently readable chapters and is organized into two sections, consisting firstly of four chapters that provide a detailed account of the history and development of Kamigata *rakugo*, and secondly of the fifth chapter of the book, which contains composite translations of five classic Kamigata stories. As someone researching Japanese popular performing arts, I was very much looking forward to Shores' scholarship in this area, particularly since this is an area that seems to be neglected by Western scholars.

In the first chapter, simply titled "Kamigata, Osaka," Shores provides useful background information on the meaning and origins of the term "Kamigata." In Shores' words, this chapter "will give readers a clearer understanding of what the Kamigata of Kamigata *rakugo* is" (23). Shores notes that "as far as many people were concerned, Osaka was *Kamigata*" (22). Shores also sheds light on various aspects of Kamigata, including the history of the region, Osakan identity, performing arts from the region, and the breakdown in the merchant system. Shores depicts Osaka's rise to prominence as the commercial capital of Japan, driven by the Osaka merchants (*chōnin*). On Osakan identity, Shores reviews some of the commonly espoused characteristics of the people of Osaka, including their reputation for being of good humor. Shores also makes some useful distinctions between the development of Osaka as a horizontal society as compared with the hierarchical society of Tokyo and how this impacted humor in both cities. For example, Shores notes that female characters feature more prominently in Kamigata performing arts, and that the vertical social structure in Edo (the former name of Tokyo) meant that people in Edo had to be careful about "how and when they laughed in public and formal settings" (30). The section on Kamigata performing arts is of particular interest in this chapter, as it provides some fascinating insights into *shamisen*, the puppet art *ningyō jōruri*, and *kabuki*, among other things.

Chapter 2 introduces the history of Kamigata *rakugo* and deals with five historical periods: storytelling prior to 1600, the Early Modern Era, Meiji to World War II, post–World War II Shōwa, and Heisei and Reiwa. This chapter includes information on publications related to storytelling, performers in the early modern period, and the development of *rakugo* as a part of *misemono*, the latter referring to the shows and exhibitions that were popular during the Edo period (1603–1868). In the section on the Early Modern Era, Shores introduces some popular *rakugoka* (performers of *rakugo*) of this period, such as Tsuyu no Gorobē I, Yonezawa Hikohachi I, Yonezawa Hikohachi II, and others. Shores' account of the history of *rakugo* is both thorough and edifying. Of particular interest in this chapter is Shores' discussion of *rakugoka* in more recent times and how many *rakugoka* are taking to social media. Shores also notes how the number of *rakugoka* posting videos and live-streaming increased significantly during 2020–2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3, titled "What Constitutes a *Kamigata Rakugo Story*," examines the nature of Kamigata *rakugo* in great depth. Shores commences this chapter by describing the difference between the Kamigata and Tokyo traditions. For example, as Shores tells us, "Tokyo rakugo is more centered on storytelling alone" (92). By contrast, in Kamigata *rakugo*, performers will often combine a number of performing arts and will "frequently digress from stories if they think it will please their audience" (ibid.). There are, of course, several other differences that are detailed in the book, such as how the two traditions use music and the complexity of the stories. Shores also covers many other aspects of Kamigata *rakugo*, including performance details and the content of the stories. Shores' research in this chapter is authoritative, and his insightful commentaries greatly enrich our appreciation of Kamigata *rakugo*.

The remainder of the first section of the book consists of chapter 4: an interview with Hayashi Somemaru IV, a *rakugoka* under whom Shores did an informal apprenticeship. It also includes a short conclusion section in which Shores reiterates many of the main points that he shared throughout the first section of the book. The interview recorded in this was conducted in 2012 and will be especially interesting to *rakugo* enthusiasts.

Chapter 5 features composite translations of five classic Kamigata stories. The stories that Shores selected for this section illustrate some of the key elements of Kamigata *rakugo* that he discussed in the first section of the book. For example, the stories include female characters, they are illustrative of the quality of *hade* (meaning lively, flamboyant, or colorful), and they are merchant stories. This section is a must-read for any serious scholar of *rakugo*.

Aside from gaining valuable insights into Kamigata *rakugo*, I discovered, to my interest and delight, that this book has a great wealth of information about Osaka and *rakugo* in general, much of which I was previously unaware. An amateur *rakugo* performer himself, Shores has not only paid his dues as a performer, learning the art in Japan, but has also succeeded in giving us a rich account of a particularly interesting element of Japanese entertainment. *The Comic Storytelling of Western Japan* is recommended not only for *rakugo* researchers and enthusiasts but also for Japanese studies researchers with an interest in the history of entertainment in Japan.

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Horie Takashi, Tanaka Hikaru, and Tanno Kiyoto, *Amorphous Dissent: Post-Fukushima Social Movements in Japan*

Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2020. 244 pages. Paperback, $41.95; eBook, $38.94. ISBN 9781920901851 (paperback), 9781920901875 (eBook).

Considering the context of "amorphous society," *Amorphous Dissent: Post-Fukushima Social Movements in Japan* adopts a rich and vivid analysis of increasingly unstructured characteristics of social movements in Japan, considering three movements of the anti-nuclear power movement, the movement against the National Security Legislation, and the countermovement against racist movements. The book offers the lens of the "amorphization of Japanese society" (26–27) to explain the changing types and characteristics of social movements, thus transcending the labor movement in the past. With the term "amorphization" the authors eloquently characterize the increasingly shapeless, unclassifiable, and unstructured state of society, as well as social movements themselves.

Since the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble in the early 1990s, the role of corporations and companies as an integral unit of social structure was thwarted along with the increasing numbers of employee layoffs and declining rates of unionization in Japan. A vivid portrayal of the socioeconomic backdrop of Japanese society made it easier for readers to understand why new social movements have occurred recently. Since the 1990s, a series of social phenomena including the declining membership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), increasing irregular employment, declining birth rates, and burdensome childcare have followed. In the 2000s, Japanese society has witnessed other global events such the Iraq War, neoliberal reforms, and the global financial crisis. This economic transition has made some groups, such as young students, no longer serve as the primary actors in social movements. The impoverishment of students with rising tuition fees and fluctuating labor markets made students turn away from social movements.

In addition to socioeconomic shifts, the rise of a hypermediated network society has expedited the individualization of young adults. Individual lifestyles and value systems were valorized among the young generation, in which young university students no longer serve as major actors in labor movements. The authors' attention does not only focus on the economic transformation of Japanese society but also looks at the cultural transformation accompanying economic changes. The dominant group identities of the late 1980s and early 1990s shared by workers of companies and students of universities faded away, and the increasing division of groups and communities by fierce competition led to the illusion of common interests and solidarity. Rising consumer culture and transforming urban spaces also contributed to the increasing sentiment of individualism that diluted group identity. The labor movement of postwar Japan pursued peace, democracy, and other communal values that promoted the public good. However, the collective values of the past have decreased, resulting in the loosening sense of "we-ness" or "one-ness." The past words that are used to collectively designate people who participate in social movements have lost the power to represent them as a whole (30). The authors argue that the terms that represented former movements, such as "workers," "citizens," or "nationals," no longer represent social movements today.

This collapse of collective identity is related to the declining notions of physical groups and communities in the hypermediated network society, where individuals established connections through online platforms. In former movements, "national movements" were established within the self-evident boundaries of "the Japanese," and some were based upon the interpersonal links forged in workplaces, universities, or local communities. However, the new social movements have arisen in the context of an amorphous society, where the participants' actions appear and evolve in online communities. Burgeoning online platforms, such as Twitter, have risen as important players in dispersing information, recruiting new participants, and helping people develop similar emotions and identities, replacing the previous groups such as companies and student groups.

In this context, the authors' analysis of social movements in Japan asks several sociological questions about what it means to be actors of new social movements and what some characteristics of new social movements include. First, the authors' approach to social movements in Japan highlighted a need to rethink the Marxist assumption that the working class made up an important group that would initiate and lead movements. Some of the young participants do not exactly fall into the traditional groups of the working class or university students who used to lead social movements. For instance, according to a survey of activists, the major occupational fields of core members organizing the movement against nuclear power included the music industry, information technology, design, construction design, editing, and translation, and these people in unstable employment are called "cognitive precariat" (23). While the rate of regular employees of major firms who participated in the movement was low, the rate of participation by the self-employed, freelancers, and the unemployed was high, suggesting that the participants of social movements today cannot be reduced to those of a particular class or stratum (23–24). This phenomenon also suggests that increasingly precarious lives in the flexible labor market may lead to a discrepancy in the subjective and objective interpretation of class positions, making it more difficult to argue and predict that a specific class is the main bearer of social movements.

Second, the authors' investigation of changing social movements makes us think about who will be the leading subjects of social movements in the future. News media on the anti-nuclear demonstrations reported that participants were "ordinary people," which diverged from the traditional "activist" image (22). The three groups of participants in demonstrations against nuclear power generation were seniors comprising people from the Japanese baby boomer generation (*dankai no sedai*), born between 1947 and 1949; free-spirited young people who are not salaried workers, the so-called "lost generation"; and housewives accompanied by their children (22). As such the authors nicely captured the emergence of the new subjects of social movements (i.e., the seniors, unemployed young people, and housewives), leading us to have a renewed understanding of movement participants. As an intriguing case, the authors discussed the highly educated housewives' participation in social movements. In the anti-nuclear movement following the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear power plant accident, highly educated housewives, who could not enter the labor market due to gender discrimination, became the core subjects of the movement, and they initiated social movements on causes such as neighborhood issues and food security. The authors' analysis of observing newly emerging movement subjects is fascinating, but an in-depth look into how these groups came to mobilize themselves would be interesting. Social identities as mothers and older adults may allow these participants to develop similar experiences in ways that allow them to empathize with other minorities, bringing greater attention to minority rights issues.

Third, the book also leads readers to recognize the significance of online platforms in the recruitment and mobilization of participants. Many participants at the anti-nuclear demonstrations participated in a demonstration for the first time after the Fukushima accidents, and it resulted in the participants' continued interest and participation in other movements. The authors argue that groups such as university affiliates, labor unions, and other community groups no longer serve as the basis of formulating collective grievance or power, but rather individuals became the basic units of participation. For example, according to a survey of participants in the June 2011 anti-nuclear power demonstration, participants found out about the demonstrations via the internet, Twitter, and from acquaintances (29). These results offer evidence of the powerful influence of the internet in the dissemination of information about demonstrations. In hypermediated societies, personal identities, interests, and commitments can be expressed, shared, and dispersed throughout online spaces, causing otherwise indifferent people to consider the reasons for participating in movements and igniting their motivation to join such movements. What we need to investigate further is how individuals' personal interests and commitments to social movements can be sustained for a long time.

Overall, *Amorphous Dissent* is a must-read for sociologists of social movements and collective behaviors, globalization, historians, and political sociologists interested in the shifting forms of social movements in increasingly interlocked global societies. It also offers various analytical and conceptual insights about the issue of structure versus agency, action versus emotion, and collective identity versus personal identity. By looking into rich descriptions and analyses of social movements in Japan, policymakers and government officials can also understand what the public aspires for and what types of social change they pursue in the increasingly complex Japanese society today.

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Chikako Ozawa-de Silva, *The Anatomy of Loneliness: Suicide, Social Connection, and the Search for Relational Meaning in Contemporary Japan*

Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. 270 pages. Hardcover, $85.00; paperback, $34.95. ISBN 9780520383487 (hardcover), 9780520383494 (paperback).

The publication of *The Anatomy of Loneliness*—mostly written before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic—could not be more timely or needed: since 2020, Japan has recorded sharp increases in social isolation and suicide rates (particularly among women under forty), and public concerns about loneliness have grown (Ueda et al. 2021). The Japanese government eventually came to recognize loneliness as a public health issue and—following the British model—appointed a minister of loneliness and social isolation, Tetsushi Sakamoto, in February 2021. Concerns over loneliness, however, predate the start of the pandemic, as Chikako Ozawa-de Silva aptly explains in her book *The Anatomy of Loneliness*. Ozawa-de Silva expands on these concerns, beginning her introduction with the premise that feeling lonely "is becoming increasingly common in modern societies" (1), and we might, indeed, face a "global epidemic of loneliness" (2). In order to truly understand loneliness—which she explains as being "neither a physical condition nor a mental disorder" (2)—Ozawa-de Silva sets out to provide an "anatomy of loneliness." This anatomy, she stresses sensibly, "is not the (one) of a single individual, but a type of society" (2). A lonely society, she argues, is a society "that makes people feel uncared for, unseen, and unimportant" (5). Both the book's origins and the author's interest in loneliness date back almost twenty years, when Ozawa-de Silva initiated a research project on individuals who frequented so-called suicide websites and "realized that [her] research had to focus not just on suicide, but also on the deeper underlying issues facing young Japanese, especially the issue of loneliness" (4).

The book is beautifully written for a general audience (8), but it is based on the author's academic scholarship and previously published articles and is situated in various fields of literature: Japan studies; anthropological literature on suffering, resilience, and the good; and literature in "positive psychology" (8). Its structure corresponds to the author's trajectory in the process of writing the book (6), a truly rewarding and mostly relatable approach. In seven chapters, the author takes readers along on her own (intellectual and literal) journey. Following the introduction and chapter 1, which comprises basic definitions and theoretical approach(es), the next section of the book (chapters 2–4) intelligently employs multiple perspectives and focuses on the topic of suicide, including suicide websites and internet group suicides. In the second half of the book (chapters 5–6), Ozawa-de Silva shifts this focus to "resilience, human connection, and . . . well-being" (7), using the triple disaster of 2011 as an example. While this change in topic, focus, and tone is at first quite surprising, the final chapter (chapter 7) incorporates these parts by developing two related theoretical perspectives: first, the "crises of subjectivity" (192) and the need for interpersonal and systemic "cultivation and recognition of human connections as antidote to loneliness" (8), and second, a "relational theory of meaning" based on the assumption that "as long as an individual experiences belonging, affiliation, and connection, questions of meaning are less likely to arise, because a key source of feeling meaningful (*ikigai*) is feeling that one is meaningful to others" (197).

The central questions that drive Ozawa-de Silva are "What characterizes the lonely society? Why are societies becoming lonelier? And what, if anything, might be done to change the tide of this steady movement towards loneliness?" (5–6). She first deconstructs what she calls common myths about loneliness and details that loneliness is neither a new phenomenon nor simply a symptom of (clinical) depression; that loneliness, "an affective and subjective reality" (12), must not be conflated with social isolation, "a physical and social reality" (12); and that it is, in fact, "everybody's business" (1). She goes on to define loneliness as "feelings of dissatisfaction that arise with regard to relationships to others or the environment" (16). Based on these premises, Ozawa-de Silva focuses on the interwovenness of loneliness, subjectivity, and empathy, introducing both her theoretical perspective and methodological approach in chapter 1, "Subjectivity and Empathy." Subjectivity, she explains, is the fact "*that* a person experiences, *what* they experience, and *how* they experience it" (20, italics in original); it is always intersubjective—"Janus-faced" (20)—and incremental for the process of establishing the self: highly dynamic, affective, and culturally shaped (20–26). The "outer manifestations of subjectivity" (29) constitute society, and the trend toward lonely societies, she argues, is closely related to neoliberalism and materialism. In order to examine the "interplay between subjective experience and social, political, and economic structures" (35), Ozawa-de Silva then proposes a methodological approach based on "critical empathy" (35, 37, 199) and triangulation (36).

The ethnographic data is the focus of the chapters that follow. In "Too Lonely to Die Alone" (chapter 2), which comprises a historical overview of suicide in Japan, Ozawa-de Silva introduces and discusses some of the influential popular writings on suicide produced since the 1990s, such as internet reviews and (newspaper reports on) "famous" group suicides. Extensive (and mostly unannotated) transcripts of so-called internet suicide websites are the focus of chapter 3, "Connecting the Disconnected." Complementary data—interviews with twenty-four "average" college students in the Tokyo area (109) on their views on suicide and meaning in life—constitute the subsequent chapter, "Meaning in Life." Finally, chapter 5, "Surviving 3.11," and chapter 6, "The Anatomy of Resilience," are based on ethnographic data from the author's fieldwork conducted in Ibaraki after the triple disaster in 2011. This data mirrors the changing focus of the second part of the book: while exploring the question of whether a community as a whole can be lonely (139), the author increasingly focuses on resilience, partly moving away from despair and death.

The variety and centrality of ethnographic data are—in addition to the accessibility of the book to a broader audience while still maintaining theoretical and conceptual depth—certainly among the major strengths of *The Anatomy of Loneliness*. However, this is also where one of the biggest weaknesses of the book lies. While the long, mostly uncommented transcripts of written and oral narratives allow the reader to fully immerse in the stories and topics, I am not fully convinced by this approach, in particular regarding the newspaper reports and the transcripts of internet suicide websites (chapter 3). In my opinion, they raise ethical questions (a topic only touched upon briefly, e.g., 74), and, unfortunately, lack both (self-reflexive) analysis and a deeper engagement with the subjects and their feelings. The transcripts are daunting and support the author's argument, but the reader might feel like a mere observer or even a voyeur. However, it goes without saying that the topic is extremely difficult to research, and there is no easy solution to these problems. Another weakness of the book may be due to the intended audience. Ozawa-de Silva is writing for a more general readership, which perhaps inadvertently resulted in some inaccuracies, generalizations, and simplifications (e.g., with regard to the "commodification of intimacy"). And while the author repeatedly defies and criticizes a simple dichotomization of "West" (here mostly understood as the United States) and "Japan," she unfortunately falls back to such explanation patterns in some parts of the book (146).

The book concludes with five rather pragmatic, concrete suggestions on how to overcome loneliness and cure a "lonely society" (chapter 7). This is very much in line with Ozawa-de Silva's hopeful, almost optimistic, way of tackling the topic as well as her (successful and thoughtful) endeavor to move beyond the common explanation pattern of economic hardship and distress as the primary reasons for suicide. While one could address underlying, intersecting factors such as gender or class in more detail in a future study, her critical approach and her focus on relational meaning are highly convincing and add a new and important perspective on the topic. The amplifying effects of the pandemic have certainly proven that such an anthropological perspective—as well as context-sensitive qualitative research on suicide, social isolation, and solitude—is highly topical and necessary. The mentioned weaknesses aside, the book is fascinating not only because of its detailed insights on the topic and the (critical) analysis of the interwovenness of individual and society, but also because of its pragmatic, hopeful, and "resilient" perspective on suicide, social isolation, and loneliness (lonely societies). *The Anatomy of Loneliness* will prove useful for scholars and students of Japan but also for scholars of anthropology and sociology as well as practitioners in the fields of mental health care.

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Dreux Richard, *Every Human Intention: Japan in the New Century*

New York: Pantheon Books, 2021. 419 pages. Hardcover, $28.00. ISBN 9781101871119.

The first part of *Every Human Intention*, "Diaspora," opens in a Tokyo love hotel following an encounter between a Nigerian man and a Japanese woman. The former is Prosper Anyalechi, an immigrant whose movements in Tokyo, Sendai, and Lagos thread together the problematics of racism, family, labor, and the law. The latter is an unnamed young woman who presents an ambivalent mix of intrigue and peril for Prosper and the men like him. What might have remained an ordinary, albeit deliberately concealed, interaction assumes greater significance due to its timing—March 11, 2011, the same date as Japan's tragic triple disaster of an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear reactor meltdowns at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. After a call from other hotel guests prompts a police officer to take him into custody, the officer tells Prosper that disasters can make people act foolishly—though he also insists that not all Japanese people are "racial discriminators" (15). The many layers of this moment encapsulate Dreux Richard's vision for *Every Human Intention*—an in-depth portrayal of intersecting private moments that reveal "Japan's national character" (8) amid the profound social, demographic, and political changes of the past decade.

Over three distinct storylines, Richard evokes a multifaceted portrait of Japan, where upheaval and transition force people in the country into murky pathways where eventual reprieve from struggle and moral ambiguity remain uncertain. In part 1, "Diaspora," Richard focuses on a community of Nigerian immigrants, whom he met at detention centers, on the streets in red-light districts, and at African community events. Richard reveals the social and economic circuits that link together visa brokering, non-authorized nightlife work and export businesses, and detention—and their impacts on immigrants themselves and their Japanese spouses and children.

Part 2, "Decline," traces the contours of depopulation and economic stagnation in Wakkanai, a city in rural Hokkaido. Richard follows the foot traffic of a municipal census-taker; the life story of Steve Tamaki, a man in his sixties who returned to Wakkanai to care for his ill mother after decades of living in California; the construction of a rest home (an elder-care facility) in the town's new train station; and the perspectives of nursing staff at the rest home. These narratives explain the town's pragmatic pivot away from its aspirations as tourist destination toward an economy that capitalizes more directly on its aging population. Finally, part 3, "Reform," enters the meetings and offices of the Japan Atomic Power Company (Genden) and the Nuclear Regulatory Authority to investigate the politics of nuclear safety before and after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident. Richard documents the scientific assessments of fault lines and earthquake-proof architecture that preceded the disaster and politicization of scientific expertise amid the process of restarting the nation's reactors in the years after.

The scope of *Every Human Intention*'s storytelling and depth of detail establish Richard as a reporter who is talented at developing connections and fostering intimacies with interlocutors across a diverse range of communities. As a text for teaching, in my view, the book's strength lies in the lessons it offers about the craft of writing. Richard translates his interlocutors' everyday experiences into fleshy scenes while dexterously alternating between his own absence and presence as a narrator. In this way, I see *Every Human Intention* as a helpful guide for teaching the principles of ethnography to undergraduate and graduate students—particularly as a conversation starter about writing thick description, relationship building, mapping out social networks, and unfolding long and complex storylines.

Yet while *Every Human Intention* models excellence for immersive storytelling and literary nonfiction, as journalistic writing, it deviates from the standards expected for scholarly ethnography. I offer this comment not to reinforce presumed binaries of investigative journalism versus ethnography or literature versus academic research, but rather to parse out aspects of the book that make it problematic to adopt uncritically as an academic resource. Except for the book's introduction and afterword, Richard offers limited commentary about the connections across his three cases.

The book's unannounced shift to rural Hokkaido in "Decline"—after seventeen prior chapters in the world of Tokyo's Nigerian immigrants—is jarring. I kept searching for a clear connection across these very different stories. What I eventually surmised was that Richard wanted these stories to stand on their own as snapshots of the daily negotiations people undertake amid disaster, decline, and marginalization in post-Fukushima Japan. Richard suggests that these stories present a view of Japan that is typically underexplored or unseen. In many respects, his claim holds accuracy. But by omitting annotation and analysis, he obscures the acts of interpretation that all authors engage in when *creating the frame* for their storytelling. Moreover, as he travels across different storylines, the chronology of events sometimes becomes muddled. This problem was especially glaring in "Reform," a section that by virtue of its relatively technical content, needed greater clarity of timeline.

What I found more concerning about Richard's slippage between narrative flourish and analysis, however, was its ethical ramifications. In a particularly troubling moment, Richard alludes to a false accusation of sexual assault levied against Prosper by the unnamed Japanese woman. Richard describes this woman as "young enough" to live with her parents and to "confess what had happened if she came to regret it, but in the version her parents would hear, the role of her consent might diminish" (13). Despite the seriousness of this claim, he offers no further context or explanation—leaving it unclear if the young woman ever voiced such accusation, if Prosper explicitly verbalized his fear of potential accusation, a combination of the two, or if Richard's intention was to evoke a more figurative interpretation, where tropes around consent and veracity stand in as character description.

Along similar lines, by neglecting to comment on gender demographics of Nigerian migration while exclusively focusing on Nigerian men, the text contributes to existing sexualized representations that persist across the globe, including in East Asia—of Black and brown masculinity standing in contradistinction to and in conflict with women's innocence (Bhattacharyya 2009; Cheng 2021). I found myself wondering how differently a queer ethnographer might approach the task of "translating" Japan (8) to their readers. What I suspect is that such a writer might find it impossible to share their insights without explicit recognition of how the ethnographer's social position is irrefutably wedded to the shape of the story itself.

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Felicia Katz-Harris, ed., *Yōkai: Ghosts, Demons & Monsters of Japan*

Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2019. 255 pages. Hardcover, $39.95. ISBN 9780890136522.

This book is an exhibition catalog, and the editor, Felicia Katz-Harris, is senior curator and the curator of Asian folk art at the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA). The onsite and online exhibition hosted by the museum is entitled "Yokai: Ghosts & Demons of Japan" (https://yokai.moifa.org/#/). The exhibition began on December 8, 2019, and runs through to October 30, 2022. The book contains ten chapters written by well-known authors, interspersed with many photos of the exhibits.

In chapter 1, Katz-Harris provides a general guideline for readers explaining the concept of *yōkai* culture. Komatsu Kazuhiko, one of the most famous representatives of modern *yōkai* research, presents a definition of *yōkai* in chapter 2. Readers may be familiar with his approach, which takes a critical view of the early studies of *yōkai* by Yanagita Kunio (more on this in the following paragraphs). In chapter 3, Noriko Tsunoda Reider analyzes the representations of *oni* in the history of Japanese literature. Shimazaki Satoko discusses *yūrei* in Edo *kabuki* plays in chapter 4. Chapter 5, by Michael Dylan Foster, which is based on his inspiring fieldwork in Kagoshima and Akita, focusses on the emotional aspects of today's masked rituals that these *yōkai* are supposed to evoke. Although Toshidon, Namahage, and Paantu are described as visiting deities in this chapter, in the beautiful book of photographs by Charles Fréger, *Yōkainoshima: Island of Monsters* (2016), they appear as characters in folk costumes. Viewing these gives us a chance to consider "the effect of fear" (Foster's term) from *yōkai*, because we can discover a different image of folk fashion outside a ritual context. Chapters 6 though 8 by Adam Kabat, Kagawa Masanobu, and Zack Davisson, respectively, discuss the cultural representations of *yōkai* in each period; it is fascinating to watch their transition through the history of various media, or comics, toys, and so on. Finally, chapter 9 is by Yumoto Kōichi, the founder of Yumoto Kōichi Yōkai Museum in Hiroshima, and chapter 10 was written by Kōno Junya, a *yōkai* artist and promotor of *yōkai* tourism. Both describe their unique experiences as creators of present-day *yōkai* culture. On the subject of modern *yōkai* artists, I believe it is essential to consider the painter, Tomiyuki Kaneko, whose incredible works are almost too ghastly to avert our eyes from. These artists provide us with more varied dimensions of *yōkai* representation.

The pioneering work on *yōkai* research is *Yōkai dangi* (Discourse on *yōkai*) by Yanagita Kunio (2013), the founder of Japanese folklore studies. The earliest essay in this book, written in 1909, focused on the *tengu* legends through his perspective searching for "mountain people." That year Yanagita visited northeastern Japan and began editing the monumental folklore study of *tengu* and *kappa* stories, *Tōno monogatari* (The legends of Tōno, 2004). Although the general term "*yōkai*" frequently describes ghosts, demons, and monsters, modern *yōkai* research has more or less maintained a connection to Yanagita's work. If we wish to academically approach *yōkai* from any perspective, I think it is necessary to recall Yanagita's initial attempts in this genre.

The question remains: are *yūrei* ghosts, and *yōkai* monsters? If we consider this from the perspective of appearance, do the former seem to be deceased persons and the latter animals? According to Komatsu's well-known definition, "*Yūrei* are ghosts, which I view as a subcategory of *yōkai*" (65), and "*yūrei* are part of the *yōkai* world, but they take the unique form of human spirits and are treated differently as the subject of many ghost stories" (65). If so, we must pay attention to whether *yūrei* could be considered representatives of *yōkai*, such as *tengu* and *kappa* or *kitsune* and *tanuki*, even if the cover of this book about *yōkai* features a *yūrei* painting. I think we should explore the proposition again that *yūrei* are *yōkai* in accordance with each case study and historical context. In fact, Shimazaki (chapter 4) presents the sole case of *yūrei* research in this volume, indicating that *yūrei* achieved unique status in Edo *kabuki* plays. She comments on Yanagita's description and Komatsu's definition as follows:

> The *yūrei*, in this sense, was a stable category in certain contexts of early modern literary and performative expression. Still, it is extremely difficult to discuss the ghost historically because it could assume a variety of physical forms ranging from shadowy presences to demons and even snakes. (109)

Shimazaki's chapter on *yūrei* includes a section entitled "The Female Body," while Reider's includes "Oni's Gender." Although *yōkai* research in Japan has tackled the problems regarding the sexuality of *yūrei* only to a limited extent, these issues of cultural representation are directly associated with the definition and categorization of *yōkai*. Furthermore, in this context, we should take into consideration the "modernity" of *yōkai* research, and Gerald Figal's *Civilization and Monsters* (1999) is the best entry point into this study for English and Japanese scholars. Figal's book is very important not only for *yōkai* research, but also for international Japanology and the comparative study of religions. Both Yanagita Kunio and Inoue Enryo, the founder of *yōkaigaku* (study of *yōkai*), were researchers at the center of modernization in Japan. Considering the enlightenment movement that was driven by the government and scholars' attempts to eradicate beliefs in *yōkai* and *yūrei*, there is no doubt that early *yōkai* research focused on the historical development of these beliefs.

I would like to mention two noteworthy parts of the book: one is an interview with Amari Yōichirō, a puppet artist in Tokushima (98–101), and the other is a discussion of the Ushioni Matsuri, the cow-demon festival in Ehime (124–27). As they include important information about living *yōkai* practices, readers can gain alternative perspectives beyond the main chapters of the book. Through this book, we do come into contact with various aspects of *yōkai* culture in a material sense, but it is just an entrance to the *yōkai* world.

In addition to the publication of this book, there is a corresponding museum exhibition that will be open through to October 30, 2022. Furthermore, the curators of the exhibit created an excellent website as an online exhibition for all the people interested in the *yōkai* culture. Needless to say, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, this attempt seems to be one of the most successful cases to establish an internet museum for both real and virtual visitors. By visiting the website, we can learn more about the actual practices of *yōkai* culture. For example, in the item "DIVE DEEPER!" we can find two additional academic essays about Pokémon and listen to Japanese ghost storytelling on YouTube, although these contents are not included in the book. Of course, there are a vast number of photos on the website that provide complementary information and help us learn more about *yōkai* culture. Moreover, the virtual experience of this exhibition evokes a powerful sense of the living culture of Japanese religion.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the curators of the exhibition have also prepared a special exhibit on *Amabie*, which is a type of *yōkai* that has the power to prevent epidemics. Japan has always developed material culture and folktales that involve prayers to overcome crises through belief in the creatures who can withstand natural disasters. While we may not necessarily subscribe to the legend of Amabie, we can become aware of the religious practices that surround it. It is worth exploring Amabie's raison d'etre, even if it will not stop the ongoing pandemic. Through including this online exhibit, the website shows us a prime example of living *yōkai* culture and how it can be applied to the current situation we face.

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South Korea

Hyung-A Kim, *Korean Skilled Workers: Towards a Labor Aristocracy*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. 232 pages. $30.00. ISBN: 9780295747217.

In the 1960s South Korea (hereafter Korea) was among the poorest countries in the world. However, as of 2020, Korea was the tenth-biggest economy, and "Korea" has become one of the coolest national brands in the world. Many international scholars and policymakers have looked at the dramatic story of Korea's economic growth and national development through the lens of a successful developmental state in Asia, along with Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore. The role of the state has widely been accepted as the key mechanism for the East Asian economic miracle. Although Hyung-A Kim's *Korean Skilled Workers: Towards a Labor Aristocracy* also points out the interventionist role of the state as a significant factor in Korea's impressive economic growth, it does so through a somewhat unexplored dimension of Korea's rapid industrialization and economic development: the untold story of Korea's skilled workers in heavy and chemical industries (HCI).

In this fascinating historical analysis of the creation of Korea's first generation of skilled HCI workers and the transformation of their sociopolitical trajectory, Kim Hyung-a unveils the complex story of how HCI workers' collective identity has dramatically changed over four decades since the early 1970s: from patriotic and obedient industrial warriors (*sanŏp chŏnsa*) in the 1970s under Park Chung Hee's developmental state into militant Goliat workers throughout the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, and how they finally became labor aristocracy (*nodong kwijok*), who possess exclusive privileges that other workers cannot enjoy, particularly irregular and younger-generation workers. More specifically, Kim attempts to spell out how the collective selfishness of HCI workers toward their own economic advancement has become a major contributing factor to not only the country's rapid economic development but also to socioeconomic inequality in today's Korean society.

The book is divided into five parts chronologically. After a short introduction, chapter 1 illustrates the mass production of well-disciplined skilled workers, which was crucial for Korea's remarkable heavy and chemical industrialization from the 1970s onward. Under the Park state's highly centralized nation-building project, the state fostered a massive number of skilled workers, so-called "industrial warriors," under a reciprocal social contract. Young people were strategically selected and provided financial subsidies and unprecedented educational opportunities through technical high school education and vocational training. In return, these young industrial workers were committed to serving the state-led industrialization. The state inculcated the nationalistic identity of industrial warriors in these workers' minds, and they conformed to the Park state's nation-building HCI project. The subsidies-as-contracts worked well, because young workers, mostly male workers from rural areas, willingly seized the chance for a better life and upward social mobility.

In chapter 2, Kim shows how industrial warriors transformed into militant Goliat warriors through an emerging new labor militancy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The term "Goliat warriors" was derived from a type of radical protest called "Goliat struggle," which was an all-out strike from the top of a gigantic crane named Goliat in shipbuilding plants. As HCI manufacturing firms grew rapidly, the number of HCI workers massively increased. Resultingly, large industrial cities for workers in the firms were established, especially in the southeast coastal cities, including Ulsan, Masan, and Changwon, in which large shipbuilding firms were located. The increased number of workers in these firms created conducive conditions for the birth of new militant unionism.

Shortly after Park was assassinated, a new authoritarian regime emerged under Chun Doo-hwan. Under the new regime, any kind of democracy protests were brutally suppressed, which included the industrial workers' democratic union movement. As new draconian labor laws and policies were introduced, new militant unionism emerged in the Korean labor movement led by HIC workers in partnership with radical university-students-turned-workers, intellectuals, and progressive church activist groups behind the *minjung* (people's) democracy movement. In the beginning, HCI workers, radical students, and intellectuals shared a political vision for a solidarity of the Korean working class. This partnership collapsed, however, because the HCI workers' movement became focused on the workers' own interests to improve their welfare rather than fighting for a shared political vision for the Korean working class.

As seen in chapters 3 and 4, throughout the period between the late 1980s and 1990s, HCI workers' collective consciousness had become more parochial, narrow, and self-interested while experiencing democratization, the impact of neoliberal globalization, and the Asian financial crisis. After the end of military authoritarianism in 1987, a new president, the former army general Roh Tae-woo, was democratically elected for the first time in history. In the early years of the Roh government, the Korean economy experienced a remarkable economic boom with a massive surge in exports and a current account surplus. Meanwhile, as a result of the success of industrial strikes, known as the Great Workers' Struggle, wages for manufacturing workers dramatically increased. In this situation, HCI workers' militant democratic unions changed the labor relations with their employers and the capitalist congregates referred to as *chaebŏl*. Collective bargaining became a necessary procedure between firms and workers.

During Korea's economic boom, HCI firms continuously increased production by investing large amounts of capital. But the firms found themselves with increasing global competition, and an economic slump began in late 1989. Amid these changing environments in HCI sectors, the rise of the Corporate Culture Movement (CCM) began, which was a strategic management reform modeled on Japanese corporate culture. Many large, leading HCI firms were engaged in this management reform, which primarily aimed to construct a new form of labor relations. The impact of the CCM was overwhelming, which led to many radical changes in workplaces and in labor relations. Most notably, as a labor flexibility device, the CCM paved the way for Korea's neoliberal capitalist system by initiating and normalizing a new mode of dual labor management, which differentiates two levels of the labor force—regular workers in full-time permanent positions and nonregular workers. The former can receive the full benefits afforded by Korea's labor laws, and the latter do not receive full benefits. Under these work arrangements, the number of subcontracted nonregular workers rapidly increased while the number of regular HCI workers dropped. In this changing environment, regular workers began to be transformed into a privileged group, and their collective class consciousness emerged as a labor aristocracy.

After the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the new Kim Dae-jung government was inaugurated in 1998. The new government committed to a comprehensive neoliberal restructuring of the finance, business, labor, and public sectors in order to relieve the structural problems of the Korean economy and to match global standards. During this period of harsh economic restructuring, the long-established state-*chaebŏl* power relationship dramatically changed. The financial crisis provided a new opportunity for the *chaebŏl* to restore their capitalist hegemonic power over Korea's newly marketized labor. Eventually, they have surged as a ruling capitalist class, often described as a "*chaebŏl* republic." Since then, Korean society has transformed into a proper *chaebŏl* republic. This change encouraged HCI workers of the large *chaebŏl* corporations to consolidate their collective position as a labor aristocracy by differentiating themselves from other regular workers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or other types of nonregular workers in Korea's dual labor market system.

As the last chapter shows us more vividly based on the author's own interview analysis with HCI workers, the institutionalized dual labor system has elevated HCI regular workers' and their unions' collective status as labor aristocracy and their privileged position in the workplace. For example, they can enjoy more guaranteed job security, better wages, and welfare provisions through union protection. Most surprisingly, the privilege of employment inheritance (*koyong seseŭp*) is given to the children of HCI regular workers who have over twenty-five years of service.

The positive role of *chaebŏl* and HCI workers should not be overlooked in Korea's rapid economic development. HCI workers and their unions have been the leading force of Korea's democratic labor movement. However, today HCI workers and their unions, and particularly their umbrella authority KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions), are being criticized by many rank-and-file Korean workers as well as ordinary Korean citizens for the characteristics of militant labor unionism through which HCI workers of large *chaebŏl* corporations can strengthen and maintain their vested rights and exclusive status and identity by discriminating against nonregular workers.

In recent years, the younger Korean generation in their twenties and thirties is emerging as a new center of Korean politics. Unlike older generations, this generation is more focused on practical issues rather than conventional political logic or ideological thinking. At workplaces, their pragmatic attitude is becoming a new challenge to Korea's conventional forms and characteristics of labor movement and unionism, in that young Koreans are skeptical about labor-union militancy and critical of the labor aristocracy. There is a growing demand for a new union model that emphasizes communication toward rationality and fairness in labor-management relations. In this regard, it is interesting to continue to observe and study what will happen and what can be changed in Korea's labor movement and labor-management relations in the future.

This book will be useful to students and scholars who are interested in economic development, class politics, labor movements, and labor-management relations in Korea. Undoubtedly the story of Korean HCI workers' changing sociopolitical trajectory will present a fresh perspective on the story of Korea's remarkable economic and national development.

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Southeast Asia

Edyta Roszko, ***Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Central Vietnam***

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Since the 1990s, religion in Vietnam has seen a remarkable resurgence. The Vietnamese religious landscape is diverse and dynamic, and recent years have seen the construction and restoration of many temples, pagodas, and churches. Reflecting these developments, scholars of Vietnamese religion have published fascinating ethnographic studies in English on topics such as popular Buddhism (Soucy 2012), urban spirit mediums (Endres 2011), and popular pilgrimage (Taylor 2004). Edyta Roszko's monograph *Fishers, Monks and Cadres: Navigating State, Religion and the South China Sea in Vietnam* is an important addition to this growing field. Contrary to most of the existing literature on Vietnamese culture and religion, this book focuses neither on the north nor on the south, but on the center. To my knowledge, this is the first study in English of popular maritime religion in central Vietnam.

Fishers, Monks and Cadres is based on long-term fieldwork in two fishing communities, the coastal town of Sa Huỳnh and the island of Lý Sơn, both in Quảng Ngãi province. As Roszko argues, Lý Sơn in particular is central to the state's project of reconstructing Vietnam as a "maritime nation," which serves to justify its territorial claims. Local ritual traditions that were deemed "superstitious" until recently now "provide evidence of maritime heritage and hence Vietnam's long-standing sovereignty in the South China

Sea" (10). Thus, this peripheral fishing community has taken on new significance not only as a popular domestic tourist destination but also, more importantly, as a symbol of the nation and its sovereignty.

The book is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter 1 introduces the two fieldwork sites, their geographical settings, and their histories. In this chapter, the reader also learns more about the recent maritime turn in nationalist ideology, "recasting Vietnam from the village-based, rice-growing nation depicted during its various ways against foreign occupiers to a maritime nation (*nước biển*) oriented towards the 'East Sea'" (51). Chapter 2, "Doing and Making Religion in Vietnam," contains an in-depth analysis of the category "religion" (*tôn giáo*) in Vietnam, and its relation to categories such as "folk beliefs" (*tín ngưỡng dân gian*) and "superstition" (*mê tín dị đoan*), which carry different connotations. All these categories are politically embedded, and their meanings and contents are subject to intense contestation by state actors, academics, and local stakeholders. I would recommend this chapter not only to sociologists and scholars of religion interested in Vietnam but also to those specializing in other geographical regions and traditions, as it provides some interesting comparative perspectives.

In chapter 3, Roszko provides a detailed discussion of the difference between farming villages (*làng*) and fishing communities (*vạn*), drawing on a wealth of historical and ethnographic material. Among other things, this chapter briefly discusses the whale god, Ông Nam Hải, an important protective deity for fishers throughout south and central Vietnam. In passing, Roszko refers to a spirit medium séance used to approve the appointment of the chief of the *vạn* (93). This is intriguing, not least because contemporary whale god worshippers often insist that no *lên đồng*–type rituals take place at whale mausoleums (*lăng cá Ông*)—a claim that is probably incorrect but understandable, considering that such practices are still considered "superstition" and banned at many places. I would have liked to read more about spirit mediumship in Quảng Ngãi, especially in relation to the whale god, but unfortunately Roszko does not elaborate further upon this topic.

Chapter 4 is fascinating—probably my favorite chapter in the book—because it shows that state-religion relations are multifaceted, messy, and subject to continuous negotiation also in socialist countries with strict anti-religious policies. The chapter focuses on a statue of Quan Âm (Guanyin) in Sa Huỳnh that survived attempts by the police to have it destroyed in 1978, whereupon it was transferred to a non-Buddhist temple on a nearby cliff. Twenty-eight years later, a new Buddhist head monk tried to have the statue returned to his pagoda. The chapter demonstrates convincingly that state representatives are not always the main agents of secularist purification projects; religious specialists can also be active in establishing spatial and discursive distinctions between "secular" and "religious" spaces, and in distinguishing between "proper" religion and "superstition." In this case, the villagers found a creative way to respond to the demands of both the local government and the Buddhist monk while simultaneously continuing their own devotional practices and leaving the old statue on its cliff.

In the last two chapters, Roszko elaborates further upon some of the themes introduced in previous chapters. Chapter 5 focuses on the changing significance of Lý Sơn in the context of territorial conflicts (the Paracel and Spratly Islands), the new role of islanders as "guardians" of the nation, and the creation of new commemorative rituals that support nationalist historical narratives. Chapter 6, finally, builds further upon chapter 4, focusing on the role of gender in ritual practices—in this case, those pertaining to the goddess Thiên Y A Na. It discusses some of the tactics employed by local women to navigate and subvert a religious and political system dominated by men. Like chapter 4, it presents some fascinating ethnographic material.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. The ethnographic and geographical descriptions are detailed and lively. I learned many new things about popular religion in central Vietnam, a region where I have lived and researched myself. I am grateful to Roszko for answering some of my questions, for instance, concerning the ambivalent relations between institutionalized Buddhism and popular goddess worship. In addition, I appreciate the nuanced discussion of state-religion relations, which shows convincingly that the state is not a single monolithic actor, and that government officials, party cadres, monks, and worshippers all actively negotiate and give shape to both "the state" and "religion" at the local level. As Roszko states in her introduction, "religion in Asia is either approached through a dichotomous and often antagonistic framework of state-religion interactions . . . or through the framework of embodied and experienced religious practices that leaves the state out. . . . One of the aims of this book is to refocus those debates by asking how people engage, selectively accept, and eventually subvert state discourses when it comes to religious practices" (14–15). In this, the book has succeeded very well.

In sum, *Fishers, Monks and Cadres* is an important study. It is not only rich in ethnographic detail but also contains insightful reflections on state-religion relations in post–*đổi mới* Vietnam, social changes in fishing communities, and the gendered nature of ritual practices. This makes it a must-read not only for scholars and students of contemporary Vietnam but also for scholars of religion and anthropologists who work on topics such as the politics of religion, religion and gender, and maritime popular religion elsewhere.

References

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Holly High, *Projectland: Life in a Lao Socialist Model Village*

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Paperback, $28.00; cloth, $80.00. ISBN 9780824888688 (paperback), 9780824886653 (cloth).

Within the growing landscape of ethnographic studies of Laos, the relationship between the Lao state and upland groups is a prominent theme. One such upland village, a relocated Katu village in the southern Lao province of Sekong, Kandon, is the subject of Holly High's second monograph focusing on the southern part of the country. As the book cover already indicates, this book is not intended to be a study of a Katu village for its own sake; it is ultimately about the Lao state and what it means to live in a socialist model village such as Kandon, a certified "cultural village." In an admirably consistent manner, the author's engaging argumentation frames the ethnographic narratives and touches upon a great variety of topics.

One of her starting points is her proposition that Lao socialism is anything but "post-". High argues that democratic centralism and vanguard socialism can be found in Laos alive and well (chapter 1). The latter is especially important because "vanguardism has produced a scenario observable in everyday village life, whereby one's fluency in the state's metalanguage, and in its socialist concepts and meanings, is an index of one's political prowess" (12). "Success," and its opposite, "necessity," are key poles in the "metalanguage of socialism" that High's interlocutors, especially Wiphat, the charismatic village head, deploy. New Kandon, the relocated Kandon village, has been successful in qualifying as a "cultural village." High investigates the cultural village policy and reveals the evolutionist underpinnings entailed in the distinction between desirable and non-desirable cultural features (chapter 3). However, the vagueness around what is not desirable implies a certain amount of flexibility, High argues, and enables villagers to retain selected practices while embracing new ones.

High can perhaps also be said to retain selected elements, here of classic monographs of the area, and to embrace new ones by highlighting often-overlooked phenomena. In discussing the implementation of development projects, she chooses the promotion of toilets and the certification of "open defecation free village" (chapter 4). Actually, the toilets cater to quite different needs: they are used by women to give birth, because taboos about spilling blood during childbirth in the vicinity of rice usually requires women to give birth in temporary huts away from the village. In her account of a ritual oath and buffalo sacrifice (chapters 5 and 6), High puts her emphasis not so much on the ritual minutiae of the sacrifice but on its relationship to the metalanguage of socialism. Wiphat's quote (chapter 1) is telling in this regard: while the majority of ritual practices have been abandoned, the remaining rituals, including buffalo sacrifices, are referred to as "necessary." High points out that the socialist state does not so much put an end to local animist practices but rather provides new pathways to practice them. Just as toilets allow rice-related taboos on birthing to be continued, the ritual oath is supposed to tackle problems of sorcery and witchcraft. Yet, when considering the vitality of animist ritual practices in Kandon, it appears to the reader that while the legitimacy of their persistence is locally clad in terms of "necessity," the latter seems to be rather grounded in their efficacy or, in other words, their success; given that buffalo sacrifices are deemed successful in preventing people from suffering and dying prematurely, one could regard these animist practices as the foundation that enables any success within the competition of recognition and resources within the Lao socialist state.

Chapter 7 revolves around the idea that desire is dangerous. This is why it is often denied and, instead, "necessity" is stressed. The key examples of this are narratives about marital decision-making: "Marriage strikes like illness," and, as High argues, illnesses often lead to marriages—as ancestor spirits are assumed to indicate their pity for unmarried descendants or their wish to have debts repaid by inflicting their kin with diseases. This chapter does not engage the wealth of the literature on the topic; in particular, there is no discussion of Kaj Århem's (2010) work, which could have helped to clarify a few aspects of the asymmetric alliance. This being said, High's focus on the question of the motivations behind particular marital decisions is highly original and relevant. In chapter 8, High confides in the reader about the details of her rather adventurous journey to the still inhabited Old Kandon. During this journey, several misunderstandings revealed that while for the hiking anthropologist, the challenging environment might be the subject of fear, it might rather be sorcery and witchcraft that occupies the minds of her local interlocutors.

Notably, the role of women and gender in New Kandon is a red thread, or better, a counter-current, that runs through the book. The staging of success appears to be entirely in men's hands—after Wiphat, other male interlocutors are at the forefront of the ethnographic vignettes. In chapter 1, the reader already is introduced to a female counterpart (or contester) of Wiphat, Sum, who also specializes in catering to foreigners, although she is not a publicly acknowledged broker for external village visitors, such as officials and bureaucrats. Women's birthing taboos appear as remnants of the past but are facing a revival thanks to the sanitization policies (chapter 4). In her description of the buffalo sacrifice, she discusses how men, wearing women's clothing, encompass female potency. When High refers to buffalo sacrifices, she explicitly mentions the domestic violence into which intensive feasting can lead. In chapter 5, finally, High gives details on weaving as a female mode of value-generation that was part of a trade connecting the uplands of Sekong with Vietnam.

This well-composed book is a must-read for scholars of Laos and mainland Southeast Asia. High's discussion of the politics engrained in different mundane areas of life and in the national and local concepts of culture is of interest to a wider readership. The narrative and self-reflective style of the book will certainly appeal to graduate and undergraduate students. Together with the author's webpage, which offers additional material and images to accompany the book (https://hollyhigh.net/category/projectland/), *Projectland* is also a rich resource for teaching courses on the ethnography of Southeast Asia. One of the merits of the book is that it raises often-overlooked yet eminently important subjects such as birthing practices and narratives of marital decision-making. We can certainly look forward to future publications inspired by Holly High's thought-provoking work.

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Tibet

Franz Xaver Erhard and Thomas Wild, *Drumze: Metamorphosen des tibetischen Teppichs*

Potsdam: Edition Tethys, 2021. 102 pp. 17 black and white illustrations, 54 color illustrations, 41 plates, 2 maps, bibliography. Hardcover, €42,00. ISBN: 9783942527132.

Drumze: Metamorphoses of the Tibetan Carpet forms the complementary catalogue to the eponymous exhibition on display between October 16, 2021 and December 31, 2022 at the Teppichmuseum Schloss Voigtsberg in Oelsnitz, Germany. But this catalog should not be treated lightly; the two authors, Franz Xaver Erhard and Thomas Wild, have produced a meticulously immersive and broadly educational history of the Tibetan carpet—an everyday object that transcends its quotidian usage and permeates every stratum of Tibetan society. Their pairing, a regional scholar and fine arts dealer, makes the catalog an indispensable resource for scholars and appeals equally to the general museum-goer.

The mission statement of both the catalog and exhibition is to track the origins and diachronic adaptations of the Tibetan carpet within specific historical epochs. Rather than focusing on individual or exemplary carpets, the catalog takes a broader tapitological approach to understand the sociohistorical context for evolutions in carpet making and to reconstruct how an archaic handicraft, made on a rudimentary loom, has morphed into a global heritage symbol and mass-consumed product (7).

In seven concise chapters spanning one thousand years of Tibetan history, the reader is treated to excellent translations of primary source material. These materials are reinforced by field research conducted by the two authors; since the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the authors have canvassed monasteries in Central Tibet to ethnographically record carpet weaving technologies and techniques. Consequently, every page of the volume offers archival photographs and is attuned to relevant archaeological material evidence—even drawing from radiocarbon dating evidence for historical precision. It also includes winsome and eccentric travelogue excerpts from a motley group of explorers, including Italian Jesuits and Russian and English adventurers. Each chapter ends with either a tapestry-related overview or high-resolution illustrations, which bring the material off the page and into the reader's imagination.

To be clear, this is not merely a picture book peppered with quotations. The authors advance our scholarly understanding of Tibetan tapitology through an impressive literature review of Tibetan-language and secondary sources. Carpets from the Wangden (*Dbang ldan*) region in the Central Tibetan Nyang valley—*Wangdrum* for short—are a fitting example. The authors persuasively argue that the *Wangdrum* technique is virtually identical to the knotting technique of ancient burial carpets from Khotan (fourth to sixth century). This means that with relative certainty we can trace influences from the Eurasian carpet belt into the Tibetan carpet tradition, which is attested for at least the fifteenth century (25). Building on this insight, distinctive motifs of the *Wangdrum* were identified during fieldwork visits to monasteries of the Drigung, Gelug, Sakya, and Bon traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The popular throne carpets in such monasteries can be interpreted as testimony to an older ecumenical or Rimé (*ris med*) tradition (23). This is astonishing to historians, as this non-sectarian Rimé movement has, up to now, been conservatively dated to the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

The authors' object-based and anthropological approach promises to fill several lacunae in textual historical research, which might otherwise have remained obscured to scholars. At times, the exhaustively technical descriptions of weaving techniques and historical adaptions may not appeal to a general readership. At other times, I would have appreciated even more explanation, especially regarding the differences between the general Tibetan cushion (*gdan*) and carpet (*grum ze*), which is only addressed in a single footnote (12).

Next, the book introduces secular (non-monastic) carpets, especially the so-called *Khamdrum*. The biography of a Tibetan cabinet minister named Doring Paṇḍita (1721–1792), whose family founded a carpet workshop on their country estate in Gabshi (Dga' bzhi), constitutes the backbone of the discussion. The Paṇḍita family instigated a trend that was soon to be followed by other noble families; the volume tracks this trend forward several centuries to its fullest social impact, as discussed in chapter 5, "Designer Carpets in the Early 20th Century." Erhard and Wild's crisp narrativizing of the social history of secular carpets enlivens a subject often treated with dry scholasticism.

With Tibet's declaration of independence by the thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1913, numerous Western influences began "weaving" their way into Tibet. This included a magnificent Tibetan Art déco rendition, which was reflected in carpet designs from some workshops of ministerial households (such as the Paeonia carpet immortalized on the cover; see also plate 30). Another outcome was the import of synthetic dyes, which negatively heralded the gradual decline of traditional carpet making in Tibet and positively allowed Tibetan handicraft artists to image new carpet motifs, which appealed to the burgeoning demand for Tibetan Chinoiserie.

A particular point of excellence within the catalog is the adroit pairing of explanations of historical processes and visual demonstrations of such processes through fifty-four illustrations. Weighing in at a slim 102 pages, obviously short of a standard historical monograph, the volume nevertheless comprehensively analyses and evaluates Tibetan carpets against the incisive events of Tibetan history. Chapter 6 is devoted to the "Dissolution of the Tibetan Carpet" when, at the beginning of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the CCP classified Tibetan carpet making as reactionary under the *Kampfbegriff* of the Four Old Ones (*sì jiù*). Although carpet weaving bans were lifted in Tibet in the 1980s, the Chinese influence led to the export-oriented production of carpets and everyday objects such as bicycle saddles and car seat covers.

Parallel to this, various initiatives were undertaken by exiled Tibetans in South Asia to preserve Tibetan carpet-making artistry and provide employment for the refugees. With international help, the Tibetan carpet-making practices underwent revision and renewed flourishing, beginning in the 1980s, as the "Nepal Tibetan rug." In this way, the authors track how the archaic knotting technique brought by Tibetan refugees formed the basis for the second-largest industry after tourism—and at one point Nepal was astonishingly exporting about three million square meters of carpet (47–48).

The final chapter, with its catchy title "International Designer Carpets: What Remains Is the Knot," showcases numerous modern designers and presents the latest trends that have emerged from this hoary tradition of carpet weaving. Despite some difficulty in conclusively demonstrating the full "metamorphosis" of Tibetan carpets audaciously proclaimed in the book's subtitle, the authors conclude that adaptability has been essential to the centuries-long persistence and popularity of the Tibetan carpet. Given its rigorous scholarship and high production quality, their volume is wholeheartedly recommended to both the amateur enthusiast of Tibetan handicrafts and art historians and Tibetologists. An English translation of the catalog is expected in summer 2022.

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