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# Asian Ethnology

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# Asian Ethnology

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## Bhojpuri Village Song and the World

### Sampling Indian Literature and the Global Field

This article examines Bhojpuri folksongs that have migrated from north Indian villages to overseas locales, or that have migrated from oral tradition to literary fiction in Hindi and English. The literary examples are drawn from Hindi novels by Ramdarash Mishra, Rahi Masoom Raza, and Phanishwarnath Renu as well as from the novel *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh. Each author makes use of song from north India, or originating from India, as with Ghosh, who also includes material from the Caribbean island of Trinidad and the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius. I draw on fieldwork in each location to present a literary tour of this global musical scene. In doing so, I argue for space in literary analysis for consideration of individual performances, for experiences of individual performers and listeners, and for the ethnographic encounters that led to various songs finding their way into literary fiction. The literary examples from Hindi and Anglo-Indian fiction are limited to songs I have personally documented in the field, allowing an analysis of the overlapping areas of fiction, history, and ethnography.

Keywords: Bhojpuri—folksongs—Hindi literature—Anglo-Indian literature—ethnography—migration—indentureship—orality



In his 1984 autobiography, Hindi poet and novelist Ramdarash Mishra (Miśra) describes childhood memories of women singing in his village in Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh (UP). One wedding song affects him deeply: a *bidāi gīt* (departure song) in which a bride and her family members weep as she leaves her birth home. Whenever Mishra recalls this song, the memory stirs a pain: “The feeling of women’s sorrow shook me so strongly that whenever I heard a daughter’s departure song I would begin to cry” (Miśra 1991, 85). The song also appears in his novel *Pānī ke Prāchīr*. A father hears it as his daughter is married, and his family fears he will lose control of his emotions (Miśra 1986, 182). These passages were on my mind as I rode the Delhi Metro several years ago to meet Mishra at his home in New Delhi. His autobiography and novel *Pānī ke Prāchīr* (*Water’s Ramparts*) were in my bag, as were recordings of Bhojpuri village songs I had made in eastern Uttar Pradesh ten years earlier, many of which I later read in Mishra’s writing. I hoped to play them for the ninety-year-old author and record his response. Our eventual discussions about Bhojpuri songs encouraged me to write this article, which explores how analysis of songs in Hindi and Anglo-Indian fiction might consider issues of ethnography, performance, and migration.

Mishra writes in Hindi, though he comes from the Bhojpuri-speaking region. Today many Bhojpuri speakers are also fluent in Hindi, and the languages are to a degree mutually intelligible. The songs in his writing are associated with festivals, ritual activity, and specific domestic and agricultural tasks. By writing these women’s songs into a Hindi novel, Mishra has taken them from one performance and linguistic context and refashioned them within another.

Yet Mishra’s writing is also an extension of the original context. As listeners, men are part of the performance community of these women’s songs. The sorrow described by Mishra is a common sentiment among men from villages in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Like Mishra, many men demonstrate great familiarity with the women’s repertory of their villages, and men’s published accounts of women’s songs often include childhood memories characterized by sorrow and loss. We find examples ranging from ethnomusicologist Laxmi Tewari’s recollections of singers in his Kanpur hometown (1974, 63) to Narayana Rao’s memory of his mother’s Ramayana songs (1991) and Hindi author Phanishwarnath Renu’s memories of his sisters singing during his childhood (Renu 1995, 2, 268–71). Women are aware of this effect. In her

study of Maithili women's oral tradition, Coralynn Davis documents narratives of men who are compelled to take action after overhearing women's expression of sorrow (2005, 2009). The act of men writing fiction on that sorrow is hence part of the performance tradition.

At the heart of this sentiment is a feeling of displacement. Mishra writes from the city. His village exists as a memory that is stirred when contemplating song. The metro to Uttam Nagar in Delhi, filled with smartphones and earbud headphones, is a reminder of that displacement. Village songs exist here only in memory. Yet I bring the village via such technology—PDFs of Mishra's own writing and MP3s of Bhojpuri village singers.

When reading novels in Hindi and English, I have sometimes had the unusual experience of encountering songs that I know from village performance. I have recorded Bhojpuri and Maithili songs in villages in eastern Uttar Pradesh and northeast Bihar, and I attended Felicity Hindu School in Trinidad for a year during my childhood, where I learned Hindi and Bhojpuri songs alongside my classmates. By including village songs in his writing, Mishra joins a list of Indian authors that have drawn on local song traditions. This list includes three others considered in this article: two of Mishra's contemporaries, the Hindi authors Rahi Masum Raza (Razā, 1927–92) and Phanishwarnath Renu (Renu, 1921–77), and Amitav Ghosh, born a generation later in 1956, who writes in English. Several works of the Hindi authors Mishra, Raza, and Renu are considered “regional literature,” because they are seen to present the total village life of their respective regions. The name of the genre—regional—was introduced by Renu, whose extraordinary 1956 novel *Mailā Āñcal*<sup>1</sup> itself contains over one hundred village songs. When it was first published, it defied categorization by Hindi critics, prompting them to articulate an entirely new genre (Hansen 1981).

Despite its use of song, Amitav Ghosh's 2008 novel *Sea of Poppies* cannot be considered a regional work. The first novel in Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy, it considers the India-China opium trade against the backdrop of the migration of indentured laborers from north India to the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. Ghosh's postcolonial literary tour of this colonial situation includes song examples from Trinidad and Mauritius—each home to descendants of sugarcane laborers brought under the nineteenth-century colonial indentureship system—as well as songs from the area of north India from which those laborers originated. Having lived or conducted fieldwork in each of these locations, most of Ghosh's song selections were familiar to me. Each one evoked waves of memory—an experience not unlike Peter Manuel's discovery of identical Bhojpuri folksongs among Indian communities on multiple continents (2009), or Helen Myers's search for songs from the Trinidad repertory along the Gangetic plain (1998).

This article considers how analysis of song material in fiction might include consideration of such waves of memory, and how such analysis might contend with the multivocality of the song tradition. Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold's study of north Indian oral tradition suggests that there is no single unified voice articulated by women performers (1994). Song meanings are not static. The meaning of any song is informed not only by structural relationships but also by individual lives

and experiences. This complexity is well documented by Smita Tewari Jassal, who highlights the ambiguities of north Indian song traditions (2012). The song's texts alone tell only part of their story, since their meanings shift with changing realities of gender, power, and agrarian economics. They are given significance through the immediate circumstances of their performance, and their meanings shift to accommodate the individuals present during different performances. Likewise, Ramdarash Mishra is a Hindi scholar, as well as an author, and his scholarship on song in Hindi fiction highlights individual emotional reactions to songs (Miśra 2001).

Such ethnographic experiences can be taken into consideration in literary analysis. When an author of literary fiction is also a member of a performance community—as is the case with Ramdarash Mishra—then it is especially appropriate to consider the author's identity as a performer or listener. Amitav Ghosh's novel includes song material taken directly from ethnographies. When ethnographic experiences directly shape the production of a literary work, then the circumstances that produced those ethnographies also contribute to the meaning of the literary work.

Songs, novels, and ethnographies are all worldly texts that require a worldly method of reading. The case for the worldly nature of texts was made by Edward Said (1983), as part of his reaction to traditions of criticism that separate texts from the social, political, and historical realities in which they are produced and consumed. He advocated attention to “geographical notation,” proposing a “contrapuntal” method of reading that exposes the spatial dimensions of texts. Counterpoint is less a description or quality of literature, and more of a process and theory of reading. It requires the critic to consider the horizontal nature of a text, as well as the vertical nature. But while Western musical counterpoint leads to “concert and order” (Said 1993, 59–60), a text, when subjected to the contrapuntal reading advocated by Said, might not result in a harmonious whole. A contrapuntal reading involves a search for fractures, for gaps, for resistance, and for exclusions. Great works, writes Said, encode experience, rather than just repeat it directly. Repetition is a key element of performance, and this element transfers to the written page, be it an ethnography or a literary work of fiction. Readers and listeners are confronted not only with the vertical text of a single song but also with the horizontal text that includes all previous instances of repetition, from text, field, and memory.

The following two sections explore examples from Hindi novels by Mishra, Raza, and Renu to demonstrate the depth of these authors' interactions with song from their respective districts in the Bhojpuri and Maithili regions. My reading aims to uncover the horizontal text, as well as consider how songs tie these novels to these geographical locations. The final section of this article takes up an analysis of song in Amitav Ghosh's novel. Here, the connection between song and geographical location is less clear. Ghosh's is not a regional work. He takes songs from one continent and century and refashions them within others. Nevertheless, his novel is still informed by ethnographic production, by actual performances, and by the individual sensitivities of the performers whose songs find their way into its pages.



Figure 1. Ramdarash Mishra with his daughter Smita Mishra at their home in Delhi.  
Photo by Ian Woolford.

### Oral literary criticism and Hindi literature

Ramdarash Mishra was born in 1924, in Dumari village, about 25 miles southeast of Gorakhpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh. In 1944 he left the village to study in Varanasi, where he earned his PhD in Hindi from Banaras Hindu University. In 2015 he was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award for his volume of poetry *Āg kī Haṃsī*. He currently lives in Delhi, having retired from his professorship at Delhi University (figure 1). Like many who move from the village to the city, he maintains an emotional attachment to his village. His autobiographical writings feature village memories, and his 1986 novel *Pānī ke Prāchīr* concerns rural life of eastern Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, when I finally visited Dumari, many residents proudly pointed out landmarks included in his writing.

Riding the metro to Mishra's Delhi neighborhood, I wondered how to ask him about the *bidāi gīt* that brought him to tears. Such matters are not easy to discuss. In a 1975 essay, Phanishwarnath Renu wrote about his own childhood memory of a song performed by his sisters. The memory caused him such distress that his wife feared he was suffocating (Renu 1977, 44–47). Other men I had talked to in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar became emotional when discussing women's songs that elaborate on the bond between brother and sister. This was my first time meeting Mishra, and I did not want to shut down conversation before it began.

As Mishra and I spoke about Hindi literature, our discussion turned to village song. I mentioned my Bhojpuri field recordings, and he asked to hear them. I began with a *devī gīt*—a song for the goddess—from the women's repertory. The song appears in Mishra's *Pānī ke Prāchīr*, in a passage describing the last night of Navratri. Mishra's literary use of the song amplifies the night's mood; the song's imagery is reflected in the night's activities.

... rāt kā pichhalā pahar gīt se tharatharā rahā hai—  
nibiyā ke ḍariyā maiyā jhūlelī hinḍolvā  
ki jhūli-jhūli nā

*maiṃyā mori gāvelī gītiyā ki  
jhūli-jhūli nā.  
lagtā hai, sachmuch sāmāne ke per par bhavānī jhūla jhūl rahī hain. rāt samāpt hotī*

. . . The last part of the night shakes with song—  
On the branch of the neem tree, Mother swings  
Swings, she swings.  
My Mother is singing songs  
As she swings and swings.  
It seems as if the goddess Bhavani is truly swinging from the nearby trees. Night is over. The blazing red sun appears. (Miśra 1986, 37–38)

This is one of the best-known songs in the Bhojpuri repertory. It appears more than any other in my field recordings from villages around Varanasi and from Mishra's village near Gorakhpur. Versions are also well-documented in published collections of Bhojpuri folksongs (Henry 1988, 86; Singh 1979, 42–43; V. Miśra 1999, 25–26). The goddess swings from the branch of the neem tree. She asks the gardener lady for a drink, but the gardener lady cannot oblige, because she holds her baby in her lap. Different versions elaborate on the mother's thirst, and the gardener's efforts to appease her.

Though sung by women, many men are familiar with this song's text, its performance contexts, and its tune. So, when a group of women performed a version for me in Serwanipur village, an hour or two west of Varanasi by car, men were eager to comment. I was visiting the home of a group of *camār* (leather-worker caste) drummers with whom I had been traveling from village to village as they performed at weddings. The mother of the group's joker, Sarita Devi, was herself a skilled singer. She gathered her daughters-in-law, and they sang well into the evening (figure 2). Many of their songs were *gālīs*, verbally abusive wedding songs that delight singers and listeners alike. Before launching their series of *gālī* songs, the women performed a *devī gīt*, in which the goddess thirsts as she swings on the branch of a neem tree:

*nibiyā kī ḍariyā maiṃyā jheluabā ho kī jhūl laganā  
jhulat-jhulat maiṃyā lagalini piasiyā  
kaise ke jal achabābau hamarī lalanā ho kee gudiyā hamare nā  
bāhini ganapati balakabā ho kī gudiyā hamare nān  
balak sutāvau mālini sone ke khaṭulavā  
ho kī bhuiyā loṭai nān  
jau moī mālini o bhuiyā loṭai jaie  
ho uthi levai nā  
apane sone ke acarabā ho uthire lebai nā*

Mother hangs from the branch of the neem tree, and is swinging.  
And while she swings she gets thirsty.  
How can I give you water to drink when my son is in my lap?  
Sister, little Ganesh is in my lap.  
Gardener-lady, put the child down in a golden cot.  
And he will fall to the earth.  
Gardener-lady, if he falls to the earth.

Then I will pick him up.  
I will pick him up in my golden *āñcal*.

The performance continued. The goddess takes the baby into her embrace, freeing the gardener to offer water from the Ganga and Jamuna rivers. The gardener's future generations are blessed and given the goddess's permanent protection.

I asked the performers about the song's meaning. Sarita Devi replied by affirming its genre. "This is a *devī gīt*," she said. When I asked about its performance context, her son Tulsi, the joker, jumped in to explain. "It is for before the wedding," he said. "Then they sing these wedding songs."

"We will sing for any type of worship," Sarita added. "If we go to worship *bābā* (deity), we must sing this song. At the beginning of any auspicious event, we sing this *devī gīt*." She explained the significance of the neem tree (it has a strong association with the goddess, especially relating to her ability to cool), the reason for the swinging (the goddess is worshiped during the monsoon, when girls set up swings from tree branches), the nature of the goddess's blessing (she also has the ability to curse), and the importance of the golden *āñcal*, the draping end of the sari cast over the shoulder, associated with motherhood and protection. Sarita highlighted cultural, musical, and intertextual elements regarding this song and its relation to others—several of which she explained by singing.

Interpretative comments such as these constitute what Alan Dundes (1966) called "oral literary criticism," which he identified as an essential part of folklore research. In her analysis of women's song traditions from the Kangra region of north India, Kirin Narayan (1995) expands Dundes's concept to incorporate deep ethnographic observation to expose the complex nature of village performance. Such complexity should be understood as present in any literary work that makes use of a performance tradition. Indeed, Dundes cautions that without consideration of ethnographic data, analysis of these works could miss important details (1965, 139–41). The meaning of



Figure 2. Sarita Devi performing *devī gīt* with members of her family.  
Photo by Ian Woolford.

a literary passage such as Mishra's quoted above is dependent on local performers' ambiguous and context-dependent understanding of song tradition.

I recorded another version of this song during a *maṭṭikor* ritual south of Varanasi in Banpurwa village, where a young man from the family I was staying with was getting married. During *maṭṭikor*, women of the bride's family and the groom's family, each in their own home, walk to a field at dusk and use a hoe to dig up a piece of earth for use in key rituals. As the sun sets, the women dance and sing verbally abusive and often hilarious *gālīs*, sometimes using a hoe as a crude prop. Adult men rarely accompany women for this ritual, but if a videographer has been hired, he may film the dancing and singing. My microphone granted me access but did not protect me from discomfort when the women teased me as evening fell.

In Delhi, I told Ramdarash Mishra how I was not the only male present in that Banpurwa field. The groom's six-year-old nephew had been given a small drum to play as the women processed. Nirmala Devi, one of Banpurwa's most accomplished singers, led them in the *devī gīt*. I played the recording for Mishra. We heard the young boy's rhythmless drumming against feet marching through the field. Over these sounds came the familiar strains of the *devī gīt*. The goddess swings from a branch of the neem tree, but she is thirsty. How can the gardener give her water with a baby in her lap? The goddess provides the baby with a golden cot, and the gardener offers water in a metal pot. The goddess grants eternal satisfaction for her and her son.

As the women dug, they crowded around the small pit. The groom's sister had returned from her married home for this occasion. She interrupted with a new line, chanting

*maṭṭi khaṇ gayī maṭṭi khaṇābā re*  
*bīchhī mārā laī jījī ke bhothihan bāre*

The soil is dug! The soil is dug!  
The scorpion's sting! The sister's vagina!

In her analysis of scorpions and sexuality in Hindi song and dance sequences, Rishika Mehrishi notes that these creatures have "crept into the South Asian imaginary as metaphors for female erotic arousal" (2019, 290). When I paused the recording and asked Ramdarash Mishra how this couplet found its way into this performance, his reply was brief and delivered with a laugh: "This is tradition." I resumed playback. The sister's new lyrics prompted much laughter from her family women. She ordered the boy to take the bundle of earth on his head. The drum now hung around his neck unplayed, and he brought the earth back to the courtyard, where it would be used to construct the *harīs*, where the gods reside in the wedding. The *devī gīt* resumed, detailing the little boy in the goddess's lap, protected by her golden *āñcal*.

Not immediately obvious in Mishra's novel is a possible connection between this *devī gīt* and light-hearted genres it is often performed alongside. Nor might his reader think to compare the boy in Mishra's literary version of the song with a young out-of-rhythm drummer carrying a bundle of fertile soil. Read in isolation, the song text does not hint at the connection between its performance and agrarian lifestyle. This is not one of the many songs performed during agricultural labor, but it was

performed during a ritual that makes use of many agricultural elements: the hoe, the soil, and the field at the edge of the village. All these performative aspects contribute to the song's meaning, and therefore also to Mishra's novel. Mishra's comment, "this is tradition," is a powerful reminder of the performative, multilayered, nonliteral meaning of any village song. It is part of the novel's counterpoint—that is, the novel's "horizontal text" that includes previous instances of repetition of this song, from both text and field.

### The departure theme in three Hindi novels

In some parts of north India there is a ceremony called *ronā*, literally "weeping," when a daughter leaves for her husband's home for the first time. In his analysis of themes of migration and separation in Bhojpuri folksongs, Nitin Sinha explores how songs portray the bride's journey from natal home to marital home as "a moment of lament, dislocation, and movement" in which the bride endures "trauma of separation" (Sinha 2018, 227). She often endures additional separations, when her husband migrates for work and she is left alone and uncared for. Likewise, Dev Nath Pathak highlights paradoxes inherent to the Maithili folksong tradition. "Songs associated with rite-of-passage put together with that of everyday life yield the notion of separation, the end of one stage and progress to the other" (2018, 196). Therefore, there is an overlap of vocabulary and idiom in songs for marriage and songs for death in both Bhojpuri and Maithili song traditions.

Such is the case with the *bidāi gīt* described by Mishra in his autobiography. This well-known Bhojpuri village song is one of many that describes sorrow as a bride departs her birth home. This song appears in two twentieth-century Hindi novels: Mishra's *Pānī ke Prāchār*, and Rahi Masum Raza's 1978 novel *Ḳaṭarā bī Ārjū*. Like Mishra, Raza is understood to have written in the regional style (Pandey 1974, 123–55). He gained fame for writing the script for B. R. Chopra's televised *Mahābhārata*, and also for his 1966 novel *Ādhā Gāv*, which tells the story of a Shia Muslim family in a Ghazipur village in eastern Uttar Pradesh. His *Ḳaṭarā bī Ārjū*, set in a section of Allahabad, concerns the 1974 Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi. As with his novel *Ādhā Gāv*, and in fitting with the regional style, Raza includes songs at crucial moments. When a bride departs, her family women cry and sing a Bhojpuri *bidāi gīt*. The song tells of her weeping brother grasping the palanquin as it carries her to another "country," her new home:

*damaṛī ka sennur mahang bhail bābā,  
chunarī bhail anmol.  
ehī re sennurvā ke kāran re bābā,  
chhuṛalyon main des tuhār.  
ḍoliyā kā bās pakare roye bīran bhaiyā  
bahinā morī dūr desī bhāī, paradesī bhī.*

The *sindūr* has become expensive, Papa,  
The *chunarī* cloth has become priceless.  
Because of that *sindūr*, Papa,  
I am leaving your country.



Brave brother cries and grasps the palanquin's bamboo,  
My sister is going to a far country, and has become a foreigner. (Razā 1966, 76–77)

Raza highlights nonliteral interpretations of this song. The characters see the cloth as a symbol of the daughter's absence, a sentiment that the narrator finds contrary to the song's literal meaning: "When this song was made, 'priceless' must have had a different meaning. But now the meaning of 'priceless' is really a dry, faded, and unfeeling 'priceless'" (ibid., 77). The lyrics are questioned as weeping characters consider how their individual sentiments differ from the song's literal elements. A similar questioning occurs in Mishra's *Pānī ke Prāchīr*. A bride's father declares relief to have performed his duty of seeing his daughter married. His family does not believe him, and they urge him to look away from his departing daughter. The song's narrative matches the song in Raza's novel: the tears of the bride's family, her brother's grasping of the wedding palanquin, and the recognition of her belonging to another family. Performers in the Bhojpuri region would describe it as the same song:

*nahīn-nahīn, maine thīk hī kahā thā, vah sukhī rahe, yahī merā sukh hai. ab main nahīn tarapūngāl hān, main khush hūn.*  
*bahare babaiyā rove, bhitarā je bhaiyā rove*  
*ḍoliyā kā bās dhaile bhaiyā rove*  
*bahinī parāī bhailī . . .*

"āh! sandhyā jā rahī hai. nīrū, tumhārī pyārī sandhyā bidā ho rahī hai. pāgal tū khush hai . . . khush hai!" "hā-hā, khush hūn, khush hūn"—*vah ja rahī hai, uski ānkhen se barsāt jhar rahī hai, mat dekh nīrū udhar, terā sanyam tūṭ jāyegā.*

No-no, I said it right. . . . May she live in happiness. This is my happiness. Now I won't be agitated. Yes, I am happy!

Outside father cries, and inside brother cries.  
Brother cries and grasps the palanquin's bamboo.  
Sister now belongs to another.

"Oh! Sandhya is going. Niru, your beloved Sandhya is departing. And you're happy, you madman . . . happy!"—She is going, tears are pouring from her eyes, don't look that way, Niru. You might lose your composure. (ibid., 182)

Performers in eastern Uttar Pradesh provided a variety of interpretations of this song. I recorded one version at a village wedding in Jaunpur district, which the bride's teary-eyed girlfriends sang as she departed.

*senūravā mahang bhailā bābā ho*  
*chunari bhail anmol*  
*senuravā ke kāran ho bābā ho*  
*chhuralī main des tuhār*  
*bhāā je robalā ḍoliyā ke dhaile ho*  
*bhaujī ka kathin karej*

The *sindūr* has now become costly, father.  
The *chunari* scarf has become priceless.  
Because of the *sindūr*, father—

I am leaving your country.  
 Grasping the palanquin's bamboo, brave brother cries.  
 Brother's wife (*bhaujī*) has a cruel heart.

The song lists the items given to the bride. All are priceless, except for the final item given by her *bhaujī*, her brother's wife, who is thrilled at her departure. Literal readings of this song gesture toward a kinship system in which conflict arises between certain women. In north Indian folklore traditions, *bhaujī* is portrayed as jealous of her husband's sister, and many village songs elaborate on their rivalry. I asked Nirmala Devi, who led her neighborhood women in the *devī gīt* documented here, about this song's meaning. She repeated the line about the *bhaujī*'s cruel heart. I asked for elaboration, and she added, "This is how it is: *bhaujī* has a cruel heart. She says, 'Look, there goes my husband's sister. She is leaving!'" She then shared a series of other well-known Banpurwa songs that detail the rivalry between these two family members.

The examples from Hindi fiction look beyond the literal meaning of the song texts to consider how their meaning is also informed by performance context. The literary works predicted later turns in anthropology, often influenced by Richard Bauman's (1977) work on performance theory, in which performance context is increasingly understood to be key to understanding a song's meaning. Jassal's discussion of Bhojpuri wedding songs, for example, explores how women's performances can challenge emotions and anxieties surrounding marriage, while also paradoxically justifying those emotions. By embracing the ambiguity of these song traditions, and by providing ongoing analysis grounded in history and ethnography, Jassal reminds the reader that these songs are sites of contention, each with multiple ways of meaning. Jassal's is a contrapuntal reading that contrasts with earlier ethnographic works that favor static readings of song texts to illustrate structural kinship relationships.

In practice, sisters-in-law often bond and may laugh with each other when performing songs about these rivalries. In Banpurwa, I read the song text with two young women: Pinkie and Rajkumari, who are sisters-in-law to each other. "Look," Pinkie said to her *bhaujī*. "The daughter is saying that she will leave her home. Brother is crying, mother is crying, father is crying. And they have given all these things to her." Then she looked directly at Rajkumari with a grin. "*Bhaujī* has a hard heart." Both women laughed, and Rajkumari pantomimed a pout. When I asked why, Rajkumari replied with another laugh, saying, "It's just like this."

This detail regarding the hard-hearted sister-in-law is curiously absent from Raza and Mishra's novels. In Delhi, I asked Ramdarash Mishra about her gleeful reaction to the departure of her husband's sister. He laughed as he explained that "here the relationship between *nanad* and *bhaujī* is considered to be quite adversarial."

My conversation with Mishra turned to the songs in Phanishwarnath Renu's fiction and the singers in Renu's village in northeast Bihar, well east of Mishra and Raza's native Bhojpuri region. I have been returning often to Renu's village since my first visit in 2006. The language spoken there is a variety of Maithili often called Angika, and UP and Bihar are distinct linguistic and folklore regions. Nevertheless, song repertoires across north India share many features, and Renu's novel *Mailā Āñcal* contains one song that resembles the Bhojpuri *bidāi gīt*. It occurs toward the novel's conclusion, just after Gandhi's assassination. The village community enacts a

local procession, complete with a funeral palanquin, which mirrors Gandhi's funeral on the bank of the Jamuna River in Delhi. Many weep as performers sing a departure song that contains the lines, "Four companions lift that palanquin together / And take it toward the Jamuna." A young daughter-in-law emerges from the crowd and chases after the procession in tears. The song continues:

*rah-rahkar oṭh tharatharāte hain aur ant mein vah apne ko sambhāl nahīn saktī hai. vah daurṭī hai julūs ke pīchhe. khelāvānsinha chillāte hain, "kaniyā, kaniyā!... ai kaniyā!"*

*hā ã re goṛ tora lāgaun ham bhaiyā re kaharivā se  
gharī bhar ḍolī bilmāv!  
māi je rovary . . .  
. . . mā ro rahī hai. bhāratmātā ro rahī hai.*

Again and again her lips tremble, and she ultimately cannot restrain herself. She runs after the procession. Khelavan Singh shouts, "Young bride, young bride! Oh young bride!"

Ah!—I grasp your feet, O brothers!  
Stop the palanquin for a moment  
Mother is crying . . .  
. . . Ma is crying, Mother India is crying. (Renu 1995, 2:285)

In his own scholarship on Renu, Mishra (Miśra 2001) argues that Renu's use of song highlights the pain and joy of village life. During our discussion in Delhi, Mishra elaborated on the connections between this funeral song and the closely related wedding songs and commented on the ability of both to express deep sorrow. This song is categorized in Renu's village as a *samdāun*—a genre performed at moments of departure. At weddings, *samdāun* are performed by the women of the bride's community in scenes much like those in Raza and Mishra's novels. Performers also refer to these songs as *bidāi gīt*, as they are called in the Bhojpuri region. At funerals, however, *samdāun* are performed by men. In this context the literal content concerning a bride's departure is understood metaphorically as the soul's departure from the body. The bride in her wedding palanquin occupies the same literal space, the same vocabulary, as a corpse carried to the cremation ground. Both bodies are carried on a bamboo palanquin, a *ḍolī*. Indeed, across north India *bidāi gīt* share many features with *nirgun bhajan*, which often liken the bride's departure to the soul's departure from the body at death. Three lines from a *nirgun* verse by the fifteenth-century poet Kabir share literal elements with Bhojpuri *bidāi gīt*, including a forest, symbolic of the danger of travel between a woman's birth and married homes: "The departure day has arrived, and the mind is gladdened. / The palanquin is carried to the threatening forest, where I know no one. / I grasp your feet, palanquin-bearer; set down the palanquin for a moment" (Jāfrī 1998, 90).

Performers in Renu's village identify both the literal and metaphorical meanings of *nirgun*. I discussed this song from Renu's novel with a *nirgun* singer, Jainarayan Mandal, who is a close associate of Renu. Jainarayan described it as a *bidāi gīt*, a women's song for the bride's departure: "When she goes, she is happy, thinking, 'Now I am going to my husband's home!' But then she stops the driver and says, 'Now let me

say goodbye to my mother. Let me say goodbye to my brother. And then I can go.' That is when they cry." In Renu's novel, when the song describes crying family members halting the procession, a weeping woman emerges and stops the Gandhi procession. Shouts follow her: "Oh *kaniyā*," which in Renu's village refers specifically to a newly married woman. The distinction between funerary and wedding song collapses.

The journey's pause—when family members grasp the palanquin—is one key element in these departure songs. As with Kabir's verse, it often occurs near a forest. It is no coincidence that Renu's *Mailā Āñcal* contains other instances of young brides stopping at forests on the way to their married homes. By the time the reader encounters the *samdāun* song performed after Gandhi's death, three other instances of interrupted bridal journeys have already been encountered in the novel. The opening lines of *Mailā Āñcal*'s second chapter describe a "bride who has just departed her natal home," traveling with her husband to her new home. She is not crying, for she looks forward to her new life. They stop at a forest where the husband shows his bride ruins of an earlier age. The forest is not threatening or treacherous, and the ruins are a source of pride. The second instance occurs as the young girl Kamali weeps when reading a passage from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Indirā*, in which a new bride rides on a palanquin to her husband's home. Indira thinks hopefully about her future life, but she is abducted by dacoits when the palanquin stops by a dangerous forest. The third example occurs when the villagers celebrate Independence by staging a wedding between Mother India and Independence. A patriotic song is performed, in which Independence rides on a bamboo palanquin accompanied by India's freedom fighters. But the procession is halted by a socialist agitator who chants, "Freedom's just a big fat lie, / The nation's people starve and die!" (Renu 1995, 2:225).

Before arriving at the departure song in which weeping family members halt the palanquin, Renu's reader has already encountered these three moments of interrupted bridal journeys. The song is a repetition of those instances. Renu gives his reader the tools to read the song not as a static text on a page but as one more note in a series of notes in counterpoint. Renu thus primes his reader to interpret this *samdāun* horizontally, as a member of the performance community would. The palanquin halts because sister is leaving, because grandmother has died, because Independence is a lie. Each song is a moment of repetition predicated on previous performances and on human relationships. Those relationships affect meaning. In performance, the *devī gīt* titled "Mother Is Swinging" is sometimes an interaction between sisters-in-law, as happened in Banpurwa, when a woman returning to her birth home inserted explicit lines into a well-known song performed by her sister-in-law at her brother's wedding. They laugh, but the depth of their relationship, this horizontal conception of village song, brings men to tears.

There is no single voice here but a chorus. Many recent works on these song traditions emphasize their multivocal nature. Jassal (2012), for example, demonstrates how songs can both affirm and challenge gendered societal expectations. No single song or performance from the women's repertory can be offered up as an example of what women think, and women are free, even, to criticize other performers' versions of songs. In her analysis of women's songs in Kangra, Narayan (2016) takes this

multivocality as a theoretical focus. Performers in Kangra demonstrate extraordinary creativity and resourcefulness as they live through the songs of the goddesses about whom they sing. Like much recent work on women's song traditions, both authors engage directly with the emotive content of the song material and emphasize that meaning cannot be separated from performance or performers.

When performing the departure song, women can either laugh or cry. Factors affecting emotional response are countless and include pressures of kinship structures, locations within natal or married homes, and the realities of everyday interpersonal relationships. When Pinki and Rajkumari laughed at sister-in-law's "hard heart," one was in her husband's home, and the other was in her birth home. Despite sitting with each other in the same geographical location, they were both subject to very different gendered expectations regarding their dress, speech, and behavior. During performance, such varying expectations necessarily affect song meaning. At that moment, to these two sisters-in-law who consider each other friends, the traditional rivalry between these two women, as portrayed in the village song repertory, seemed quite comical. As occasional audience members, men may have access to the women's repertory, but the material from Hindi novels presented here suggests a similarly complicated engagement with that emotive world. In a patrilocal system, in which men see their daughters or sisters leave in heart-wrenching scenes, it is thus perhaps unsurprising that men's works focus on the pain of departure. But there is still considerable room for alternate reactions in these literary works. With Renu, the journey from natal home to married home takes on multiple meanings throughout his novel. And in Mishra's novel, the bride's father must be urged by family to perform sorrow.

In Delhi, Ramdarash Mishra became quite emotional discussing Renu, more so than he had discussing his own work. I asked him again about the cruel sister-in-law in the *bidāi gīt*, who is happy to see her husband's sister leave. He explained, as performers often do, by way of another song—this one about the rivalry between these two women. But while describing a song that women in his village may sing together while laughing, Mishra found himself overcome by emotion. "A young woman is in her married home," he explained. Her husband has been gone for some time, but he finally returns. He arrives with her "mother's son," that is, her own brother:

There is a girl who sees that two men are coming on horseback—one white horse, one black. She says, "The white horse carries my mother's son. The black one carries my husband." Her brother arrives, and she says to her mother-in-law, "My brother has come, please let me feed him." She feeds her brother from broken bowls. She tells him how she prepares food for everyone in the house but has nothing to eat herself. Her only request to her brother: *Do not tell our father.*

At this point in his narration, Ramdarash choked on his words. "Look at this," he said quietly, gesturing to his eyes as he wiped them. He then concluded: "Don't tell our mother. She would die if she found out. Don't tell your wife, she would die. Don't tell our younger sister, she could not bear it."

Not long after I met with Ramdarash in Delhi, I traveled to his village Dumari, in UP's Gorakhpur district. I was greeted there by Ramdarash's ninety-four-year-old

brother, the Bhojpuri poet Ramnaval Mishra, who passed away shortly after I met him. The Bhojpuri poet asked me about the health of his brother in Delhi. Despite being blind and almost deaf, he sang one of his compositions that describes seven decades of village change. I also recorded his daughter-in-law Shanti Devi, who performed a series of local songs. She began with the *devī gīt* about the gardener and the goddess. I asked her about the departure song, which she knew well. “Brother grasps the palanquin and weeps,” she sang. During her rendition, it was Ramkirpal, a seventy-year-old man who sat with us on the veranda, who suddenly gasped and cried.

### **Amitav Ghosh’s worldly text: Postcolonial folksong as a window to the world**

The study of folklore and the study of literature have been called “rival siblings” (Rosenberg 1991), with studies of folklore within literature an obvious area of overlap. Folklorist Roger Abrahams was critical of these studies, finding them to provide only glosses of literary features that do little more than demonstrate that an author used folklore to “provide the quaint setting” (1972, 84–85). Indeed, Frank de Caro and Rosan Jordan note that “living writers rarely have even been asked about their uses of folk material,” and that it is notoriously difficult to retrieve that information (2004, 13). This article’s analysis of Mishra, Raza, and Renu’s Hindi works demonstrates the depth of these authors’ interactions with local song. There is nothing quaint here. What remains is to consider how these songs might function in the work of a nonregional author. For this, I turn to Amitav Ghosh’s 2008 English-language novel *Sea of Poppies*. Jan Goldstein, the president of the American Historical Association, has recommended this novel as a method for learning global history (2014). However, a contrapuntal reading of Bhojpuri songs in this novel against their corresponding field locations uncovers mismatches between text and field. Unlike the Hindi authors, Ghosh’s individual readings of song often seem literal. Nevertheless, they combine to produce a wonderful fiction. Rather than sharpen this novel as a global history tool, a horizontal reading of Ghosh’s use of song raises Goldstein’s question regarding the “boundary between history and fiction.”

Ghosh grew up in Calcutta and earned his PhD in anthropology at Oxford. *Sea of Poppies* is the first in his *Ibis* trilogy. It is set in colonial India and opens in the opium fields of eastern Uttar Pradesh, at the famous opium factory in nineteenth-century Ghazipur—not far from the birth villages of Ramdarash Mishra and Rahi Masoom Raza. Characters’ lives converge on the *Ibis*, the ship taking them to the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. The novel is informed by Ghosh’s ethnographic and archival research on nineteenth-century opium production, and on the British system of indenture that brought laborers from the vast Gangetic plains to the tiny tropical islands of Trinidad, Fiji, and Mauritius.

The novel includes eight songs, in transliterated Bhojpuri or Hindi, with Ghosh’s English translation. For these texts, Ghosh cites the nineteenth-century accounts of George Grierson (1884), Edward Henry’s 1988 study of Bhojpuri song, Sarita Boodhoo’s 2003 study of Mauritius Bhojpuri song, and my mother Helen Myers’s 1998 study of Indian music in Trinidad. These are telling choices. Grierson’s accounts are contemporaneous with the events depicted in *Sea of Poppies*. The works on

twentieth-century Mauritius and Trinidad are potentially reliable sources for music of the nineteenth-century Gangetic plain. Both island locations are home to Bhojpuri communities descended from nineteenth-century indentured servants, and there is evidence of marginal survivals of older Bhojpuri forms in the island locations.

Reading and fieldwork make good companions with the Hindi novels by Mishra, Raza, and Renu. The same is true of Ghosh's novel, because it is shaped not just by texts but also by the world. That world includes nineteenth- and twentieth-century performances, interactions between local singers and foreign scholars, and the ongoing winds of musical change. More than anything, it includes songs that matter to many people. Consider the *devī gīt* used by Mishra in his novel, which I have recorded in villages from Varanasi to Gorakhpur districts, and which has been reported from all corners of the Bhojpuri region. A tally of the population of this area suggests that over the past 150 years, performances of this song have mattered to hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people. Such history, which compelled Ghosh to include the songs, is part of the geographical notation of his novel. A contrapuntal reading of *Sea of Poppies* can take this history into account, including the history of the scholarly texts that informed his work, and including the recent history of the populations of these island colonies who brought Bhojpuri village song *sāt samundar pār*, across the seven seas.

Having spent part of my childhood in Trinidad, sent there by my ethnomusicologist mother, and having conducted research on village songs in north India and in Mauritius, I am familiar with the Bhojpuri song repertory of the three musical locations in Ghosh's novel. Edward Said's insistence that texts are a part of the world demonstrates that the worldly critic can study the world without traveling it; the world is already a part of the text. Nevertheless, my interest in village performance has led me to an investigation of the nonfictional locations where those performances take place. An analysis of one song from each location—Mauritius, India, and Trinidad—will suffice to demonstrate the global reach of Ghosh's work and provide a contrast between Ghosh's use of song and that of the Hindi authors.

*Location one: Goodlands, Mauritius*

One song in *Sea of Poppies* is hummed quietly by a character named Deeti. Her pathetic husband has lost his job at the opium factory, setting in motion the chain of events that brings her from the Gangetic plain to the *Ibis* and the ocean. Sitting on a bullock cart, Deeti feels surrounded by darkness, prompting her to chant an evening song, "as if by habit."

*Sājh bhailé*  
*Sājha ghar ghar ghumé*  
*Ke mora sājh*  
*manayo ji*

Twilight whispers  
 at every door:  
 it's time  
 to mark my coming. (Ghosh 2008, 99)

Ghosh's source for this song is Sarita Boodhoo's volume on Bhojpuri culture in Mauritius. As part of his research for *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh spent time in Mauritius with members of the Bhojpuri community—descendants of the nineteenth-century indentured servants who arrived on ships like the *Ibis*. I had a chance to ask Ghosh about his motivation to include village song lyrics in his novel; he cited his experience witnessing the important role of song in the Bhojpuri community of this tiny Indian Ocean island nation.

When I conducted fieldwork in Mauritius in the late 1990s, I witnessed a lively song repertory. Many Mauritius Bhojpuri songs are directly related to, if not obviously versions of songs still performed in villages of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. Some Mauritius songs closely match songs performed in India today, in text and tune. Other songs may be marginal survivals from the nineteenth century, while others are lively adaptations to the Mauritius Creole community—with French *auto* and *avion* in place of Bhojpuri and Hindi *ghorā* and *hāthī*. Deeti's song, "Twilight Whispers," is known in Mauritius and north India as a *sandhyā gīt* (twilight song). It is one of the best-known songs on the island and serves as the musical cornerstone of the Friday evening tradition called *gīt gavāī* (song singing), in which neighborhood women are invited to sing in the home where a wedding is taking place. In the decades since I visited, there have been many local efforts to promote and preserve *gīt gavāī*, which is seen as a central part of Mauritius Bhojpuri culture (Dawosing 2020).

On Friday afternoon, family members use tape and cardboard to cover the floor of the front room of the house. This protects the floor and creates a less harsh surface for the barefooted women to dance on. One woman is hired to lead others in singing. Once she arrives, the women perform *nād puja*, a worship of sound itself (figure 3). The mother of the bride or groom bows to the *ḍholak* drum and makes an offering of Mauritius rupees. Fresh vermilion is applied to the parting of her hair, and the lead singer directs her to apply vermilion to the drum. She then lights a small piece of camphor, which has been placed within a betel nut upon the drum. Pounded ginger mixed with sugar is presented to all the singers as they begin the first set of four or five *sandhyā gīts*, which are the best-known items in the Mauritius Bhojpuri repertory. They are performed without instrumental accompaniment, and often all women in the room sing. The songs tell of *Sandhyā*, the goddess of morning and twilight, of the boundary between night and dark. She is asked to leave her home at the bank of the river and to come reside within the house. How, the song asks, shall we worship the goddess and welcome her into this home?

I attended a wedding in the north Mauritius town of Goodlands, where Manti Ramodin, an expert performer of the Mauritius Bhojpuri repertory, led the family and neighborhood women in a performance of this song. Her opening lines correspond to those in Ghosh's novel, and therefore also to the version in Boodhoo's folksong collection, from which Ghosh drew the song:

*sāj̄h bhaīle*  
*sanjhā ghare-ghare ghumilā ho*  
*kehī more sanjhā manāī jī*  
*apane mahaliyā se bulilā apān bābā*  
*ham lebon sanjhā darasān*





Figure 3. *Nād pūjā* in Mauritius. Photo by Ian Woolford.

*bahise ke debon mātā sone ke sinhāsan  
acharā pasāri guṇ gāun*

Evening falls  
Evening travels to every house  
Who will appease my evening goddess?  
My father calls from within his house  
I will take the holy vision of evening  
I will give Mother a golden throne to sit on  
Spread your *ānchal* and sing her praises.

Manti's song continued. Additional family members call from within the house. They offer the Goddess pure water, exquisite food, a cooling fan, a beautiful bed, milk and pudding, and finally they promise to perform a fire sacrifice in her honor. Manti concluded with an invocation to Tulsidas, author of the sixteenth-century *Rāmcaritmānas*, by uttering the following:

*tulsidās balu ās charan ke ho ās charan ke  
tuhi ke charan chitalāv*

With great hope for the blessings flowing from Tulsidas's feet  
I bring my mind to your feet.

The Mauritius *gīt gavāi* ceremony begins with this and other *sandhyā gīt*, after which the women sing four or five songs about the divine relationship between the deities Shiva and Gauri. As these songs conclude, they are offered more pounded ginger with sugar, cardamom, and cloves. Women still fill the room, but the number of singers may be reduced to five or six skilled performers. Those women are offered

small cups of whiskey, which are refused at first, then accepted after much insistence. Now they sing lively *jhūmar*, accompanied by the *dholak* drum and the *lotā*, a small brass pot played with spoons. They dance in a circular pattern, in a style reminiscent of women's dance from north India but also influenced by the Mauritian Sega style. The singing and dancing often continue into the early morning hours.

The *sandhyā gīt* performed at the evening's beginning require less expertise from the performer; all women in the room participate, reinforcing what Kevin Miller (2008), writing on Indo-Fijian musical identity, calls a "community of sentiment." Ghosh was moved by the strength of this community, which he witnessed firsthand during his time in Mauritius. This musical community did not exist during the time period depicted in *Sea of Poppies*, and Ghosh therefore does not attempt to transplant the twenty-first-century Mauritius performances into his novel. The whisky, the laughter, and the dancing have no place there, for there is no community aspect to the novel's performance. It is not sung but "chanted" by a woman enveloped by darkness. Instead, the song stands as a prediction. A fictional peasant woman from north India thinks of her future and chants a song. That song is one of the strongest symbols of a community that she will never know, but within which, as a performer and creator of song, she is essentially a participant.

*Location two: Uttar Pradesh, India*

When Deeti flees her husband's family, she recalls her wedding and the journey to her husband's home. She made the journey by boat, and the ladyfolk who accompanied her sang on a sensual theme common to the region's erotic song tradition: "Oh friends, my love's a-grinding." The next paragraph describes Deeti's memory of reaching the riverbank and being carried to her husband's household in a *nalki*, a bridal palanquin.

The songs had grown increasingly suggestive while she sat waiting for her husband, and her neck and shoulders had tightened in anticipation of the grip that would push her prone on the bed. Her sisters had said: Make it hard for him the first time or he'll give you no peace later; fight and scratch and don't let him touch your breasts.

*Ág mor lágal ba*  
*Aré sagari badaniyá . . .*  
*Tas-mas choli karái*  
*Barhalá jobanawá*

I'm on fire  
 My body burns . . .  
 My choli strains  
 Against my waking breasts . . . (Ghosh 2008, 32)

The song sets up a frustrated expectation. The moment Deeti's sisters prepared her for does not come, because her husband is an impotent lump, more wed to his opium pipe than his wife. It seems also intended to add an element of ethnographic authenticity to the scene. Indeed, analyses of folklore in literature have often highlighted this literary function of folklore (Evans 2005, 99). A contrapuntal reading

can look farther and take the novel's geographical notation into account, including the exact performance and scholarship that led to Ghosh's inclusion of this song.

The source for this song is Edward Henry's 1988 study of Bhojpuri music in eastern Uttar Pradesh. The song belongs to the *pūrvī* genre, and Ghosh uses two of the eleven lines in Henry's text. Henry describes *pūrvī* as a kind of "entertainment music" performed for the men of the *barāt*, the groom's wedding party. In eastern Uttar Pradesh, the *barāt* often camps outside in a field, where entertainment is provided. When Henry collected this *pūrvī*, the entertainment was exclusively live. Today, Bollywood films projected onto large sheets hung from the trees are a common option.

*Pūrvī* performances included harmonium and *ḍholak* players. The principal singer could have been either a female dancer or a female-impersonator called a *lauṇḍā*. In this case, it was performed by a woman to entertain the primarily male audience. Henry is conflicted, though, as to whether this song should be properly categorized as a *pūrvī*. This song describes a face-to-face conversation between lovers, rather than the typical *pūrvī* theme of love in separation. The refrain presented in Henry's text is "jawan jawan kahī piyā mānab sab bachaniyā" (Whatever you say, my love, I'll do what you want). And the last lines are unambiguous: "Unbutton the buttons, lover, take pleasure. / Just remove my nose ring and slowly kiss me" (1988, 209). Henry suggests that *pūrvī* may have solidified as a genre between the 1920s and 1940s, citing studies of Bhojpuri music in the Caribbean, none of which identify *pūrvī* in the New World, as evidence that the genre did not exist under that name during the period of nineteenth-century indentured labor. That is, *pūrvī* as such may not have existed during the period portrayed in Ghosh's novel. Nevertheless, song texts such as these certainly predate the twentieth-century *pūrvī* phenomenon, even if their appearance in this exact genre did not (Henry 2006, 3–6).

The sensual union described in this song is atypical of the *pūrvī* genre. Genres are fluid designations that can be reworked by performers to multiple artistic ends. Performers who are hired for a wedding may be more concerned with entertaining than they are with preserving ambiguous boundaries of genre classification. In the case of keeping a raucous group of groomsmen occupied, this might mean inserting sexually suggestive lyrics into a genre that does not normally accommodate them. Henry presents a theory of "genre entropy," which he explains as the "degradation of organization within a genre" in which musicians enliven their performances by incorporating text and tunes from other genres, thereby changing their nature without changing their name (Henry 2000, 101).

At more recent weddings in villages around Varanasi, I found songs of this amorous type are increasingly common during live performances for the *barāt*. This was the case during the Banpurwa wedding previously described, in which Nirmala Devi led the women in the *devī gīt* during the *maṭṭikor* ceremony. The next day the groom and his *barāt* traveled by bus to the bride's home in a village in Jaunpur. The men camped out in a field and were entertained by a troupe that performed film songs and energetic renditions of Bhojpuri hits (figure 4). The group's lead female singer sang the following lyrics many times during the night, because it was requested again and again by the men of the *barāt*, who threw money at the stage to have their request honored. As noted by Bidisha Chakraborty and Vandana Nain in their analysis of

popular Bhojpuri songs, performances such as this focus on the male spectator while relying on “deep misogyny and gender stereotypes” (2020, 2). Indeed, encouraged by this song, young men in the audience openly speculated on the singer’s possible sexual promiscuity.

*nayā-nayā māḷ bā*  
*dāḍhī bemisāl bā*  
*jaise chāhā,*  
*vaise āj dūṅgā*  
*o launde rājā chakkū mār!*

Here’s some nice new stuff  
 With an incomparable beard  
 I’ll give whatever you want today,  
 Oh Big Boy, beat me with your knife.

As with the *pūrvī* from Henry’s collection, the speaker in this song addresses her lover directly. Her lover is young (his beard is newly developed) and she will do whatever he wants. In the fourth line she calls him her *lauṅḍe rājā* (Launda Prince), translated here as “Big Boy.” This is an unusual juxtaposition of words. *Rājā* means “prince” or “king.” *Launḍā* can refer to a young or effeminate man, to the female impersonator who dances and sings during *pūrvī* and related traditions, or even to the male genitalia.

This song was not identified by the performers as a *pūrvī*, which are rarely performed now, if at all. But the text is similar, and the performance context is identical to the *pūrvī* documented by Henry, which Ghosh later included in his novel. I heard the “new stuff” song performed at a time when the *pūrvī* genre had all but disappeared. As traditional *pūrvī* lyrics gave way to those with more contemporary entertainment value, the tunes, too, may have been replaced. What remains are



Figure 4. Entertainment for the groom and his relatives at a wedding in Uttar Pradesh. Photo by Ian Woolford.

songs through which women tease their male audiences by providing public windows on women's expressions of desire.

The scene from the Jaunpur village field, or from Henry's ethnography, is not the one depicted in Ghosh's novel. The fictional scene has the bride Deeti traveling on the river by boat to her husband's home. This is her ritual departure from her natal home to her married home. The women accompany her, singing as they go. The scene implies that the song is part of the women's song repertory: one of many songs that women sing in the company of other women. In truth, such women's songs are distinct from *pūrvī*. When I asked him about the appearance of his work in Ghosh's novel, Henry recalled that the singer performed the song with "a twinkle in her eye." But in Ghosh's novel the twinkle is absent, replaced with a literal reading of the text. A woman's public performance of female desire, used to entertain raucous men throughout the night, has been presented by Ghosh as private thoughts of a young woman on the threshold of her bridal chamber. Women in this region of India certainly do use private song performance in this way, when no men are present. But Ghosh drew this song from a public wedding context, in which men camped out overnight in a village field are left to speculate on how this public performance might reflect women's private desires. Ghosh, likewise, refashions the public performance into a private, interior moment.

*Location three: Felicity, Trinidad*

Having left the Gangetic plain, Ghosh's characters find themselves on the *Ibis*, where the captain critiques a shipboard peasant group's performance through a mouthful of food.

But in spite of the plenitude of food and drink, there was less conviviality in the cuddy than there was around the chuldan, where, from time to time, the migrants could even be heard singing a few snatches of song.

*Májha dhára mé hai bera merá  
Kripá kará ásráí hai tera*

My raft's adrift in the current  
Your mercy is my only refuge . . .

'Damned coolies,' muttered the Captain, through a mouthful of lamb. 'Bloody Doomsday couldn't put a stop to their caterwauling.' (Ghosh 2008, 374)

Nineteenth-century documents tell that such performances did take place on the ships. While visiting the Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Mauritius, Ghosh could have viewed several displays of musical instruments brought by the nineteenth-century coolies on ships like the *Ibis*, as well as read officers' accounts that describe shipboard performances. The 1858 diary of Captain E. Swinton of the Trinidad-bound *Salsette* said that the coolies were "very musical." His wife Jane Swinton found that the coolies' music and "native dances" were "very useful in keeping up a good state of health," and she participated in them herself (Myers 1998, 9–12).

As with my experience with Mishra's novel, I immediately recognized several of the songs in Ghosh's text. But this passage startled me more than any other, because

I know this song well from my childhood, and I am deeply familiar with the history of the scholarly source from which Ghosh learned the song—that being my mother Helen Myers’s 1998 book on Indian musical culture in Trinidad. When I was in sixth grade in the 1980s, she sent me to her Caribbean field site and placed me in the care of Maati and Mesho Rohit. Mesho was a teacher at Felicity Hindu School on Cacandee Road, where I was enrolled for a year, and where I learned this song and many others alongside my classmates. With its opening request for knowledge, it is especially appropriate for young students: *he jagata pitā bhagavāna, hame do jñāna* (Oh, ruler of the world, Lord, grant us knowledge). The mechanics of these performances were equal in importance to any individual song’s literal content. Every performance was a teaching tool, in which we learned through constant repeat and refrain. The performance style was predicated on language loss. In a Trinidad Indian community that was fast losing knowledge of Hindi and Bhojpuri (Mohan and Zador 1986), this structure allowed groups of young children, including myself, a British boy with limited knowledge of Hindi, to sing entire Hindi songs on philosophical topics.

These Cacandee Road performances were the source for the *bhajan* in Ghosh’s novel. The temporal and spatial shifts that appeared when comparing the literary examples with the performed examples from Mauritius and eastern Uttar Pradesh become even more pronounced with this example from Trinidad. A group of shipboard peasants perform a song whose literal content concerns bodies of water and aquatic vessels, thus inviting a literal reading of the song. The experience of a shipboard “snatch of song” bears little resemblance to the sunrise performances at the Divine Life Society or to the daily *bhajan* drills at the Felicity Hindu School. For likeminded readers on Cacandee Road, this song belongs with raising the Trinidad flag the morning (I was the designated flag-raiser), and with Trinidad’s national anthem: “Side by side we stand, islands of the blue Caribbean Sea.” It belongs with cricket after school, and harmoniums, and with backyard ducks for dinner, with essays on Wordsworth and on dengue fever, with Trinidad Creole I no longer speak, and with lining up in front of class, to be given lashes by the teacher for an offence I do not remember. The fictional text is dependent on these real-world performances. And literature, with its ability to open doors, opens them back toward that world.

*Sea of Poppies* is not about any of the scholarly texts from which Ghosh selected musical examples, nor is it about the processes that produced those texts, including the postcolonial anxieties that underpin anthropological and ethnomusicological work of the late twentieth century. But it is nevertheless dependent on those texts and anxieties. The unusual postcolonial circumstance that would find me, as a young British schoolboy, overseas and learning Hindi *bhajan* from members of the Bhojpuri community of a former British colony is connected to the scholarly text that informed Ghosh’s novel. My mother was eager, after all, to record me when I returned to my family, and my spontaneous performances must have strengthened her conviction that this repertory was of fundamental importance to the Trinidad Bhojpuri community. A contrapuntal reading of Ghosh’s work takes these experiences into account.

## Rea n n t e lobal el

The song traditions that Ghosh draws from rely on deep repetition that encodes emotions that are at times impossible to discuss. Mishra and Renu both describe tears on contemplating songs of their villages. It takes an entire novel to explain why memory of a village song brings tears to the eyes of a ninety-four-year-old Hindi professor sitting at his home in Delhi. Renu's novel provides the reader with the tools to understand a tear-filled song from the perspective of performance. Each song represents one note in a series of notes in counterpoint that ring throughout each novel. These Hindi novels sit well in the field. A certain harmony sounds when the vertical text of any single one of these novel's songs is considered alongside the horizontal text that includes field, performance, and memory. Contrapuntal reading uncovers both elements of these texts: horizontal and vertical. A certain dissonance, however, sounds within Ghosh's novel. His songs are sourced from ethnographies and a colonial administrator's accounts, and a contrapuntal reading of his novel reveals fractures and gaps. Nevertheless, the songs in his novel are as worldly as those in the novels of his Hindi counterparts, and they too must sound out in the world.

At the beginning of *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti views an apparition of a ship with large white sails. She has never seen such a thing in her life. The reader knows of the *Ibis* in her future and may suspect this to be the beginning of the kind of magically realistic journey that has come to characterize much Indian writing in English. But the novel takes a different path. Each song becomes like Deeti's vision of the white-sailed ship: harbingers of performances to come in far-flung locations across the world. Ghosh projects the multilayered counterpoint of today's performances back into his fictional nineteenth century. Deeti possesses the knowledge that will inform the *pūrvī* genre, whose genesis lies somewhere during the 1930s and by the end of the twentieth century was giving way to new performance forms. She has the knowledge that informs the evening performances in Mauritius, with the smashed ginger and sugar, the cardamom and cloves, the whisky and dancing. The shipboard performance likewise predicts the Bhojpuri traditions in the New World. These are songs that still bring pain and joy in twenty-first-century performance and memory; each song is a window on a human world that can bring individuals to tears. Ghosh's novel is a postcolonial tour of colonial India, and its songs are visions of a postcolonial identity yet to be formed. All exist within the thoughts of a nineteenth-century peasant, who is part of the network of associations that contribute to the worldliness of this text. Her songs tell this story.

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### NOTES

1. The notorious difficulty translators often encounter when translating titles is well demonstrated by *Mailā Āñcal*, where the word *āñcal* refers both to the "region" of Bihar portrayed in the novel, and also to the "fabric at the end of a sari"—the part of the garment associated with modesty, grace, protection, and motherhood. Both elements are *mailā*, that is "dirty," "unclean," or even "backward." Multiple meanings are present, in a title that likens this dusty region of India to a soiled garment worn by Mother India (see Junghare 1982).

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## Engaged Buddhism in Mountain Monasteries Templestay as Wellness Tourism in South Korea

This article examines Templestay, a short-term retreat program held for laypersons at Buddhist monasteries, as a form of wellness tourism amid the prevailing social malaise in South Korea. Initially designed to engage foreign visitors during the 2002 World Cup, Templestay has become popular among Koreans struggling to cope with an ever more competitive and precarious social and economic environment. Drawing on ethnographic research and an examination of the history, statistics, marketing, and program content of Templestay, this article challenges the polarized view that posits socially engaged Buddhism as the opposite of traditional monastic Buddhism and suggests that Templestay facilitates Buddhism's engagement with the prevailing psychological predicament of society. Opening monasteries day and night for a standard fee, a way of formatting staying at temples as an experiential commodity, allows the distressed laity space for self-reflection and a perceived enhancement of their wellbeing. Templestay sheds light on the interplay of wellness tourism and engaged Buddhism in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Templestay—engaged Buddhism—South Korea—(un)happiness—branding—wellness tourism

Traditional Buddhist temples in Korea are found mainly in the mountains and thus are commonly called *sansa*, literally meaning “mountain monasteries” (see figure 1).<sup>1,2</sup>

They were built in mountainous regions during the Confucian Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), as the dynasty did not allow them to be built in cities or villages (Buswell 1992, 135; Sørensen 1988, 26). Thus, Korean Buddhism came to be called “mountain Buddhism” (Cho S. 2002, 131; Cho E. 2003, 108). This image of socially withdrawn Buddhism, also prevailing in the West due in no small part to the influence of Max Weber, who contrasted it with Protestantism in accordance with “the spirit of capitalism” (Baumann 2000, 375), was a serious concern to reform-minded Buddhists in Korea around 1900. Witnessing Christian missionaries’ growing social influence and eager to take advantage of an opportune time for its revival under the growing Japanese influence in the peninsula, they saw the remote locations as a serious challenge for Korean Buddhism’s survival and future. Han Yongun (1879–1944), a prominent Buddhist monk and scholar, critically described monastic communities as “separate universes” in “devil-inhabited black mountains . . . without sending a single message to the outside world” (2008, 78).

Figure 1. A mountain temple. Photo by Kyoim Yun.





Figure 2. The official Templestay logo.

Few would have imagined a century ago that these monasteries would attract a host of laypeople from the outside world through Templestay (see figure 2 for the logo).<sup>3</sup>

Literally meaning “staying at a temple,” Templestay refers to a short-term retreat program held for laypersons at Buddhist monasteries. There is a long tradition of pilgrims and travelers staying at mountain temples, going back to the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392). Even during the subsequent Chosŏn dynasty, Buddhist pilgrims, both elite and non-elite, stayed at temples for short or longer durations (Stiller 2020). While Templestay can be seen within a spectrum of pilgrims’ use of temple space, it is framed as a secular retreat program that is open to all (see table 1 for the religious affiliation of recent Korean participants).<sup>4</sup>

It is a Buddhist enterprise, managed with government support and following a specific business model.<sup>5</sup> How should we make sense of the Buddhist establishment’s own marketing of the monastic experience as a secular retreat program?

This article considers Templestay, popular amid a happiness crisis in early twenty-first-century South Korea, at the intersection of engaged Buddhism and wellness

**Table 1.** Religious Affiliation of Korean Participants, 2017–19

	Protestants %	Catholics %	Buddhists %	No religion %	Other %
2017	5.1	10.8	39.6	44.1	0.3
2018	4.8	9.9	44.0	41.0	0.3
2019	5.2	9.2	37.8	47.4	0.3

Source: Courtesy of the Cultural Corps.

tourism. Templestay is a form of wellness tourism, a rapidly growing sector catering to those individuals seeking the enhancement of wellbeing and quality of their lives away from home in fast-paced, burnout societies. Expanding the previous scholarship on engaged Buddhism, this study challenges the polarized view that posits socially engaged Buddhism as the opposite of traditional monastic Buddhism. Templestay, I argue, facilitates Buddhism's engagement with the prevailing psychological predicament of society and with people's aspirations, and even desperation, to live a good life. This study draws on ethnographic research and an examination of the history, statistics, and program content of Templestay. It first shows the origin and evolution of Templestay into a nationwide wellness franchise, and then discusses what makes Templestay wellness tourism and what social conditions propel its popularity. Next, it analyzes the participants' reception of the program. Finally, the article considers implications of packaging the monastic experience as a wellness journey in light of engaged Buddhism.

### **Origin and development**

At first glance, Templestay is diametrically opposed to engaged Buddhism in terms of goal, history, and scope. Engaged Buddhists aspire to release the suffering of all beings by actively participating in resolving this-worldly problems rather than focusing on personal salvation through Buddhist rituals and prayers (Park P. 2010, 29). By contrast, laypeople participate in Templestay chiefly to withdraw from their ordinary social world for self-reflection. This section investigates how a program, designed to provide ad hoc lodging with a cultural experience for foreigners, has mutated into a new form of tourism, facilitating mountain-dwelling clerics' engagement with a broad spectrum of Koreans.

The origin of Templestay distinguishes it from privately organized temple-experience programs in other Asian countries, such as those offered by Tibetan monasteries in India and Nepal (Kaplan 2007, 45). Templestay was jointly designed by the Chogye Order, the predominant sect of Korean Buddhism, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, to provide alternative lodging to foreign visitors during the 2002 World Cup (May 31–June 30, 2002) cohosted by South Korea and Japan. This collaboration between the state and Korean Buddhism was not entirely by happenstance, especially in view of the historical context of Korean Buddhism in the twentieth century.

During the colonial period (1910–45), Korean Buddhism came under the auspices of the Japanese government, which controlled Korean temple affairs in accordance with the temple ordinance established in 1911 (Park P. 2010, 44n2). Although some young clerics resisted the constraints, most clergy members went along with or welcomed changes brought about by the Japanese, which they might have felt liberating especially after the five-hundred-year Confucian dynasty that significantly undermined Buddhism's prestige and institutional power.<sup>6</sup> Han, the critic of mountain-centered monasticism, and other reformers took advantage of the opportunity to revive and modernize Korean Buddhism by opening branch temples in residential areas (Park P. 2006, 197). Moreover, Han wrote to Kim Yunsik,

the chairman of the Consultative Committee, and Viscount Terauchi Masatake, the Japanese residency general, requesting policy changes to permit the marriage of monks and nuns, which had already been institutionalized in Japan in 1872 (Han 2008, 111–14; Kim S. 2022, 163–64). By 1929, the ban on clerical marriage had been lifted in some 80 percent of Korean temples (Kim S. 2022, 164), and by around 1945, more than 90 percent of the clergy were married (Kim K. 1998, 293).

In the turmoil of postcolonial politics after the Korean War (1950–53), the celibate minority used their status to establish monastic authority as the only legitimate heirs of Korean Buddhism, while lumping the majority of married clerics together as Japanese collaborators (Kim S. 2022, 162–65). The minority faction backed by Syngman Rhee (r. 1948–60), South Korea's first president with a pro-American and anti-Japanese stance, established the Chogye Order in 1962. The T'aego Order embracing both married and celibate clergy was established in 1970 when the "purification movement" ended. The Chogye Order, which has maintained a symbiotic relationship with most South Korean administrations since Rhee, has become "the face of Korean Buddhism" (Tedesco 2003, 156) with its central image of celibate monasticism, ideal for Templestay.<sup>7</sup> Although several minority orders, including the T'aego Order, run Templestay, the Chogye Order, the strongest stakeholder in Korean Buddhism, administers the nationwide program.

Focusing on institutional policies and marketing strategies, earlier studies of Templestay emphasized how the program was branded and utilized as a way of promoting traditional Korean Buddhist culture to consumers of global cultural tourism (Kaplan 2010; Kim S. 2017). This view of Templestay as cultural or heritage tourism is undeniable, especially given the program's original purpose and target audience. Barely recovered from the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis, the Kim Dae Jung administration (r. 1998–2003) saw the World Cup as an opportunity to boost the nation's economy and pride. Expecting an inundation of foreign visitors, the Ministry inspected and financially assisted in the renovation of various forms of lodgings to meet the standards of international tourists (Kim C., 2002). At this juncture, a professor of tourism suggested Templestay as an additional option and discussed the possibility with a T'aego Order monk, who proposed it to the Ministry (Kaplan 2007, 10n11).

The crucial feature of Templestay was that, unlike hotels, temples could also provide a cultural experience. In this regard, Templestay is similar to the Japanese temple lodging *shukubō*, where boarders can sample *tatami*-floored rooms, communal baths, and vegetarian temple food and are invited to morning ceremonies (Nicoloff 2008, 15). However, the Korean Templestay was envisioned as something more than a monastery-hostel for overnight guests. The participants were to stay in temples not only at night but also during the day to "thoroughly experience a slice of Korean culture," in the words of the monk who was the executive director of missionary work of the Chogye Order (quoted from Kaplan 2010, 133).

The added value of cultural experience dovetailed with the government's emphasis on culture, both popular and traditional, as a marketable resource to lead economic growth in the twenty-first century. According to this moral order, the unrelenting marketing of culture is viewed as "sensible and even virtuous," rather than



corruptive, for the sake of the wealth of the nation (Yun 2019, 139). The government, acting as the guardian of traditional culture, had already assisted in the promotion of curated Buddhist culture such as rituals and temple food as tourist commodities in the late 1990s (Choi 2022; Moon 2008, 169).<sup>8</sup> For the Templestay program, it provided 1.07 billion won (circa US \$0.9 million) (Kim C., 2002).<sup>9</sup>

Conceptualizing the program not only as alternative lodging but also as an opportunity to promote a distinctly Korean Buddhist culture to international visitors—though what makes Korean Buddhism particularly Korean can be debatable—was effective in pacifying complaints from some clergy members, especially those dedicated to meditation. They were concerned that opening temples to outsiders for their temporary monastic experience both day and night would disturb their contemplative monastic lives (Kaplan 2010, 132). However, the idea that a cooperative spirit for the national cause would also help Korean Buddhism temper its prevailing image as a cloistered tradition, along with the strong sense of a national tradition of Buddhism (Buswell 1998; Park P. 2006; Vermeersch 2008), quelled such qualms.

While Christianity, one of the two major institutionalized religions in South Korea, is associated with Western modernity, Buddhism, introduced to Korea in the late fourth century CE and thoroughly indigenized since then, is often perceived as a default Korean religion vis-à-vis the foreign religion. Moreover, Buddhist traditions are often represented as Korean traditions (Chung 1997, 95).<sup>10</sup> Framing Templestay as a means of promoting Korean culture precluded the potential accusation from Christians (especially Protestants) that the government lacked impartiality in providing the Buddhist establishment with funding.<sup>11</sup>

Templestay's development as a centrally structured program with financial support from the national government proved conducive to its mutation into a new form of temple tourism.<sup>12</sup> During the World Cup games, only about one thousand foreigners availed themselves of the program offered by thirty-three temples.<sup>13</sup> However, their positive responses and related foreign news coverage motivated the Chogye Order and the Ministry to repeat the program for both the Asian Games in Pusan in fall 2002 and the Universiade in Taegu in summer 2003. For these events, Templestay was expanded to include locals, a possibility already considered during the World Cup with the prospect that the five-day workweek, instituted in 2002 and gradually expanded through 2004, might attract more Koreans to traditional temples (*Pulgyo sinmun* 2002).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, influenced by the “blue-eyed” monks coming to Korea, the translations of books by the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh, the introduction of Vipassanā meditation, and a growing interest in Buddhist psychotherapy at the turn of the century (Joo 2011), many laypeople, increasingly exposed to pluralistic and transnational Buddhism, began to perceive Buddhism as “cool.”

That the number of local participants far surpassed that of their foreign counterparts during these trial periods (see table 2) suggested not only a social demand from laypeople but also that the program could be of value to monastic communities.

Unlike Christian churches, scattered throughout the country both in urban and rural residential areas, and known for their aggressive evangelicalism, traditional Buddhist monasteries have limited access to the laity and influence on the wider

**Table 2:** Local and Foreign Participants in Three International Games

Games	Year	Locals	Foreigners
World Cup	2002	-	991
Asian Games	2002	1,299	268
Universiade	2003	33,530	1,544

Source: Courtesy of the Cultural Corps.

society. The lack of frequent visits by lay Buddhists, potential contributors to temple economy, also presented financial challenges for the survival of insular monasteries in light of the declining number of novices (see table 3 for the frequencies of church visits for Buddhists, Protestants, and Catholics).<sup>15</sup>

Opening monasteries day and night for a standard fee may have been viewed by the leadership of the Chogye Order as an opportunity to gain new adherents, who might bring in much-needed revenue to mountain monasteries.

In 2004, after operating Templestay three times for the three international sporting events, the Ministry and the Chogye Order established the Cultural Corps of Korean Buddhism (hereafter the Cultural Corps) in order to develop the program more systematically. The Templestay Commission, which had previously operated within the Propagation Division of the Chogye Order, moved to the Cultural Corps, highlighting its business orientation (Kaplan 2010, 134). This semi-autonomous organization is funded in part by the Ministry and staffed by a team of lay experts in heritage, tourism, and marketing. It oversees cultural enterprises with Buddhist content, including souvenirs, Templestay, and temple food.<sup>16</sup> The Templestay manager of the Cultural Corps told me that Templestay is a business serving *kogaek* (clients), a concept that the monks and nuns at first had difficulty in accepting (interview, August 6, 2019).

The Cultural Corps created a sophisticated Templestay website both in Korean and English through which people make reservations by choosing a temple, the type of

**Table 3:** Percentage of Visitors to Religious Facilities  
One or More Times per Week (1984–2021)

	All religious persons	Buddhists	Protestants	Catholics
1984	39	10	62	66
1989	41	4	73	66
1997	42	1	72	60
2004	36	4	71	43
2014	44	6	80	59
2021	32	1	57	42

Source: Courtesy of Gallup Korea.

program, and the duration of their stay. They then wire payment for their selection to the temple of their choice. Templestay was extended to a year-round program in 2004, after which both attendance and temples offering the program proliferated (from 36,902 to 286,610, and from 36 to 135, respectively, between 2004 and 2018).<sup>17</sup> Although Templestay continues to attract foreigners who are interested primarily in Korean Buddhist culture and spirituality, far more Koreans are taking advantage of the program (in 2018 there were 233,319 Koreans and 53,291 foreigners). The lodging upgrades, the emphasis on culture rather than religion, and the logistical convenience enhanced by the Cultural Corps' intervention facilitated Templestay's attraction for a wide range of local participants.

### **Wellness tourism in mountain monasteries**

Buddhist temples, a composite site of Korean culture and tradition, have long been major tourism destinations attracting sightseers. By contrast, Templestay allows participants an inward-looking experience in a contemplative surrounding. In the post-retreat surveys of 2018, a combined 74.1 percent of the Korean respondents reported that their primary motivation was to reflect and calm their mind (37.3 percent) and to rest and recharge (36.8 percent), a far more important concern than any inherent interest in Buddhism or traditional Korean culture (11.4 percent) (Cultural Corps 2019, 14). This suggests that participants perceive Templestay chiefly as wellness tourism, or "travel associated with the pursuit of maintaining or enhancing one's personal wellbeing" or "holistic health" (Global Wellness Institute, n.d.).

Scholars of tourism and recreation have been paying increasing attention to this burgeoning tourism sector, as ever-more people in the world feel burnout and become interested in alternative health modalities (e.g., Bushell and Sheldon 2009). The notion of wellness tourism offered by Melanie Smith and Catherine Kelly, cultural tourism scholars, is particularly helpful in understanding the nature of Templestay. According to them, wellness tourism embraces spiritual, psychological, or emotional dimensions beyond physical movement and is "more of a psychological than a physical state," despite the inseparability of the two (2006, 2). This section explores settings and activities characterizing Templestay as wellness tourism with its distinctive features.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Setting*

Many Koreans believe that mountains, occupying nearly 70 percent of the peninsula, are repositories of energy, both secular and sacred. Mountain hiking has been a national pastime for many years. Korean shamans visit mountains to pray and to recharge their spiritual energy. Buddhist monks and nuns also go back to mountain temples to restore their depleted "physical and spiritual forces" after periods of residence in city temples (Galmiche 2014, 237). To wellness tourists, no other destination would be more suitable than mountain temples, many of which belong to national and provincial parks. Ironically, the contemplative surroundings generated by forced isolation during the Chosŏn dynasty make these temples fertile grounds for wellness journeys.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, traditional Buddhist art and architecture in mountain

settings provide an environment that is not only culturally rich but also beautiful and restful.

Lodgings for Templestay participants have often been newly added to existing temple complexes. Originally designed to meet the standards of international visitors attending sporting events, the rooms are generally kept very clean. Since the late 2010s, some temples have been adding air conditioning to provide added comfort during the increasingly hot summers. Having once stayed at a temple before the era of Templestay, I can appreciate the dramatic transformation brought about by the program. When I traveled with a friend to Haenam in South Chŏlla Province in summer 2002, a Buddhist monk we met at a temple kindly allowed us to stay overnight. The temple was relatively small with two resident monks and few tourists. It was not particularly well kept. The many mice, especially those in the kitchen, disturbed me, and my sleep was fitful due to the musty bedding. Using the outdoor facilities in the dark of night was also rather eerie. Twelve years later, when I participated in Templestay for the first time, I was pleasantly surprised by the cleanliness and comfort of the lodging.

Another attraction is the food. Previously considered dull and ascetic, vegetarian temple cuisine is now considered a healthy alternative in light of growing concerns about diet-related illness and obesity (Moon 2008, 167; and see figure 3).<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, due to government subvention, this wellness package combining tranquility, comfort, and healthy meals is quite reasonably priced, making the experience financially attractive for most participants. As of 2020, the average fee was 70,000 won (US\$58), substantially lower than 90,000 won (US\$75), the aggregate price estimate that consumers who had experienced Templestay were willing to pay.<sup>21</sup> In fact, many participants I met told me that they felt they had received good value for their money (*kasŏngbiga chot'a*).



Figure 3. A temple meal. Photo by Kyoim Yun.

The security of the lodging, along with freedom from cooking, makes Templestay particularly appealing to women. Women are usually discouraged from traveling alone, and the occasional news of sexual crimes and even the death of solo female travelers functions as cautionary tales.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Templestay is an official platform helped it to gain rapid public trust with women. When asked why she chose Templestay instead of *kidowŏn*, facilities run mostly by and for Protestants and usually located in quiet areas, often in the mountains, for prayer and worship, a Protestant woman responded that she did not trust such places because many were run by heretical Christians (personal conversation, July 15, 2014).<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly, women have made up about 70 percent of the participants since 2017, when the Cultural Corps began their comprehensive surveys of Templestay (Cultural Corps 2019, 13; 2020a, 16). Even in a 2005 survey conducted jointly by the Cultural Corps and Kyung Hee University's Hotel Management Department, 55 percent of the participants were women (Chogye Order, quoted from Kaplan 2007, 26).<sup>24</sup>

### Activities

When arriving at a temple in midafternoon, participants are warmly welcomed by Templestay staff, typically a lay staff member. The staff work in a Templestay office, distinct from a temple office (*chongmuso*), which oversees overall temple affairs, including finances, in the pertinent temple. Participants check in and are assigned a room. Following the monastic culture, if they share a room, roommates will be of the same sex.<sup>25</sup> They then change into comfortable unisex outfits provided by the temple that they will wear for the duration of their stay. The apparel, a form of neo-traditional Korean outfit consisting of baggy trousers and a hip-length vest, is well suited for a wellness retreat due to its comfort, simplicity, and practicality. Seen as Korean, rather than specifically Buddhist, such garb precludes any sense of discomfort that some participants might otherwise feel.<sup>26</sup> Wearing the uniform visually distinguishes retreaters from other non-clerics at the temple site such as lay Buddhists, workers, and passing tourists, and ensures admission to meals in the temple dining room.

After changing clothes, marking a transition from ordinary life to retreat, participants receive a brief orientation regarding temple etiquette, rules, and the program schedule. Temples are primarily religious sites, where monastic communities reside, and routine and special ceremonies are conducted for lay and ordained Buddhists (Buswell 1992, chap. 2). The addition of a Templestay program does not radically alter these core functions of the monastery and monastics (cf. Kaplan 2010, 140); rather, it adds an additional layer. Participants are instructed to show respect for the monastic culture by following basic temple rules such as staying quiet, wearing socks when entering *pŏptang* (dharma halls), and turning off lights early at night, usually around 9 pm.

These rules are minimal in comparison to rules for retreats where lay participants aim to learn Buddhist teachings and deepen their practices in the contemporary world.<sup>27</sup> In the fall of 2016, I participated in a four-day, rather rigorous Buddhist retreat, during which the use of cameras, makeup, cell phones, and pen and paper were strictly prohibited. In contrast, most Templestay participants use cell phones

for texting and taking photos, including selfies in the serene temple settings, for which some women even apply makeup. I once shared a room with two women, who were using their smartphones even in bed at night.<sup>28</sup> How much one (dis)connects with the outside world is ultimately left to an individual participant's discretion. Stringent rules are not imposed upon consumers of wellness tourism.

Three types of Templestay are available to meet different needs. Lasting just a few hours, a daytime-only (*tangil-hyöng*) program is for those wanting to sample a bit of Korean Buddhist culture.<sup>29</sup> The focus of this study is two overnight Templestay programs: rest-oriented (*hyusik-hyöng*) and experience-oriented (*ch'ehöm-hyöng*). People can choose either type, individually or as part of a group. Those interested in devoting some time to the tranquility that temple sites provide would likely choose the rest-oriented Templestay, featuring a single room for solo retreaters. The size of a group signing up for this type of program is relatively small, as people generally come if not alone then with their close friends, colleagues, and family members. Although attending morning and evening ceremonies is recommended, participation in other activities is not required. Participants appreciate time away from home and work; this alone is considered invaluable, as such unscheduled time is otherwise a rarity.

The second type of stay focuses more on experiencing what is deemed traditional Korean (Buddhist) culture. Most temples offer this program only during weekends and the major annual holidays such as lunar New Year and the Harvest Moon Festival (Ch'usökk), when they have enough participants. However, in summer this program is offered during weekdays as well to serve diverse groups, large and small, such as students and workers on vacation. Unlike the rest-oriented type, the participants follow a routine arranged by the staff of individual Templestay programs. The staff at times incorporate particular requests from the group leaders.

Customary activities for the experience-oriented program are a temple tour (figures 4 and 5), 108 prostrations to release 108 sufferings (figure 6), practicing a craft, meditation (sitting and/or walking), teatime with a monk or nun, attending morning and evening ceremonies, *ullyök* (communal work such as weeding or sweeping the temple grounds), and *paru kongyang* (dining in a formal monastic manner).<sup>30</sup>

Involvement in such activities can be considered a sampling of curated Buddhist culture, but it also helps people to slow down and calm their minds. The staff, mindful of the religious diversity of the participants, often present the activities as a means of relaxation rather than learning Buddhist culture per se. In one temple in Seoul, participants were allowed to sound the *pömjong* (gigantic temple bell) and encouraged to feel its vibrations, not a commonly observed Buddhist practice. In another temple in Kyöngsang Province, when teaching 108 prostrations, the lay staff showed *Miracle on the 0.2 Pyöng*, a documentary demonstrating the mental and physical benefits of prostrations, with testimonials from a broad range of people including medical personnel and a Catholic priest, perhaps to deemphasize the association of the prostrations with Buddhism.<sup>31</sup> Making lotus lanterns and threading *yömjju* (prayer beads) are simple tasks requiring concentration, and are considered therapeutic. One of the most memorable temple tours that I experienced took place on a snowy winter's day. The crisp fresh air and serenity of the surroundings made an



Figure 4. Temple tour inside. Photo by Kyoim Yun.



Figure 5. Temple tour outside. Photo by Kyoim Yun.



Figure 6. 108 prostrations. Photo by Kyoim Yun.

even stronger impression on me than did the explanations by a student monk of the temple history and Buddhist arts.<sup>32</sup>

While lay staff members take care of logistical matters and lead cultural activities, the monks and nuns teach meditation sessions and lead *ch'adam* (conversations over tea). Although most monks spend little or no time on meditation because most of their daily lives are devoted to performing essential tasks in support of their monastic communities, it is perceived as “the putative *raison d'être*” of the clergy in monastic communities in South Korea (Buswell 1992, 107). Thus, a brief (usually an hour or less) meditation session is included in most experience-type Templestay programs. When introducing meditation, the monks and nuns invite the participants to try it out in the spirit of experimentation and emphasize the universal benefit of meditation as a means of quieting a busy mind. Sitting together with the monks and nuns over tea is a new experience for many participants hoping to gain some wisdom from their hosts. In sum, Buddhist culture and tradition, albeit integral to the program, are generally framed as therapeutic.

### **Yearning for healing in a distressed society**

Unlike the itinerary-centered travel genres such as *tapsa* (trekking to heritage sites), and *paenang yŏhaeng* (backpacking mostly abroad), both popular in the 1990s (Oppenheim 2011), Templestay is a journey that one takes to be wholly immersed in a temple site. According to a survey from 2020, in fewer than two decades since the first Templestay, 82 percent of Koreans were aware of the program and about 20 percent had been participants (Yi 2021). Why has this mode of “travel” become appealing to so many Koreans? The popularity is, I contend, closely related both to a sense of crisis in emotional and psychological well-being felt by many Koreans after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and to the Cultural Corps’ effective promotion of the program as wellness tourism.

It is not that Koreans lived a stress-free life before the crisis, but the impact of the ensuing neoliberal restructuring of society on citizens’ lives was massive and all encompassing: people lost secure jobs, families broke down, and gender discrimination increased (Song 2009). As the labor market became heavily reliant on temporary, flexible, freelance work, people have had to deal with job insecurity even after investing much time and expense in education and self-improvement, including one’s physical looks (*woemo*) (Kim Hyun Mee et al. 2010). Faced with endless competition, prevailing economic uncertainty, and widening inequality, increasing numbers of South Koreans suffer from anxiety and depression, defined both socially and medically.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) fares poorly in cross-national statistical measures of overall life satisfaction. According to the World Happiness Report published by the United Nations in 2020, its happiness ranking for 2017–19 was 61 out of 153, lower than many countries whose citizens have a shorter life expectancy, fewer educational opportunities, and lower per capita incomes. The high suicide rate is another indicator of a larger social malaise. Since late 2006, the ROK has had either the first or second highest suicide rate among member countries of the OECD. We



may not need these cross-national statistical measures to learn that South Korea is not a happy country. The internationally acclaimed film *Parasite* (2019) and TV series *Squid Games* (2021) vividly depict the fierce competitiveness and rapidly increasing inequality in society, often leading to depression.

Despite the increasing awareness of mental health issues, the percentage of the population actually seeking professional attention for mental health issues remains relatively low. In Korean society, as in other East Asian countries, mental illness is only in the early twenty-first century becoming socially accepted and medicalized (e.g., for China see Zhang 2020, 51; and for Japan, Kitanaka 2012). The 2019 survey conducted by the National Center for Mental Health shows that 60 percent of respondents were red flagged for mental health issues, but only 20 percent reported that they had visited a hospital or used counseling services (Ch'oi 2020). According to the survey, some *did* feel the need for help, but they self-assessed that their condition was not all that bad and hoped that it would improve with time. Others felt that mental health problems are something that one should overcome oneself or were unsure about the usefulness of professional help.

The low level of happiness in people's self-reports and their reluctance to seek professional help may explain why the word *haengbok* (happiness) has recently been in vogue in Korea.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, happiness guidebooks, particularly those written by Buddhist monks, have often become bestsellers. For example, as of June 2019 the eponymous *Happiness* by the Venerable Pomnyun, known as the national mentor (*kungmin ment'o*), had been reprinted twenty-nine times since its first publication in January 2016.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, *hillung*, a neologism from the English "healing," has become ubiquitous in the media and everyday conversation. SBS, a major Korean media concern, ran a confessional TV talk show *Hilling K'aemp'ũ* (*Healing camp*) from 2011 to 2016. The Koreanized term *hillung* does not connote a narrowly defined meaning of Western-style medical or clinical treatment but suggests embracive, holistic, and alternative ways of enhancing physical and mental health.<sup>35</sup> Although the concept does not exclude the physical, its emphasis is more on the emotional and psychological. This becomes apparent especially when compared with the well-being (*welbing*) boom that emerged around 2003 and petered out in the middle of the 2008 global economic crisis. That rather short-lived trend focused on quality of life defined by physical health, construed as achievable through the consumption of related products such as health food, naturally dyed clothes, and environment-friendly interiors. The marketing of these products was sometimes so outlandish that it was widely criticized and even ridiculed (Sŏ T. 2005).

The subsequent *hillung* boom indicates a paradigm shift in Koreans' view of what comprises a good life. "Let's live well" (*chal sarabose*) was a song and motto representing the developmental philosophy that buttressed South Korea's economic growth.<sup>36</sup> The hope for material abundance motivated poverty-stricken Koreans after the Korean War (1950–53) to work diligently to achieve material affluence. Ironically, one of the side effects of the relentless pursuit of material wealth was the "mental poverty" (*chŏngsin jŏk pin'gon*) felt by Koreans, which led to high rates of anxiety and depression. This prompted many to think about the emotional, psychological,

and existential aspects of their individual lives<sup>37</sup> that were given little consideration or repressed during the postwar era of militant economic development and democratization. Templestay is a timely option at this juncture of Korean history in which experiential commodities promising happiness, relaxation, and healing are in great demand among those with little desire to explore Korean heritage sites or the world outside Korea.

The Cultural Corps responded to and capitalized on the prevailing social distress. In 2012, ten years after the program's inception, it began to explore a new brand image for the next decade. In fall 2014 it adopted happiness as the overarching theme, with the slogan "Templestay, a journey for my happiness." The new image appeared in an advertisement on its homepage in the autumn of 2014 with the following blurb:

"A journey to console me"

"A journey for my health"

"A journey to dream my dream"

"A journey for me to let things go"

Templestay is advertised as a healing experience providing consolation (*wiro*), health (*kōn'gang*), letting go (*pium*), and dreaming (*kkum*), virtually a panacea for all emotional, physical, and psychological wounds. According to the blueprint for the Cultural Corps published in 2014, the four key words were inspired by Buddhist ideals—consolation by peace, health by vitality, letting go by freedom, and dreaming by the power of prayer (2014, 31–40). Although Buddhist philosophy underpins the new brand concept, the key words are expressed in ordinary parlance to appeal to a wide range of people.

### Participants' experiences and perspectives

How is Templestay received? Do participants feel consoled, healthier, as well as more hopeful and relaxed after the end of the program, as the new advertisement suggests? According to surveys conducted by Gallup Korea between 2017 and 2020, the overall average satisfaction with Templestay was above 6 on a scale of 1 to 7 (Cultural Corps 2019, 15; 2020a, 20; 2021a, 164). However, most questionnaires were limited to the quality of the service and the program's operation. Two questions asking about the impact of Templestay on participants' emotional and psychological well-being were added to the survey in 2020, to which more than 95.4 percent of respondents reported an improvement in their emotional stability and 94.2 percent an increased sense of happiness (Cultural Corps 2021a, 89). This high level of customer satisfaction was publicized in various news sources, with catchy titles such as "Emotional Stability and Increased Happiness, the Degree of Satisfaction with Templestay 6.47 on a scale of 7" (Yi 2021). These numerical results are powerful by virtue of their simplicity. However, they provide little information about *why* many deem Templestay worthy of their time and money.

Handwritten, anonymous testimonials in the exit survey offer some clues for the high percentages and reveal more about individual experiences and feelings than the statistical data can provide. Select reviews are scanned and posted on each Templestay

program website. Reviewers are asked to provide a succinct definition of Templestay and then their thoughts about the experience. Here are a few of the comments: “The utmost healing,” “My second home,” “Rest, recharge, and purification,” “All the answers are in me,” “Recovered from my blue and tangled feeling,” “Washing dishes because it is like washing a dish called me” (Cultural Corps n.d.).

One participant defined Templestay in one word: *shwimp’yo*, referring to “comma,” and explained why it was a comma: “How long ago was it that I last spent some time without thinking about anything? The eight-day-long rest was such a precious time for me who had kept running” (Cultural Corps 2021b). The participant traveled alone from Incheon to this temple on Wan Island, located to the west of the southernmost tip of the peninsula, a journey of seven hours’ duration. Talking with a monk over tea and the fellowship of the (lay) staff members made the participant feel comfortable after a couple of awkward days. Satisfied with the restful stay, the reviewer decided to add three more days to the originally planned five days, and ended the review with a promise to revisit: “If I could find a time—no, I will create a time—to come back. Until then, stay healthy everyone, including Sarang [meaning “love” and referring to a dog living in the temple].” These reviews are often filled with gratitude, relaxation, a sense of peace, and of a connection with nature and with other temple residents.

My observations in the field are congruent with the high level of consumer satisfaction, demonstrated both by statistical evidence and by the many heartfelt testimonials. The immediate effect of the program activities seemed obvious from what I observed. In summer 2015, a nun led a walking meditation for about fifty employees working at a hospital in a city near Lotus Temple as part of an experience-type Templestay. The group walked in silence, holding bowls half-full of water in their hands while pausing occasionally—the repetition of walking and pausing was signaled by the sound of a *chukpi* (bamboo clapper) struck by the nun (figure 7).



Figure 7. Walking meditation. Photo by Kyoim Yun.

After a long, steady climb of a hill in the woods, the group reached a pavilion with a beautiful view, located about one mile from the main temple complex. The nun invited them to talk about their experience. I was quite impressed by their openness and articulation of their feelings. Just a few examples from my field notes are: “I thought about people who cannot speak and those who cannot use their hands,” “when I paused, I was able to listen to the sound of birds and to see the water [in the stream along the road],” “I tend to worry too much. I felt my anxious mind becoming calm,” “I have a sinus infection in my nose, but the congestion cleared.”

One member of the group, a self-identified Catholic, said, “It’s not easy to let things go because I worry about getting behind. I usually get more tired when not working because I become too restless, but I had a restful time.” I was a bit surprised by one man’s confession. “I talk a lot at work, but never reveal my *sok maūm* (inner feelings). We [my wife and I] have been married for ten years, but I have never expressed my feelings to her. My wife and my brother-in-law, who are also here, are all working at the hospital.” All of a sudden, he called his wife and told her: “I love you.” The nun’s question “Were you forced to marry her?” generated laughter among the group. During the sharing session, people expressed previously unspoken feelings as well as released anxieties and emotional pressure, and a few shed tears. The participants looked much more lighthearted on the downward climb to the temple than they had on their climb up to the open pavilion.

However, Templestay did not do anything miraculous for my research partners. According to them, they had benefited from Templestay and from other therapeutic activities as well, such as gardening, counseling, psychiatric treatment, happiness guidebooks, and contemplative walks. In summer 2014, Yuna, a civil servant in her early fifties, traveled from Seoul to a Buddhist temple in a southeastern province to find “freedom and space” (*chayu wa yōyu*). Several years earlier, she had taken a yearlong medical leave of absence due to breast cancer. Four years after returning to work, Yuna was transferred to her current division, a transfer that required her to learn many new skills and often mandated both late hours and substantial overtime. While her husband was helpful, responsibility for the household chores rested primarily on her. After free counseling sessions provided by her institution, she decided for the first time in her life to spend a few days at a temple, leaving behind her family consisting of her husband, daughter, and elderly mother.

During her stay, this Protestant woman neither interacted with Buddhist monks nor entered temple buildings except for a museum of Buddhist art. Instead, she read and wrote in her journal in her own room, walked about the tranquil temple complex, and occasionally talked with two other solo retreaters. Yuna extended her originally planned two-night stay by two more days on the spot. When I met her in 2015 and 2019, she expressed a desire to go back if she could afford the time and also told me that she had had art therapy and had bought a tiny house in a small town for weekend gardening. She seemed to continue to expand the freedom and space in her life.

A thirty-eight-year-old single woman whom I shall call Chisu did her first Templestay at a temple in Seoul in 2015. Since that time, Chisu has returned to the temple at first as a Templestay participant with her foreign friends interested in Korean culture and then occasionally as a volunteer interpreter for weekend

programs, which often include foreign visitors.<sup>38</sup> She earned an MBA at a prestigious university in Seoul with the dream of becoming an investment banker, but failed to get a job in the financial sector and worked instead in a small company involved in publications for private education. Although she tried to feel content with her job, she continued to suffer from a desire to get ahead of her peers, a common affliction in South Korea's extremely competitive society. Furthermore, she faced a personal and professional crisis when the company's business began to decline, and she was also cast aside at age thirty-three by the first man she had dated seriously. After experiencing panic attacks, she worked with a clinical counselor and began to read books about love, life, and philosophy to better understand the importance of her neglected emotional life.

Still, Chisu felt that counseling and reading self-help books did not seem to be enough and that she needed to take more direct action to find the answers she sought. She considered walking Spain's Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route but feared walking some five hundred miles alone in a foreign country. In order to test herself with something unfamiliar yet less intense and challenging, and hoping for a restful and consoling time in a quiet place away from her family, she joined Templestay during the Ch'usök, the Korean equivalent of Thanksgiving, in 2015. This experience gave her the confidence she needed to request a forty-five-day unpaid vacation and set out for the Camino. Walking about six hours every day for forty days helped her let things go, dampen her resentment, and appreciate the beauty of nature. In her words, "I believed I could find answers if I constantly turned everything over in my mind, but when I let things go, both answers and gratitude came to me." She told me that the nun had helped her learn about letting things go without trying to bind her to the temple, something she would have resented. Templestay provided people like Yuna and Chisu with space to do self-work.<sup>39</sup>

## Re e t o n s

Due to the monasteries' outlying locations and their withdrawal from society, Korean Buddhism was once known as "mountain Buddhism." In an effort to reach out to the laity, since the 1980s Buddhist orders in South Korea have built temples in urban areas (Joo 2011, 616). While the Christian-like propagation earned city temples more lay Buddhists and revenue, Buddhists at the same time idealize and long for remote monasteries, which the reformist Han during the colonial period deemed "Buddhism's grave" (Galmiche 2014, 228). Although Templestay has not contributed to increasing the number of converts, it reconciles the ambivalence toward mountain monasteries by turning their physical and social distance into an asset to gain traction with a wide range of laypeople.

Templestay, a seemingly emblematic example of "disengaged Buddhism," allows us to reimagine engaged Buddhism in a contemporary society. The *minjung Pulgyo* (Buddhism for the masses) led by clerics discontented with monasticism failed to appeal to laypeople, whose suffering they purportedly aspired to ease, due in no small part to their own ambitions and internal politics (Park P. 2010, 31). The subsequent, grassroots community movements of the Jungto Society and Indra's Net provided

new visions for engaged Buddhism by integrating Buddhist principles, such as the interdependence of all sentient beings, into social work (Kim and Choi 2016; Kim S. 2021; Park P. 2010; Tedesco 2003). Their commitment to resolving pressing issues concerning the lives of all in Buddhist ways with compassion and nonviolence has earned much support from Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

By contrast, Templestay is a Buddhist enterprise originally designed by the Chogye Order, in conjunction with the government, to engage foreign visitors with no explicitly stated soteriological goals. Taking advantage of both the substantial government support and exotic images of monastic life, the program transformed traditional temples into popular wellness destinations for Koreans. Templestay can be dismissed as a devious enterprise coopted by the Buddhist establishment and the government “to patch up people’s psychological and spiritual wounds and send them back out into the fray,” but this, Sallie King claims, is not the true purpose of engaged Buddhism (2009, 3).

However, examining how Templestay works on the ground and what people get from the experience suggests that the secular retreat program at a religious site presents for Korean Buddhism an opportunity to engage with ordinary citizens hoping to temporarily disengage from their everyday lives. It allows laypersons lacking any association with the temple, clergy, or Buddhism space for self-reflection and facilitates enhancement of their well-being, free from unwanted commitments. Given the magnitude of the emotional and psychological distress felt by many individuals in Korea and in the world, this is no small matter. According to Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), who minted the term “engaged Buddhism,” “All of Buddhism is engaged because all of it addresses human suffering” (King 2009, 4, 8). From his view, “Buddhism is already engaged Buddhism. If it is not, it is not Buddhism” (Hunt-Perry and Fine 2000, 36), whether encountered in mountain monasteries or urban mega-temples.

Templestay’s systematic inclusiveness and holistic approach to wellbeing would not be sustainable without the partnership between the state and Korean Buddhism. If it is problematic to believe that Templestay is wholeheartedly dedicated to promoting the happiness of distressed laity, so too is to assume that popular concerns for well-being are purely the object of manipulation by the state and the Buddhist establishment. Opening monasteries day and night for a standard fee is a way of formatting staying at temples as an experiential commodity. This sort of “disentanglement” in the sense of sociologist Michel Callon (1998) is integral to attracting a wide range of people. The participants include those rejecting Buddhism as a religion, those reluctant to seek professional help for their mental health issues, and those seeking something beyond what they get from psychiatrists, counselors, and churches. For them, Templestay is a viable option for a safe, low-key, affordable, and restorative getaway. While this transitory retreat may not provide a lasting impact on many retreatants’ lives, the outcome of this engagement can be more than a restful experience in a cloistered monastery. In response to my question, “Do you feel happier than before?,” Chisu, who did Templestay in preparation for her trip to the Camino de Santiago, responded, “I’ve come to care less about happiness and unhappiness. The nun taught me that happiness is not something you seek.”

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## NOTES

1. Romanization of Korean terms in the article follows the McCune-Reischauer system, with the exception of familiar names such as Seoul, for which I have adopted conventional English spellings. All Korean names in the text are pseudonyms, except for those of authors and public figures. All transliterations, transcriptions, and translations are mine. The exchange rate between the Korean won and the US dollar has fluctuated over the years, but I use a rough estimate of 1,200 won to US\$1 throughout the text.

2. In 2020, there existed 968 traditional temples nationwide: Chogye Order with 783, T'aego Order with 96, and Pöphwa Order with 17 (the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, quoted by Kwön O., January 20, 2021).

3. Templestay is a brand name, capitalized and written as one word with no hyphen.

4. Categories such as shamanism, Confucianism, and Daoism are not considered to be on the same footing as Buddhism and Christianity with their well-structured practices and sophisticated doctrines. Participants in the survey were asked to list their religion.
5. For Buddhism's engagement with global market economy, see Brox and Williams-Oerberg 2020.
6. The Confucian dynasty regulated Buddhism rather than persecuting it. Buddhism thrived, fulfilling religious and spiritual needs of a wide range of people during the period (Baker 2014).
7. The Chogye Order has in principle upheld celibacy, but it is an open secret that some monks have a "secret wife" (Kim S. 2022). Moreover, the self-identified "pure" order was not so pure in other regards, prompting lay Buddhists to occasionally call for reform of corruption within the leadership (Tedesco 2003, 162–65, 170–74).
8. For the state's support and control of Buddhism, see Pai (2013, chap. 5) for the colonial period; Kaplan (2010) and Sørensen (1988, 1999) for the post-independence period; and Ahn (2018) and Vermeersch (2008) for the Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392).
9. Joan Hubbard, the wife of Thomas C. Hubbard, who was the US Ambassador to South Korea (2001–04), suggested the renovation of toilets (Kwŏn T. 2002).
10. This blur was often seen particularly in the realm of traditional music during the heyday of the *minjung* culture in the 1980s and early 1990s, when Buddhist cultural elements were often represented as Korean traditional culture. For example, meditative music composed by Kim Yŏngdong, known for his contribution to popularizing traditional Korean music (*kugak*), was described as the music of both *kugak* and Sŏn, the Korean counterpart of Zen. Shamanism has also been deployed in the politics of national representation of religion and culture since the colonial period, but the vernacular religion, both romanticized and stigmatized, has not held the same status as Buddhism.
11. In fact, such criticism did arise from the Christian leadership as the amount of funding for Templestay increased significantly over the years (e.g., No 2016).
12. For a longer history of temple tourism in modern Korea, see for example Kaplan (2010); Pai (2013, chap. 5); Sørensen (1999).
13. The number of participants was far lower than the forty-five thousand estimated by the Buddhist establishment (Sŏ 2002). Among the thirty-three temples, twenty-five were from the Chogye Order and the rest from four other minor orders (*Pulgyo sinmun* 2002).
14. Although foreigners continue to participate in Templestay, it is advertised separately for them (e.g., Kim S. 2017, 131), and their expectations and purposes differ from those of Koreans (Cultural Corps 2019, 28; 2020a, 39; Kaplan 2007, 28–30). This article concerns Templestay for Koreans, because Templestay for foreigners requires a separate study.
15. Compared to Christians, who frequently participate in church activities and pay their tithes, most Buddhists visit temples infrequently with no concept of tithes. Aware of this problem, Buddhist monasteries have made efforts to connect with lay Buddhists by creating lay associations affiliated with monasteries (Buswell 1992, chap. 6; Galmiche 2010) and building temples in cities (Galmiche 2014; Joo 2011, 616). According to Gallup Korea, the number of self-reported Buddhists was only 16 percent in 2021, as opposed 19 percent in 1984, while the percentages of Protestants (17 percent) and Catholics (6 percent) remained the same.



16. Before the establishment of the Cultural Corps, the Buddhist culture industry was dependent upon and at times in conflict with the general tourism industry (Moon 2008, 175).
17. The Cultural Corps kindly provided the information in this article regarding the number of people, Koreans and foreigners, and temples participating in Templestay. Each year since 2017, the Cultural Corps has commissioned Gallup Korea to perform a comprehensive survey of participants and their satisfaction with Templestay and to analyze the data. I am very grateful to the staff members for sharing with me Gallup Korea's reports from 2018, 2019, and 2020.
18. For a study of wellness retreat, a subcategory of wellness tourism, focusing on retreat operators' perspectives, see Kelly (2010).
19. Their insularity also made temples favored sites for self-exile, especially for political figures. For example, Chun Doo Hwan, the president of the Fifth Republic of Korea, who rose to power through a military coup in 1979 and was responsible for the Kwangju massacre in 1980, took up a hermit life with his wife in Paekdam Temple, Kangwŏn Province from November 1988 to December 1990 (MBC 2018).
20. Some Buddhist nuns have in the early twenty-first century been drawing global attention for their previously unrecognized culinary talents for temple food (Choi 2022).
21. The fee for Templestay has increased over the years. During the 2002 World Cup, the fee for one day and night was 30,000–50,000 won (US\$25–\$42) (*Pulgyo sinmun* 2002). The estimate of 90,000 won (US\$75) was based on surveys using the Contingent Valuation Method by Yi Ch'unggi, a speaker at a seminar on the social values of Templestay (Cultural Corps 2020b).
22. For example, a woman hiking on the Olle trail was raped and killed by a local resident (Ko 2012); another woman was raped and killed by the owner of the guest house where she was staying (Kim C. 2018). Both women were traveling on Cheju Island, a famous tourist destination in South Korea.
23. For more details of *kidowŏn*, see Baker (2008, 135).
24. Other contributors to the higher participation of women than men in the program may have to do with the fact that men are more constrained due to their work. In 2019, women's employment rate (51.6 percent) is 19.1 percent lower than that of men (70.7 percent) (Korean Statistical Information Service 2023).
25. The rule has appeared to change. In one temple, I saw foreign couples rooming together in 2015, and Korean couples in 2022.
26. The gender-neutrality of the outfit bears a marked resemblance to the elements of the monastic dress code. In contrast to the rather impractical *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing), which is elaborate, expensive, and donned only for special occasions such as ceremonies and traditional holidays, this new-style *hanbok* is practical for ordinary life (Ruhlen 2003, 123). More strenuous Buddhist training called *suryŏnhoe* requires participants to wear outfits connoting Buddhist association, such as gray jackets and trousers.
27. For example, see Buswell (1992, 141–42), Galmiche (2010), and Nathan (2018, 119–20) for Korea; and Laidlaw and Mair (2019) for Taiwan.
28. Participants voluntarily refrain from using cell phones during the morning and evening services, meals, and tea times with monks and nuns.

29. This type of Templestay was first offered by two temples during the Asian Games in fall 2002, when altogether fourteen temples nationwide ran the Templestay program (*Yōhaeng sinmun*, September 30, 2002).
30. Typically, *paru kongyang* is arranged only once for a large group of participants, particularly when participants include foreigners. The rest of the meals are served buffet style.
31. The documentary was originally broadcast by SBS, one of the major TV broadcasting systems in Korea, on April 8, 2007. One *pyōng* is 3.3058 m<sup>2</sup>; 0.2 *pyōng* is the typical size of a rectangular floor cushion that people use for prostration and meditation.
32. Temple tours are usually provided by lay staff and, in large temples, by *munhwa haesōlsa* (cultural tour guides). A student monk attending Dongguk University, a Buddhist college in Seoul, led this particular weekend tour as a part-time job.
33. As with many other neologisms, the term came to Korea through Meiji Japan at the end of the nineteenth century (T'ak 2013, 36–37). For definitions of the term “happiness” in Chinese historical and cultural contexts, relevant to those of Korea and Japan, see Chen (2019).
34. For Pomnyun and his engaged Buddhism, see Kim S. (2021) and Park P. (2010, 32–36).
35. The term has come to be widely used in Korea since 2007 (Park J. 2016, 378).
36. According to Kang Sinuk (2016), the song was composed in 1962, a year after the May 16 military coup by Park Chung Hee, the ROK president (1963–79) known for having spearheaded the rapid development of the South Korean economy.
37. For similar changes in China, see Yang (2015) and Zhang (2020).
38. Chisu was introduced to me by the nun running the program at the temple. I interviewed her on August 4, 2019, after her volunteer work.
39. See Chapter 6 in Zhang’s 2020 study for similar experiences among Chinese individuals.

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## The Placenta as the Depository of Patriarchal Imagination Reproductive Experiences in Tokugawa Japan

Though largely neglected, the placenta plays a critical role in reproduction, both physiologically and symbolically. Focusing on the Tokugawa period, where narratives on reproduction by male authorities in the fields of medicine, morality, and politics became prominent, this article argues that the placenta functioned as a depository of imagination, based on patriarchal desires, anxieties, and concerns. In childrearing manuals and obstetrical texts, prior to birth the placenta was depicted as what delivered nutrients to the fetus while protecting the fetus from toxins derived from the mother, revealing the ambivalent views on the maternal body. During the postpartum period, the placenta was used to address wishes for the child's career success and his or her obedience to the family patriarch, as well as concerns over female promiscuity. In short, the placenta operated as a discursive apparatus for control of the female body and for the soothing of anxiety surrounding maintenance of the patriarchal order.

Keywords: reproduction—patriarchy—Japan—Tokugawa period—placenta



While often associated with hope and excitement, many experience pregnancy and birth also with a sense of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. Further, though often associated with femininity, reproduction is also an interest of men, and it invokes various emotional responses in them. Emotions surrounding pregnancy and birth existed in premodern settings, but it is often difficult to access them, as written accounts of such experiences tend to be scarce. This article uses the representations of and rituals on the placenta as the window to examine emotional aspects of people's experiences of reproduction in the Tokugawa period in Japan (1603–1868). I argue that male anxiety, in particular, is evident in how people viewed and handled the placenta.

Today, the placenta is frequently disposed of as medical waste (Birdsong 1998; Baergen, Thaker, and Heller 2013), but it was not treated as such in many cultural and historical contexts. Premodern Japan was no exception. It had been considered as something that belonged to the realm of the sacred from ancient times in the country (Kinoshita 1981; Nakazawa 2003), and it remained so during the Tokugawa period.<sup>1</sup> This study attends to the dynamics during the pregnancy, in addition to postpartum rituals and experiences of people in different strata of society. Following feminist scholarship on reproduction, which offers the possibility of reconceptualizing the body through the prism of the placenta (Maher 2001), I examine people's experiences with pregnancy and birth through this organ.

The Tokugawa period offers an intriguing case, because the understanding of the beginning of life was debated intensely during this era, and the authoritative male narrative of reproduction became prominent. The dynamic behind this included the emergence of obstetrics (Ogata 1919; Shinmura 1996; Sugitatsu 2002), the prohibition of abortion and infanticide (Chiba 1983; Drixler 2013; Ohta 1997, 2006, 2007; Saeki 2017; Sawayama 2005; Takahashi 1981), as well as the popularization of childrearing manuals, which typically explained the processes of fetal development and what constituted proper behavior for pregnant women (Burns 2002; Kajitani 2014; Ohta 2011). The placenta, which was commonly called *ena*, appeared in various historical accounts.

Patriarchy was the central framework in societal and family structure, and because of—rather than despite—this, fathers played a critical role in childrearing. As the household became the basic social and economic unit, the importance of family lineage was emphasized not only for elites but also for ordinary people. The average

household size declined to between four and five by the mid-Tokugawa period, from over seven at the beginning of the era (Hayami 1973, 53–56, 67), further contributing to parents' closer attention to each child. Accordingly, the father, as the head of the household, became responsible for educating and disciplining children, who were expected to bring stability and prosperity to the family (Ohta 2007, 7). Historical documents suggest that fathers of this time indeed spent much time with their children (Ohta 2011).<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, childrearing manuals were originally written for fathers, but as authors began to emphasize the importance of early education, they promoted the idea that it should start even during pregnancy and shifted their target audience to mothers.<sup>3</sup> Childrearing manuals urged pregnant women to control their behaviors and thoughts, and the placenta was used to highlight this. That is, the placenta functioned as the symbolic divider between the mother and the fetus, delineating the contour of the fetus. While the fetus was inside the woman's body, it was imagined as a separate individual deserving proper care and attention. This imagination enabled both the ideas of the mother nurturing the fetus through the placenta, as well as the placenta protecting the fetus from toxins derived from the mother.

By examining the depictions and treatment of the placenta in obstetrical texts, child-rearing manuals, and popular fictional stories, this article demonstrates that the placenta was central in reproductive experiences in Tokugawa Japan and functioned as the depository of (male) emotions surrounding pregnancy and birth. During pregnancy, the representations of the placenta encapsulated the ambivalent male gaze upon the female reproductive body. The placenta was depicted as both the symbol of maternal care and as the shield to protect the fetus from its mother. Treatment of the placenta after delivery highlighted unease surrounding the maintenance of patriarchal order, including not only hopes for the good health and successful career of the child but also concern over the child's biological paternity as well as desire for their obedience to superiors, most importantly to the father.

### **Why the placenta matters**

The placenta is an understudied body part. "Despite its crucial role in the health of both the fetus and the pregnant woman, the placenta is the least understood human organ" (Guttmacher, Maddox, and Spong 2014, 303). The reproductive body was historically overlooked in the modern notion of the body (Grosz 1994), and the placenta has also largely been neglected in the social sciences and humanities for a long period (Colls and Fannin 2013), with the exception of anthropological scholarship on postpartum rituals using the organ. Early twenty-first-century feminist studies have, however, demonstrated that the placenta is a critical aspect of reproduction that provides keys to understanding the boundedness of the body, care, and subjectivity, as well as fetal-maternal relations (Colls and Fannin 2013; DiCaglio 2018; Hird 2007; Maher 2001, 2002; Simms 2009; Yoshizawa 2016).

The placenta provides us with a particular vantage point to elucidate how people experienced pregnancy and birth. The anxiety over the placenta was a serious matter, as placental complications could mean dire consequences to the reproductive

outcome as well as women's lives. In addition to medical concerns, there was an element of symbolic fear, associated with the ambiguous nature of the placenta. The placenta exists in a liminal space and time. That is, it is situated in between maternal and fetal bodies, along with the umbilical cord, and it exists only during pregnancy. The placenta is formed by the embryo but functions relatively autonomously, and it belongs to neither the maternal nor the fetal body. As the biologist H el ene Rouch explained, "On the one hand, [the placenta] is the mediating space between mother and fetus, which means there is never a fusion of maternal and embryonic tissues. On the other hand, it constitutes a system regulating exchanges between the two organisms" (Irigaray 1993, 39). Pointing out that "The porous nature of the placental division between maternal and foetal matter is part of its ambiguous and challenging nature" (2002, 105), JaneMaree Maher argues that the placenta can even be seen as a synecdoche of pregnancy.

Ambiguity allows a wide range of interpretations, but it also generates anxiety. "Things become meaningful only when placed in some category" (Zerubavel 1991, 5), and the uncategorizables possess power and invoke fear (Douglas 2002, 118). The act of categorization brings a sense of control over the uncontrollable and thus helps to ease feelings of apprehension. Performing of rituals was one way in which assigning and confirming the meaning of the placenta took place. Historically, anthropologists studied the ritual treatment of the placenta in various cultural settings (De Witt 1959; Frazer 2009; Jones and Kay 2003; Long 1963; Meyer 2005, 82) and argued that such rituals functioned as the mechanism to relieve anxiety (Jones and Kay 2003, 103). This study investigates the specificity of the angst expressed through the discussions and treatment of the placenta in the Tokugawa period, clarifying the source of anxiety.

### **Nursing in the womb: Placenta as the nurturing maternal body**

Authors in the Tokugawa period generally depicted the pregnant body as the nurturer of the fetus and thought that the placenta played a significant role in taking care of it. By the early nineteenth century, obstetricians began writing their explanations of fetal development, and many emphasized the critical role of the placenta. For example,  maki Sh usei wrote in his *Sanka Shinan* (Lessons on Obstetrics, 1826; see the Appendix for details of primary sources used in this article) that the fetus was located in the uterus and received nutrients through the umbilical cord. According to him, the placenta first received the maternal blood, which went through the umbilical cord and arrived at the fetal liver, from which it traveled to the heart and then reached every part of the body.  maki continued that once moving through the entire fetal body, the blood returned to the maternal body through the placenta, which was then mixed with that of the mother. He described that it was like a circle (Kure and Fujikawa 1895, 883).

Other obstetricians had similar ideas. For example, Kagawa Ransai's disciples recorded that he said, "The placenta is what filters the blood and delivers it throughout [the body of] the child" (*Sanka Kibun* [Records of Obstetrics], around 1810). Okuzawa Kench u, who studied both Chinese and European medicine, also noted in his *Sanka Hatsume*i (Inventions in Obstetrics, 1833) that "while the fetus

is in the uterus, it receives the mother's blood in the placenta and has it reach the whole body to nurture different parts [of the body]. There are numerous thin blood vessels in the placenta, and they become one and connect to the umbilical cord, and reach the child's navel" (Nakamura 1999, 74). All these doctors paid close attention to the blood and viewed the placenta as the critical point of passage that delivered the maternal blood to the fetal body.

Authors of Confucian childrearing manuals also considered the maternal body as the nurturer, with the placenta playing a crucial role in fetal development. While obstetricians maintained that the blood nourished the fetus, authors of childrearing manuals presented the idea that the fetus was fed breast milk even while in the womb. Milk represented what allowed the fetus and infant to survive, as there was no reliable substitute unless another lactating woman offered hers (Sawayama 2011, 2016). Namura Jōhaku<sup>4</sup> wrote in his *Onna Chōhōki* (Records of Weighty Treasure for Women, 1692) that after the fetus gained the shape of a person in the seventh month, it would be equipped with various senses, including that of taste through which the fetus learned the sweetness of the milk. He elaborated that the fetus would start drinking over two liters of milk during the night in the ninth month (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976, 250). The notion of the fetus consuming breast milk in the uterus was widespread. In his book on folk remedies for women *Fujin Ryōchi Tebako no Soko* (Cures for Women Hidden on the Bottom of a Small Box, 1704), Hata Genshun called the umbilical cord the rope of the milk (*chizuna*). The philosopher and doctor Andō Shōeki referred to it as the feeding rope (*kainawa*) in his book *Tōdō Shinden* (Tale of the Truth, around 1752).

Accordingly, fetal deaths were understood to be the result of the fetus discontinuing to drink milk in the womb (Sawayama 1998, 55, 226). The aforementioned Hata Genshun wrote that when the calmness of the belly was disrupted with the mother falling or lifting something heavy, the fetus would let go of the milk rope, resulting in a miscarriage (Shimano 2007, 33). Sasai Moan's *Ubuya Yashinaigusa* (Family Manual for Raising Infants, 1774) also suggested that this type of understanding was common. He criticized those who falsely believed that lactation during pregnancy indicated miscarriage, which resulted from the fetus letting go of the nipple in the womb (Shimano 2007, 33). Similar explanations frequently appeared in the *Shitai Hirōsho* (Reports of Fetal Deaths), an official local document in Ichinoseki (in present-day Iwate prefecture in northern Japan) compiled for the surveillance of reproduction in the nineteenth century (Sawayama 2009). Fetal death reports from other areas also showed such explanations for the cause of miscarriage.<sup>5</sup> In short, whether it was envisioned as blood or milk, what was seen as central in fetal development was the continuous feeding by the mother via the placenta, placing an increased sense of responsibility on the woman.

### **Placental protection: Placenta as the mechanism against maternal toxins**

While authors of child-rearing manuals described the pregnant body as nurturing, they, as well as local government officials, did not necessarily celebrate it as positive. Rulers wished to have control over reproduction, as population numbers directly

affected the subsidy provided by the central government, and they were uneasy that they only had limited influence on the actual pregnancy and birth. One way in which they exerted control over reproduction was the use of the concept of pollution (*kegare*) and its associated notion that women's inappropriate behaviors, especially in the areas of eating and drinking, would contribute to the child's poor health. In this framework, the placenta was imagined as a protective mechanism for the fetal body against maternal toxins.

The notion of pollution was used to explain the mechanism of how ill fortune occurred (Namihira 2009, 18), and it was central in the belief system as well as in the maintenance of social order in premodern Japan. The most potent pollution was considered to have come from deaths, and those who were associated with them (e.g., dead people and their families, gravediggers) were thought of as polluted. Because the polluted were also believed to have polluting power, there were myriad taboos observed to avoid the spread of the pollution (Namihira 2009, 18; Narikiyo 2003).

The female body, especially as it related to reproduction, was viewed as a source of danger associated with blood and pollution.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the emphasis on taboos pertaining to pollution surrounding death declined in the Tokugawa era, the danger of pollution pertinent to birth was further stressed with the development and consolidation of the patriarchal system during this period (Narikiyo 2003, 202). When women were considered polluted during menstruation and around the time of delivery, they were not allowed to engage in certain activities, including entering shrines. Because fire was believed to spread pollution, food for those women was prepared separately from the rest of their families. Such notions of pollution were reinforced by prominent intellectuals of the time as well. For example, in his *Yōjōkun* (Lessons for Health Cultivation), health expert Kaibara Ekiken (1961 [1712]) stated that when taking medication, a person should not look at anything polluted, such as the dead or a pregnant woman, as that would cause the spirit to sink and cancel out the effectiveness of medication.

As the female body came to be seen as the embodiment of risk and pollution, what followed then was the notion that the fetus and the infant must be protected not only from external danger but also from the "poison" of its mother. The placenta was often depicted as an umbrella hat in the shape of a lotus leaf, situated at the top of the fetus.<sup>7</sup> Head coverings symbolized protection for liminal beings in precarious contexts,<sup>8</sup> and this image of the placenta exemplifies such symbolism.

For the fetus, its immediate environment was the maternal body, and pregnant women were advised to be mindful of their actions and thoughts. In particular, proper diet was considered essential, because problematic food and drink consumption were seen as threats to the survival of the fetus. The idea that pregnant women's wrongful eating and drinking would cause smallpox for the child was introduced from China during the Kamakura period (1185–1333) (Shimano 2011, 23), and it gradually took root in Japan. For instance, a text for practitioners of the syncretic *shugendō* religion called *Shugendō Shūyō Hiketsu* (Essentials for the Training of Shugendō, written around 1520) stated that the placenta covered the head of the fetus and prevented the fetal body from being destroyed by the poisons caused by what the mother consumed (Nakamura 1999, 72).

Doctors called the toxin a child was believed to have received in the womb “uterine poison” (*taidoku*) and considered it highly dangerous. Childrearing manuals often included lengthy instructions on how to avoid inappropriate behaviors that were believed to risk the health of the child, and such discussions contained extensive recommendations on food. Uterine poison was thought to be the source of smallpox and measles, the leading causes of children’s deaths. Chimura Setsuan wrote in his *Shōni Yōjōroku* (Records for the Health Cultivation of Children, 1688) that this toxin would cause measles later in the child’s life. Namura Jōhaku also wrote in his *Records of Weighty Treasure for Women* (1692) that a child with uterine poison might suffer from smallpox and eczema. By the mid-Tokugawa period, the danger of uterine poison was generalized and came to be seen as the origin of any type of disease for children (Shimano and Shirozu 2007). Examples include Kazuki Gyūzan’s *Shōni Hitsu-yō Sodategusa* (Essential Notes on Raising Children, 1703), which argued that uterine poison was the primary determinant of children’s diseases; and *Shōni Imashimegusa* (Cautionary Notes on Children, 1820) by Oka Ryōin, a prominent pediatrician who served the central government as a doctor, in which the author stated that uterine poison would induce various illnesses for children. Hirano Jūsei’s *Byōka Suchi* (Essential Knowledge on Medicine, 1831) also stated that eight or nine out of ten children’s diseases were derived from poison left by fathers and mothers of the children (Shimano and Shirozu 2007).<sup>9</sup> The placenta was seen as a barrier that blocked the unwanted toxins from entering the fetal body.

These ideas were disseminated through one of the popular childrearing manuals of the time, *Records of Weighty Treasure for Women* (1692). Its author, Namura Jōhaku,



Figure 1. Depictions of fetal development and a birthing scene. Source: Namura Jōhaku, *Onna Chōhōki* (Records of Weighty Treasure for Women, 1692). National Diet Library, Japan.  
<https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2533891>

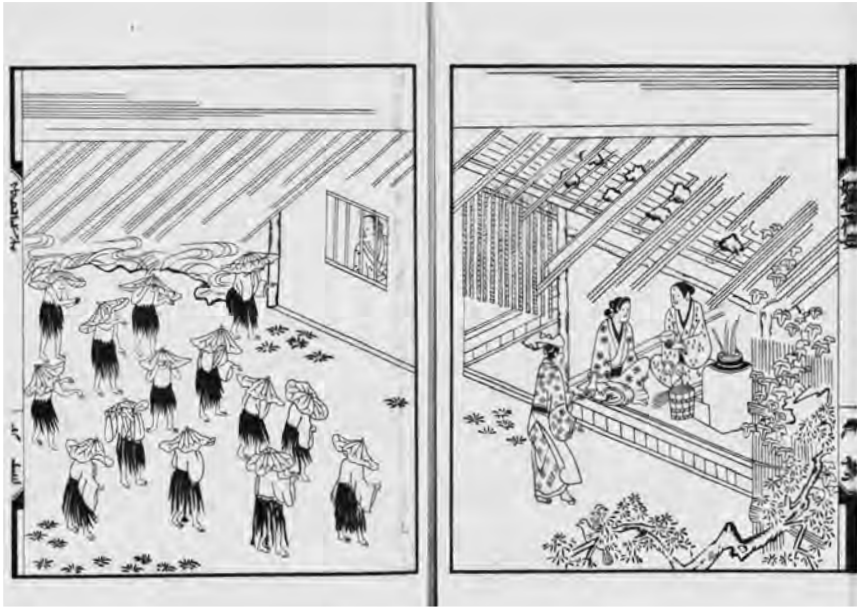


Figure 2. Depiction of aborted fetus. Source: Ihara Saikaku, *Kōshoku Ichidai On'na* (The Life of an Amorous Woman, vol. 6, 1686). National Diet Library, Japan. <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1137498>

wrote that the head of the child was covered with the placenta, which protected the child from poisons potentially present in what the mother ate (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976, 258). The image that accompanied such discussion (figure 1) listed illustrations of the fetus for each month of gestation on the bottom, starting from the right, along with the specific Buddhist deities that protected the fetus on the top. The fetus during the ninth month of pregnancy in this image (on the left page, second row, second from the left) is shown with the placenta hat on its head.

A popular story also used similar imagery. Prominent poet and storywriter Ihara Saikaku wrote in his *Kōshoku Ichidai On'na* (The Life of an Amorous Woman, 1686) that when the protagonist was about to die, she looked outside a window and saw numerous children wearing lotus-leaf-shaped placentas on their heads, their lower bodies soaked in blood (figure 2). They were crying and saying that she was a terrible mother. The character realized that those were children she had aborted in the past.

The same idea was seen in a parody of the explanation of fetal development called *Sakusha Tainai Totsukizu* (Ten Months in the Womb of a Writer), written by woodblock print artist and author Santō Kyōden in 1804. The protagonist was a writer who struggled to write a story by the deadline and desperately asked a god that he would become pregnant with the seed of a plot. Once he swallowed the seed given by the god, the author's ideas were depicted as the fetus inside his belly. In the ninth month, he pondered that he should quit being a writer and live like a masterless samurai, and this thought was shown in his transparent abdomen as a person (the fetus) holding a fan while wearing a woven hat (placenta) (figure 3).

With such images widely available, people likely internalized the notion of the protective placenta hat. The placenta was seen as part of the nurturing mother that



Figure 3. The character's story idea depicted as a fetus. Source: Santō Kyōden, *Sakusha Tainai Totsukizu (Ten Months in the Womb of a Writer, 1804)*. National Diet Library, Japan. <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2537598>

delivered nutrients in the form of blood or breast milk to the fetus, while at the same time it was depicted as a shield to protect the fetus from maternal threat. This dual framework allowed male experts to encourage women to foster their identity as mother, and simultaneously extended male experts' control over the female reproductive body.

### Patriarchal desires in postpartum placenta rituals

The treatment of the placenta after delivery also allows us to access rich accounts of people's emotions. Instructions for placenta rituals were included in an old medical text as well as books on protocols for elites, whose simplified versions were disseminated to people in the lower strata of society through childrearing manuals. Such instructions often included processes of purification, placing it in container(s), and burial. Though there was disagreement on the details of how the placenta should be handled, it is evident that many practices were motivated by the desire to maintain patriarchal order. The analysis also suggests that people in Tokugawa Japan saw what the anthropologist James G. Frazer (2009) called sympathetic connection between the placenta and the child,<sup>10</sup> within which the placenta is conceived as the child's symbolic sibling or partner (Jones and Kay 2003) or the protective force that shaped the life of the child (Leach 1950).

Ritualistic treatment of the placenta started among elites. Specificities of burial preparation indicated that the careful handling of the placenta was one way in which people tried to achieve their child's good health and successful career. Furthermore, the level of elaboration with co-buried objects as well as the decorations on and layers



of containers displayed the family's status and power. One of the earliest accounts on the placenta in Japan appears in the oldest medical text known in the country, *Ishinpō* (Prescriptions from the Heart of Medicine, 984), which cited a Chinese classic, *Sankei* (The Sutra of Birth), stating that:

The placenta should be washed first with pure water then with sacred *sake* (rice wine). It should be wrapped in silk and placed in a jar. One should put five coins and place the placenta on top. If parents wished the child to have literary talent, they should place a writing brush as well. Place the lid tightly so that it would not be damaged by insects or eaten by farm animals or birds or wild animals. The lucky direction should be determined based on the birth month. One needs to have someone dig a hole that is three *shaku* and two *sun* (97 centimeters) deep and bury it there. If damaged by animals or insects, the child might become ugly or die with disease. (Maki 1995, 154–55)

The imperial family and other elites between eleventh and sixteenth centuries practiced the treatment of the placenta similar to the description that appeared in *Ishinpō* (Doi 2004; Nakamura 1999). With the formalization of these rituals during the Muromachi period (1336–1573) when the powerful Ise and Ogasawara families detailed various protocols for warrior families, including handling of the placenta (Nakamura 1999; Tanigawa 2001, 92), such practices continued into the Tokugawa period (Nagashima and Ohta 1968; Tanigawa 2001, 90–91).

The families wished for the child's good health and successful career, as they were closely linked to the prosperity of the patrilineal family. One way in which they showed this desire was through the choice of co-buried objects, which became more elaborate in later years. In *Ishinpō*, hopes for the child's future career were shown in the placement of a writing brush. But a document from the sixteenth century, *Kainin Chakutai no Koto* (On the Donning of a Belt for Pregnancy),<sup>11</sup> included a discussion of placing a bow made of mulberry and an arrow made of lotus, as well as kelp (*kombu*), chestnut (*kachiguri*), and *noshi* (ceremonial decoration on a gift to wish good luck), suggesting the parents' hope for the child to become a successful warrior. Records indicate that others buried the placenta with money or an abacus for boys, and threads and needles as well as cosmetic items for girls (Yamazato 1997).

Another characteristic of elite placenta preparation was the multiple layers of containers and elaborate decorations, for the purpose of pristine preservation and as a status display. The damage of the placenta by creatures was believed to result in the child's disease, indicating the belief in sympathetic connection. The aforementioned Ogasawara document mentioned that if eaten by wild animals, the child would suffer from mental illness, and if eaten by insects, the child would experience a malignant tumor (Nakamura 1999, 39–40). Based on the same notion, *Sanjo Hōshiki* (The Manners in the Birthing Place, 1756) by Ise Sadatake urged family to:

Place the white silk cloth on the bottom of the placenta bucket made of pine, and wrap the placenta with it, then position coins wrapped in a paper as a weight. Pack cotton between the placenta and the bucket so that the placenta would not move. Place a lid on the bucket and close it with nails. Place it in an outer bucket, close

with a lid, wrap it in white and red silk, and finally encase it in a pot with a lid made of pine. (Nakamura 1999, 51–53)

Their desire for proper preservation is also seen in the location of the burial. Elites typically buried the placenta in a hill or a shrine, together with a clear marker (Fukunishi 2010; Kinoshita 1981).

A family's wish for the child's health was evident also in the instructions of decorating the placenta bucket with paintings of a pine tree, bamboo, a crane, and a turtle, all of which are symbols of good luck and longevity.<sup>12</sup> A placenta from the late seventeenth century that belonged to the Date family was placed in a cedar bucket with such paintings, which was then wrapped in silk with the same symbols and placed in a copper container with a lid at Zuishōji Temple in central Edo (Tanigawa 2001, 90–91).

With the popularization of Confucian childrearing manuals from the seventeenth century (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976), the elite practices of placenta burial came to be known to people of different social status. Archeological findings indicate that by the early to mid-eighteenth century, people in the mid to lower strata of society were practicing simplified versions of the elite placenta burial rituals (Tanigawa 2001, 95). Obstetrical texts from the early and mid-nineteenth century also contained discussions of such practices.

Though rituals were introduced and there was increasing interest in the handling of the placenta, this did not mean that there were agreed upon protocols among non-elites. Authors of Confucian childrearing manuals indeed complained about how ordinary people treated the placenta. For example, Records of the Health Cultivation of Children stated that people in the lower strata of society threw the placenta away as a filthy object, even to the point of discarding it on the street. The author of Records of Weighty Treasure for Women (1692) wrote that it was regrettable that ordinary people would simply leave it on a street or the gate of a shrine. Doctors agreed. Kojima Isai, a disciple of Gotō Konzan, the authoritative figure in the *Koihō* tradition of medicine, criticized in his *Hosan Michishirube* (Paths for Safe Delivery, 1782) that people buried it in places such as near the doorsill on the side of the premises or under the floor (Nakamura 1999, 76). The obstetrician Mizuhara Sansetsu also wrote in 1850 that the placenta should be buried in a dry and elevated location on the premises, warning that it should not be disposed of with other polluted or polluting matters (Nakamura 1999, 79).

While complaints by elites may give the impression that ordinary people did not care about the placenta, a careful examination of historical materials suggests otherwise. Both elites and non-elites did believe in sympathetic connection and worried about the maintenance of patriarchal order, but the details differed. Indeed, what elites thought of as disrespectful might not have been considered as such by ordinary people. In fact, ordinary people did see symbolic significance in the placenta, and their concerns can be elucidated through how they treated the organ.

For example, even just within the process of washing the placenta, various types of anxiety can be observed. To be sure, the washing and purification of the placenta was based on the belief in sympathetic connection between the child and the placenta. The placenta was, at least sometimes, washed with the infant while it was

still attached via the umbilical cord (Yasui 2006). In such cases, people might have considered the practice as bathing the placenta as a symbolic sibling or a protector, rather than washing.

Sympathetic connection was not the only idea behind the practice of washing. That is, it was also based on the fear of divine punishment. While the placenta played the role of protector during pregnancy, it was exposed to maternal blood, rendering it both polluted and polluting. Thus, a careful washing was considered essential. Several texts, including *Records of the Health Cultivation of Children* (1692) and *Onna Geibun Sansaizue* (Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women, 1771), stated that one should sprinkle salt water before burial as a way of paying respect to *jigami*, a god associated with the placenta and believed to have protected the local area, especially concerning farming. Such treatment had the dual meanings of preventing the gods from getting upset with the pollution and having the placenta under the protection of the gods (Nakamura 1999, 42).

Furthermore, the washed placenta allowed the family to examine it closely. Female promiscuity was seen as threat to the patriarchal order, and dispute over biological paternity was not uncommon (Sawayama 2020). Fear of female sexuality manifested itself as the belief that the family emblem (*mon*) would appear in the placenta, enabling people to determine the biological father (Yamazato 1997). Poetry became popular among ordinary people during the Tokugawa period, and the compilation of poems by ordinary people included ones that mentioned the placenta, such as “Wearing glasses, I look closely at the placenta” (Ozawa 1996). Such practices indicate that female sexuality was indeed a concern both at the personal and societal level, and the placenta was used as a tool to send a message to women.

The commoners’ choice of containers and their burial locations also differed from elites. While elites’ practices suggested that their ultimate goal was the preservation of the placenta, ordinary people wanted the placenta to eventually return to the soil, seeing it as the source of reproductive energy. Andō Shōeki’s descriptions encapsulate such ideas. He noted in his *Tōdō Shinden* (Tale of the Truth, around 1752) that “People buried the placenta in the dirt after the child was born with its completed body. The placenta is the husk of the human. The placenta rots in the dirt completely. After returning it to the dirt in two months, one might get pregnant” (Yamazumi and Nakae 1976). Andō held the notion that humans resembled grains and viewed the placenta within that framework.

While childrearing manuals stated that the placenta bucket was the outermost container used, existing archeological evidence does not match such instructions. Most of the excavated containers from Edo and its surrounding sites consisted of two pieces of pottery bowls put together called *kawarake* (Tanigawa 2001, 88), and in western parts of the country, people typically placed the placenta in pots that were originally used to hold water for extinguishing fires (Doi 2004, 164). In his *Sanka Kibun* (Records of Obstetrics, around 1810), Kagawa Ransai wrote that ordinary people used plain terracotta pots, as opposed to a pot with the painting of sparrows or turtles used by elites (Nakamura 1999, 82). In *Sanka Hiyō* (Secret Essentials in Obstetrics, mid-nineteenth century), Kagawa wrote that the placenta should be placed in a small charcoal extinguishing pot with three small dried anchovies as well as a sea

cucumber, as the sign of celebration (Kure and Fujikawa 1895). The choice of the container was based on people's understanding of the placenta, rather than mere lack of access to the materials. Layers of containers make it harder for the placenta to decompose. Ordinary people, especially farmers, might have had an understanding similar to what Andō described, rather than what elite writers depicted in their childrearing manuals.

Placenta burial locations also reflected a family's desires. Authors of Confucian texts wrote that the placenta should be buried in the location of a good omen, but often there were no specific instructions on how to determine such a location (Yasui 2006). Common places chosen for the burial included where the child was born, under the floorboards, near doorsills or outhouses, earthen floors typically used in a kitchen, and gardens.<sup>13</sup> They were all boundary areas within the family property that were associated with liminality and reproduction. By returning the placenta to the realm it had come from, people wished for the birth of another child in the future (Iijima 1987, 1989).

Further, choosing locations with heavy traffic was believed to have contributed to establishing desirable relationships between the parent and the child, which in this historical context meant one with a clear sense of hierarchy. In his *Sanka Hiyō* (Secret Essentials in Obstetrics), Kagawa Ransai wrote that one should bury the placenta under the doorsill of the house entrance and explained that it was considered fortunate to be buried where people walked by, as being stepped on meant receiving love. There was the belief that the child would be afraid of the first people or animals who walked on their placenta burial (Ohfuji 1968)<sup>14</sup>; parents stepping on the placenta burial had to do with their desire to have a child who would be obedient to the superiors in the family. By burying the placenta in a location with high traffic, people tried to achieve the consolidation of a stable hierarchy within the family, with the father as its head.

## Conclusion

An analysis of the representations of and practices surrounding the placenta offers a compelling framework to consider pregnancy and birth, allowing us to access not only what people did but also how they experienced these transformative events. This article argued that the placenta functioned as the depository of patriarchal imagination surrounding reproduction during the Tokugawa period. The placenta embodied the ambiguity surrounding reproduction, and people expressed their anxieties and desires through the organ.

The symbolic significance of the placenta became prominent in the Tokugawa period, where people began to consider proper childrearing as essential for the survival and prosperity of the patriarchal family. It was also the period when male authoritative figures in various fields, including obstetrics, law, and morality, began producing knowledge and narratives surrounding pregnancy, birth, and childrearing. In particular, authors of childrearing manuals promoted education from an early age, claiming that it should start as early as pregnancy. Lowering of the target age of children's education meant an increased level of responsibility for women, which

entailed the expectation of bodily control. Within this framework, the placenta was imagined as a critical juncture between the woman and her fetus that simultaneously divided and connected them. Knowledge about fetal development produced in the burgeoning field of obstetrics reinforced this notion.

Further, male anxiety over the unruly female reproductive body contributed to the use of the concept of pollution, providing the basis for the notion of the placenta in the shape of a lotus leaf umbrella hat protecting the fetus from being destroyed by its mother. Thus, the woman was viewed as both the nurturer and the threat, and the fetus was considered both the protectee and the potential victim of its own mother, presenting incongruous yet not necessarily contradicting notions.

This article also presented the centrality of the patriarchal family as a social institution beyond any divergence based on social class. Tokugawa Japan was a highly hierarchical society, and experiences including pregnancy and birth differed significantly based upon one's social position. Yet, centering our gaze on differences obscures our understanding of a more pervasive ideology at work. That is, while details of the practices differed, careful handling of the placenta was based upon people's belief in a sympathetic connection between the child and the placenta. More importantly, anxiety expressed vis à vis the placenta had to do with the maintenance of patriarchal order, be it the child's health and successful career for elites or the child's obedience and women's chastity for ordinary people.

Though ephemeral, the placenta was a powerful organ. In the patriarchal society where individual survival and success was defined by family stability and prosperity, reproduction was far more than the birth of a child. Indeed, a large part of the anxiety surrounding reproduction had to do with the uncertainty of the future of the family. With its liminal and ambiguous nature, the placenta epitomized the unruly nature of reproduction, functioning as the depository of patriarchal imagination derived from such anxiety.

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#### NOTES

1. Incineration of the placenta began at the beginning of the Meiji era as one of the attempts to modernize medical and reproductive practices.
2. The British physician and diplomat Rutherford Alcock (1863) as well as the American zoologist Edward S. Morse (1917) wrote that fathers were spending much time with and taking care of their children. Because women's income-earning activities were crucial for the survival of many farming families (Walthall 1991), mothers were not seen as solely responsible for taking care of their children. Mashita (1990) also points out that the father performed significant amounts of childcare and daily chores around the house during the immediate postpartum period, especially within small households.
3. While childrearing manuals in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries stated that children's education should start from three years old, by the seventeenth to eighteenth century, authors argued that even infants should be given proper education. By the nineteenth century, authors were emphasizing the importance of *taikyō*, or "fetal education" during pregnancy.

4. He wrote this piece under the name of Kusada Sunbokushi.
5. In 1848 in Sendai domain, for example, the husband of a woman who had miscarried after nine months of pregnancy explained that “the baby in the womb let go of the milk” when his wife fell after stumbling on a stone at a riverbed while washing rice (Kikuchi 1997, 199–200).
6. There are several theories on how reproduction in general and birth in particular came to be included in the realm of the polluted. The anthropologist Namihira Emiko (1976) argued that pregnancy and birth came to be associated with the notion of pollution as they were seen as the opposite of death. That is, death was the transition from a person to a nonperson (e.g., the dead, spirit, Buddha, a god), and birth was transformation in the opposite direction. Drawing upon the work of Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach, Namihira argued that such a liminal state was seen as unstable and dangerous as well as polluted. While Namihira emphasized the precarious nature of birth at the individual level, the religious scholar Okada Shigekiyo (1982, 317–28) stressed the social anxiety associated with birth. He maintained that births and deaths were transformations that disrupted interpersonal relations and social order, presenting the risk of danger to the community and society.
7. People believed that the fetal head stayed on the upper side of the uterus, and the placenta was imagined to have been located above its head. The obstetrician Kagawa Gen’etsu discovered the correct fetal position (i.e., having the head on the bottom), but even after this discovery, the circulation of this knowledge was limited to medical communities (Sugitatsu 2002).
8. There is a clear parallel between birth and death rituals in Japan; while the fetus was imagined to have donned the placenta hat, the dead wore the burial clothes called *kyōkatabira* (Iijima 1994, 52). Other types of liminal beings also wore head coverings, including a bride in the wedding ritual (Furukawa 2009), warriors in combat (Shimano 2011, 93–94), as well as travelers (Komatsu 1995).
9. Hirano did not discuss how the father could leave poison for the fetus.
10. Frazer wrote in *The Golden Bough*:
 

Thus in many parts of the world the navel-string, or more commonly the afterbirth, is regarded as a living being, the brother or sister of the infant, or as the material object in which the guardian spirit of the child or part of its soul resides. Further, the sympathetic connexion supposed to exist between a person and his afterbirth or navel-string comes out very clearly in the widespread custom of treating the afterbirth or navel-string in ways which are supposed to influence for life the character and career of the person. (2009, 41)
11. A dictation of Ogasawara Nagatoki, recorded by Iwamura Ikyu Shigehisa.
12. For example, see the Ise document of *Sanjo no Ki* (The Record from a Birthing Place) from the seventeenth century. Confucian childrearing manuals, such as Records of Weighty Treasure for Women (1692), *Onna Geibun Sansaizue* (Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women, 1771), and *Shōni Hitsuyō Yashinaigusa* (Essential Notes on Raising Children, 1703), also instructed that lucky symbols like the crane, turtle, pine, and bamboo should be painted on the bucket.
13. The author of Guidebook of Childrearing for Women, Baiu Sanjin, wrote that people in urban areas buried it under the doorsill, and those who lived in rural areas buried it under the floor of the birthing space (Nakamura 1999, 64). Other childrearing manuals that promoted such burial locations included: *Onna Kagami Hidensho* (Secret Book of Paragon for Women, 1652);

*Fujin Yashinaigusa* (Guidebook of Childrearing for Women, 1689); Records of Weighty Treasure for Women (1692); and *Onna Geibun Sansaizue* (Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women, 1771).

14. A poem described that a chief retainer was the first person to step on the placenta burial of the young prince, and the author of another poem self-deprecatingly wrote, “Probably a rich person was the first person who stepped on my placenta burial,” complaining that it contributed to the writer being poor (Ozawa 1996, 69–82).

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## APPENDIX

Original Title	English Title	Year	Author
<i>Ishinpō</i>	Prescriptions from the Heart of Medicine	984	Tanba no Yasunori
<i>Onna Kagami Hidensho</i>	Secret Book of Paragon for Women	1652	Unknown
<i>Shōni Yōjōroku</i>	Records for the Health Cultivation of Children	1688	Chimura Setsuan
<i>Fujin Yashinaigusa</i>	Guidebook of Childrearing for Women	1689	Baiu Sanjin
<i>Onna Chōhōki</i>	Records of Weighty Treasure for Women	1692	Namura Jouhaku
<i>Shōni Hitsuyō Sodategusa</i>	Essential Notes on Raising Children	1703	Kazuki Gyūzan
<i>Fujin Ryōchi Tebako no Soko</i>	Cures for Women Hidden on the Bottom of a Small Box	1704	Hata Genshun
<i>Yōjōkun</i>	Lessons for Health Cultivation	1712	Kaibara Ekiken
<i>Shōni Hitsuyō Sodategusa</i>	Essential Notes on Raising Children	1714	Kazuki Gyūzan
<i>Tōdō Shinden</i>	Tale of the Truth	c. 1752	Andō Shōeki
<i>Onna Geibun Sansaizue</i>	Illustrated Encyclopedia of Art and Literature for Women	1771	Torigai Suiga
<i>Ubuya Yashinaigusa</i>	Family Manual for Raising Infants	1774	Sasai Sen’an
<i>Hosan Michishirube</i>	Paths for Safe Delivery	1782	Kojima Isai
<i>Sanka Kibun</i>	Records of Obstetrics	c. 1810	Kagawa Ransai
<i>Sanka Shinan</i>	Lessons on Obstetrics	1826	Omaki Shūsei
<i>Byōka Suchi</i>	Essential Knowledge on Medicine	1831–32	Hirano Jūsei
<i>Sanka Hatsumei</i>	Inventions in Obstetrics	1833	Okuzawa Kenchū
<i>Sanka Hiyō</i>	Secret Essentials in Obstetrics	mid-19th century	Kagawa Ransai

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## Spectral Encounters on the Sinamale' Bridge

### Affective Infrastructure along a Watery Stretch of the Belt Road

This article focuses on one of the largest infrastructure projects in the Maldives, the Sinamale' ("China-Maldives Friendship") Bridge. The bridge affords a range of meanings, shaped to various degrees by both its global entanglements with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and local political contestation within the Maldives. Linking the national capital to its international airport and spanning across the three islands, the Sinamale' bridge quickly became the site of a diverse range of social and cultural experiences and interpretations—including encounters with the supernatural. The bridge has thus inadvertently become a space in which local experiences of modernity are elaborated by individuals through complex engagements with diverse elements of local cosmology, and symbolic expressions of locality and trespass that complicate any neat linear narratives of modernizing development and "progress."

Keywords: Indian Ocean—China—infrastructure—identity—sense of place—haunting

Ghostly matters are part of the “something more” because haunting is one of the most important places where meaning—comprehension—and force intersect. (Gordon 1997, 194)

Beyond its publicly expressed intentions to foster mobility, connection, and economic development, China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its reconfiguration of maritime connections across the Indian Ocean has transformed the lived experiences of people all across the region in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways. The cultural dimensions of social change afforded by such mega-projects have attracted increasing attention from anthropologists in the burgeoning subfield of “infrastructure ethnography” (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Harvey and Hannah 2015; Larkin 2013). Despite this boom in scholarly attention, however, relatively little work has been done to explore the religious dimensions of the important and often unpredictable transformations that accompany the imagination, implementation, and aftermath of super-sized infrastructure projects.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we explore some of the ways in which narratives of supernatural beings familiar to traditional Maldivian Muslim cosmology have served to express nonmaterial experiences of a major BRI infrastructure project in the Maldives. Soon after its opening to the public, the Sinamale’ Bridge became the site of a diverse range of experiences and interpretations, including encounters with otherworldly beings. Attention to accounts of hauntings on the bridge affords analysis of affect and its narrative expression in and around this new infrastructure space in relation to a range of social, political, and cultural dimensions of everyday life as well as contestations over symbols of modernity.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, modernity, international tourism, and infrastructure development projects have shaped significant reconfigurations of culture and identity in the Maldives. While the country has seen a number of major infrastructure projects implemented over recent years, there has been a particular fascination about the Sinamale’ Bridge (figure 1). The bridge affords mobility and connection for one-third of the country’s population, centralized in the Greater Male’ Region (consisting of Male’, Hulhumale’, and Villimale’). The Sinamale’ Bridge has a complex and contested history, entangled within global contexts of its development, debt, and security concerns, while also complexly mired in local politics. The idea of a bridge connecting Male’ and Hulhumale’ was first floated in 2007 and was a



Figure 1. Image of the Sinamale' (China-Maldives Friendship) Bridge as it connects between Male', Hulhumale', and Hulhule' islands. Photograph by Thoiba Saeedh.

key promise of the unsuccessful presidential campaign of Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom in 2008, and subsequently during Mohamed Nasheed's government that followed (2008–12). The idea was only realized, however, during the presidency of Abdulla Yameen (2013–18), who seized the moment to locally co-opt aspects of China's ambitious BRI initiative to promote urban aspirations for a more concretely connected national capital.

The Sinamale' Bridge has also been at the center of the country's biggest corruption scandal, which resulted in the loss of the presidential election for Abdulla Yameen and his subsequent five-year prison sentence. In this contested political context, the transformation of the landscape, international entanglements, and foreign debt have all contributed to prevalent anxieties about threats to Maldivian national identity. By extension, and in consideration of the critical place of Islam in Maldivian nationalism, debt obligations compromising national sovereignty also strain contemporary understandings of religion and ways of being Muslim among the Dhivehin (Maldivian people). The social impact of these political and economic changes and the ways in which infrastructure projects associated with the BRI have impacted local aspirations and nationally promoted "dreams of development" are discussed by the authors of this article in another publication (Saeedh and Feener, forthcoming). Here we focus on one of the distinctive areas of cultural discourse that this massive new infrastructure affords beyond its technological function of interconnectivity and facilitating physical mobility.

The potential of the bridge to become a site of otherworldly experiences was manifest shortly after its official opening. Soon thereafter, Maldivian motorists began sharing stories of supernatural encounters along its span—situating this new infrastructural space within frameworks of localized Muslim cosmology in ways

that reflect contemporary imaginations of connections between islands, as well as between the visible and invisible worlds. Examining such narratives of personal encounters on the bridge can expand our understandings of the bridge's significance and social impact beyond the frameworks of geopolitics, mobility, and technology that have dominated international discourse on the so-called "China-Maldives Friendship Bridge" and its place within the broader global transformations that have accompanied the development of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### *The Sinamale' Bridge*

Following a decade since the initial discussions surrounding the construction of a bridge, Dhivehi-language news outlets (Ali 2016) and social media posts by locals on Twitter, Pinterest, and Facebook reported the arrival of China's megaship *Hawk* on February 25, 2016. The posts were timestamped at 9:45 am, marking the moment the vessel docked at the Male' Harbour. The 64,900 MT, 223 m long semi-submersible vessel sailed into the waters of the Maldives carrying with it the largest shipment of machinery ever brought to the islands: a tugboat, four barges, two floating cranes, and materials needed for the construction of the bridge between Male', the capital seat of the country's administration, and Hulhumale', an artificial island ward belonging to Male' city but lying 5.3 km south of the capital. A highway connection to the bridge links the two islands to the Velana International Airport.

Each phase of the project's construction, beginning with the initial public announcement of its plans in 2015, then the signing and project commencement ceremony, followed by the actual construction of the bridge, and finally the formal opening on August 20, 2018, was widely celebrated by the Maldives government and the broader public. Progress through the various phases of the project (figure 2) was documented on social media by locals as well as foreign residents in Male', who expressed awe of the gigantic pillars, massive blocks of cement, and the extension



Figure 2. Construction work on the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge. Photograph by R. Michael Feener.

of asphalt and metal across the ocean that provided surreal visions of a shimmering landscape melding nature and industrial construction together (Saeedh 2018).

The inauguration ceremony for the bridge was an elaborate spectacle followed by a display of fireworks with a total cost of US\$3 million (= 46 million Maldivian Rufiyaa [MVR]). Such lavish expenditure became the target of harsh criticism from the political opposition in the run-up to the 2018 presidential election (Rehan 2018).

This article will explore how, along with its impressive cargo of machinery and construction materials, the *Hawk* carried with it dreams, hopes, and imaginations. The ship's arrival, in other words, signified both a literal and a symbolic "cementing" of relationships between China and the Maldives (Saeedh 2018).<sup>2</sup>

In a parliament briefing held on April 12, 2016, Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, then minister of housing and infrastructure, estimated a US\$210 million budget for the project. The Chinese government provided US\$126 million in grant aid along with an additional loan component, the details of which were not made publicly available. The Maldives government funded the remaining US\$12 million. This is the largest foreign investment in the Maldives to date and has also carried with it significant obligations for the national debt. The financing of this megaproject and, as suggested at the outset, its political dimensions were inextricably bound to the rise and fall of Abdulla Yameen's presidency.

To mark the relationship between the two nations engendered by this massive infrastructure project, the bridge was formally named the "China-Maldives Friendship Bridge," although it is more often referred to locally as the Sinamale' Bridge. At the bridge's inauguration ceremony, then President Abdulla Yameen called special attention to the history of ties between the two countries in stressing that it is indeed symbolic that *the most important* and *the most historic* landmark of the Maldives will be named the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup> At the same event, Mr. Wang Xiaotao, Chinese Government special envoy to Maldives, remarked:

The bridge is a landmark for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road under President Xi's Belt and Road Initiative. The bridge is also a new *symbol for continued friendship* between the two peoples and a new start in bilateral relations (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

The bridge is thus a key infrastructure investment project in the BRI.<sup>5</sup> As suggested, it is the most prominent developmental mega-project in the Maldives and has become an icon of China's rising profile in this Indian Ocean island nation.

### *Connecting islands*

The bridge and highway between Male' and Hulhumale' spans over two kilometers of land and water, where the atoll meets the broad open waters of the Indian Ocean, connecting the densely packed historic capital of the Maldives to Hulhule' Island, which is where the city's airport is located, and thence to the much larger artificial island, Hulhumale'. The last of these islands is popularly known as the "Youth City" and home to extensive new housing developments. The bridge has a pedestrian lane for a short portion of its span from the entry from Male', but that ends before the highway section of the bridge begins. Pedestrians thus are not able to use the bridge for travel between the islands on foot, although this was envisaged in the initial



drawings. The partial pedestrian path is separated from the vehicle lanes by metal railings. On either side is the ocean. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks is exaggerated late into the night when the traffic thins out.

When the bridge was first opened, a lack of regulation by the Transport Authority (TA) resulted in taxi drivers unanimously setting their own fares, charging up to MVR150.00 (US\$10.00) for trips across the bridge and highway connecting Male' to Hulhumale'. Under strong public pressure, the TA was forced to have public consultations, and against the protests of taxi drivers, it introduced set rates for taxi fares across the bridge. Several taxi drivers refused to comply at the beginning and imposed their own rules.

Maldives Ports Limited (MPL) began operating regular bus services (figure 3) over the bridge between Male', Hulhumale', and Hulhule' shortly after the bridge opened in September 2018. The new system was often unreliable, buses were delayed, bus stops were not clearly marked, and bus schedules were not available at the outset. For these reasons and more, taxis were the preferred mode of transport for many crossing the bridge, even though bus fares came to MVR10 (US\$0.65 cents) per trip, much less than the cost of taking a cab.



Figure 3. Residents at a Male' bus stop waiting to go to Hulhumale'. Photograph by Thoiba Saeedh.

The fast speeds that it became possible to attain across the long straight bridge were unprecedented and exhilarating to many Maldivian motorists. This afforded the emergence of a new kind of leisure experience: “burujehun” or joy rides (figure 4). The jarring sense of velocity at which wheeled vehicles have become able to travel in the Maldives over just the past few years may not be particularly easy to grasp for those living virtually anywhere else on the planet. Most inhabited islands outside the capital have few, if any, paved roads, and the streets of Male' are so tightly cramped and congested day and night that it is generally impossible to accelerate too much or to travel more than a few meters before inevitably having to stop to avoid hitting one obstacle or another. Until the completion of the two largest Chinese infrastructure



Figure 4 . Traffic on the Sinamale' Bridge during peak traffic on a weekday.  
Photograph by Thoiba Saeedh.

projects in the country—the Sinamale' bridge and the Laamu Link Road across three islands in the southern atoll of that name—there were very few roads in the country where one could drive at speed.

The physical infrastructure of BRI projects in the Maldives affords new freedom in the vectors and velocity of movement in some parts of the country (figure 5). With the opening of more than two kilometers of wide, multi-laned asphalt road across the Sinamale' Bridge (and the even longer sixteen-kilometer stretch of Chinese-built road across three islands in Laamu), motorists were presented with almost irresistible temptations to speed. That has, unfortunately, resulted in a tragic and ever-growing list of casualties. Compounded by the absence of lights on the bridge when it first



Figure 5. A typical narrow, congested street in Male'. Photograph by R. Michael Feener.

opened, faster speeds to which the locals were not accustomed, and the lack of safety gear, accidents—especially motorcycle accidents—on the bridge were frequent and at times quite severe.<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting this dangerous reality, narratives of *jinnīn*<sup>7</sup> (ghosts)<sup>8</sup> on the bridge began to circulate alongside accident reports. Ghostly apparitions can cause sudden stops—or at least an occasional slowing down—along the way that can give pause to the careless crossing of formerly inaccessible spaces. Some victims related that they witnessed spectral sightings on the bridge, and that this caused them to either suddenly stop while driving at high speeds or forced the drivers in question to suddenly swerve so as not to run over pedestrians or collide with other vehicles.

Some locals accredit such narratives to the hallucinations of young drivers high on drugs. The stories were also reduced to mere fictions spread to deter young motorists from speeding across the bridge's asphalt road from Male' to Hulhumale' to enjoy faster speed limits. Nevertheless, reports of such supernatural encounters circulated on Maldivian social media and attracted considerable commentary in coffee shops and other spaces of casual conversation.

#### *Ghostly encounters*

In 2019, *Vaguthu News*, a local online information outlet in the Maldives, posted the story: “a *Jinni* climbs on the backseat of a Policeman's motorcycle” (Rehan 2019). It recounted the experience of a policeman driving across the bridge on his motorcycle when he sensed that someone was sitting behind him. He turned to find a woman on the back of his bike. Startled, he immediately slowed down and stopped so he could take a better look behind him, but he saw no one. This scared him to the point that he could not continue his ride. As he was waiting halfway across the bridge, he saw the lights of another motorcyclist that stopped for him. After sharing his experience and that he was too scared to ride alone, he eventually rode to Male' side by side with the other rider for company, and later shared his experience with friends.

On her way across the highway portion of the bridge to a meeting with Michael Feener, Thoiba Saeedh heard another ghost story on the Sinamale' Bridge. Taxi rides, albeit short, are often occasions for conversational entertainment. Over the course of Thoiba's short trip across the bridge, the driver (Rasheed—name changed for anonymity) made several remarks about traffic congestion in Male', the cost of petrol, and his complaints against the set taxi fares mandated by the Transport Authority. Rasheed drives his own refurbished car. A number of taxi centers operate in the Maldives, although registered, privately owned cars also offer taxi services. He says, “The bridge offers faster journeys and an easier and smoother connection between Male' and Hulhumale'.”<sup>9</sup> Talk of the bridge eventually led to mention of the “bridge *jinni*” (the local designation for the ghosts at the center of stories about spectral encounters on the Sinamale' Bridge). Such stories had been making the rounds in the news. Unexpectedly, when asked for any corroboration of the bridge *jinni* stories, after an assessing glance through the rearview mirror, Rasheed shared with Thoiba his own encounter with the *jinni* in the following account:

It was a rainy night, close to midnight. I was taking three female passengers from Male' to Hulhumale'. At the time, the lights installed on the bridge were not fully

operational. Beyond the headlights from the taxi, there was no other source of light. Everything else was pitch black as the car sped across the bridge. When I reached the center of the bridge, where the arch is at its highest point above the sea, I was forced to suddenly hit the brakes. I was going at 60 miles per hour on a rainy night over asphalt, so stopping suddenly like that is very dangerous. Someone had rushed past, not caring for the car. To avoid hitting the pedestrian I had to stop. The women sitting in the back were startled by the sudden brakes. They said something about selfish young people under the influence of drugs and substances risking other people's safety. [He paused for a moment of pensive reflection.] It was a *jinni*!

I didn't want to scare my passengers, so I said nothing, but the women saw someone, and so did I. It was not a human. I had to slow down so as to not run "it" over. . . . I come from a family where my father does *fanḍita* [magic], which is why I did not get scared. I recited some verses from the Qur'ān and made a *du'a* [prayer of supplication]. What I saw was a *jinni*. They share the same space with us. There might be a *jinni* sitting next to us. We just don't know. Maybe this was where they were living, where we have built a bridge, we are just using the space because we have built a bridge here. Maybe it is really *we who are using the space belonging to the jinni*.<sup>10</sup> So maybe they are just retaliating or showing us that we have *trespassed* and are *occupying their home*.

In the comments section to the *Vaguthu News* article about the policeman's story of a "bridge *jinni*," the public voiced a number of suggestions to avoid ghostly encounters. To have protection from such encounters, one must read prayers for protection. Some suggestions even alluded to *sihuru* (black magic) having purportedly been performed during the construction of the bridge. Incidents of engaging with supernatural beings are frequently associated in the Maldives with seeking illicit political, social, or material gain, resulting in the present "haunting" of the bridge.<sup>11</sup> Some stated that the spirit was the daughter of Hulhule' Bodu Meehaa, or the "big man of Hulhule' (*bodu mīhā*).<sup>12</sup> References were also made to similar stories from Maamigili Island, where female ghosts were said to hitch rides on passing motorcycles during the night.

Similar experiences as well as imaginations of such encounters with otherworldly beings began circulating among Maldivian users on a number of social media platforms. Encounters with *jinnīn* and visions of such encounters on the bridge were soon rendered as photoshopped images and other artistic visualizations and circulated on social media. Beyond such traditional depictions of *jinnīn*, contemporary circulations of ghost stories in the Maldives incorporate images drawn from and playing upon the modern cultural references of globalized media. Their depictions thus ranged in form from elaborations on traditional Maldivian specters to visualizations drawing on a global repertoire of ghostly images.

The bridge *jinni* eventually had its own Facebook page with a cover photo depicting a female *jinni*, along with a sea demon, a kind of a *furēta* (figure 6), rising from the water under the bridge. One Twitter user shared photoshopped images of Casper-like ghosts on the bridge, time-stamped past midnight, with the words "It's true" (figure 7). Other depictions include a typical *jinni* "bride," a traditional depiction of a *jinni* in

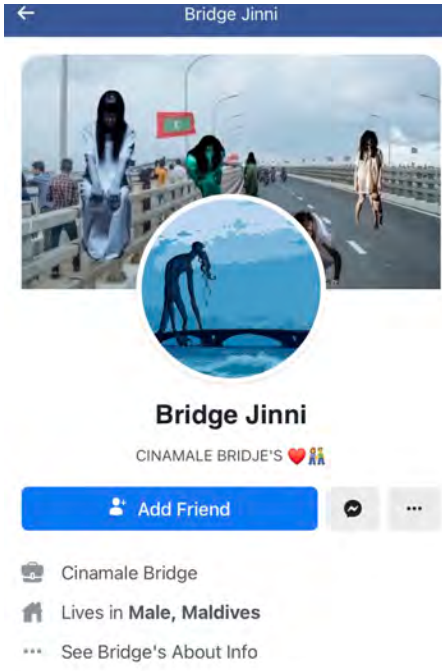


Figure 6. Screenshot of a Facebook page with the username “Bridge Jinni” (bridge ghost).

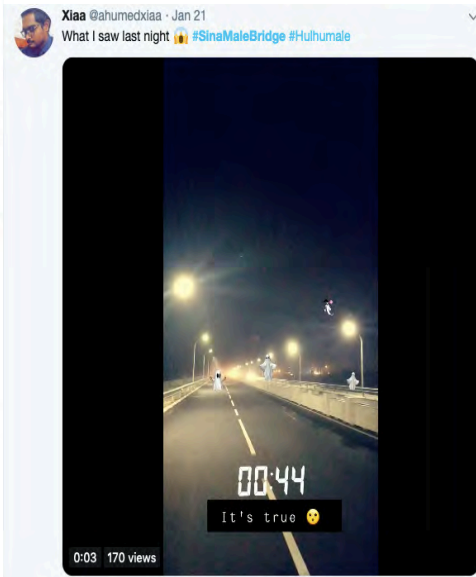


Figure 7. Screenshot of a Twitter user’s rendition of “Casper-like” ghosts on the bridge, time-stamped past midnight.

the form of a woman with long black hair flowing down past her hips and dressed in a red *libās*, a traditional Maldivian dress. Popular images of *jinnīn* are almost always female, if not nongendered in local accounts. Some contemporary Maldivian artistic renditions resembling female spirits prominent in Asian horror movies such as *Ju-On: The Grudge*, which was popular in the Maldives, also began to appear. Such mass-mediated images of feminine Asian spirits compelled some local commentators ask if the ghosts were therefore Chinese.

Belief in ghosts and the realm of the unseen (*al-ghayb*) is an integral component of Islamic cosmology, and the reality of its existence is established firmly in the Qur’ān. A belief in the existence of multiple worlds is broadly shared by Maldivian Muslims, with the corporeal and noncorporeal worlds coexisting in harmony on the condition that humans do not intervene or disrupt the world of the spirits.

*Jinnīn* are believed to linger in places that are generally unfrequented by humans, including jungles (*valutere*), beach points (*fuṭṭaru farāi*), and boundaries marking the separation of land from sea, particularly when such locations are enveloped in the dark of night. Maldivian traditions warn of the grave risks that come with disrupting the spaces occupied by ghostly *jinnīn*. The corporeal and noncorporeal worlds thus may exist in harmony, so long as human beings do not intervene or disrupt the supernatural spirit world. There is a pervasive sense of places that hold the potential for ghostly encounters, including forests, beaches, the ocean, and always in the dark of night. Imbalances in the cosmic system could result in spirits possessing human bodies as vessels in retaliation, or even on occasions of amorous encounters. While there are risks associated with disrupting the spaces owned by ghosts, at the same

time there is no empirical “map” that marks geographic locations known as ghost dwellings.

Stretching across the water between islands at a considerable height above sea level, the bridge between Male’ and Hulhumale’ falls into the category of places (generally unfrequented liminal spaces) that are dwellings of *jinnīn*, surrounded by the ocean, dark and eerie in the night. Negotiating space with *jinnīn* has long been central to the Maldivian Muslim experience and has been repeatedly reframed in line with changing historical contexts. Unique to the ghost stories told of the Sinamale’ Bridge is the incorporation of foreign ghosts, alluding to the presence of Chinese spirits.

### *Jinnīn, fanḍita, and Islamic cosmology in the Maldives*

The central theological doctrine of Islam is monotheism (*tawḥīd*). The recognition of this orthodox formulation as definitive of the tradition has, however, historically been understood by Muslims in ways that were nonexclusive to recognizing the existence of a number of nonphysical beings inhabiting the universe God has created. The Qur’ān makes specific mention of such entities. Indeed, it is held that revelations received by the Prophet were conveyed, at least in part, by way of angels. Beyond its shared participation in this cosmology with other Abrahamic faiths, the Qur’ān also references the existence of a class of creatures known in Arabic as *jinn*. These beings are widely held to be created of fire, not earth, and thus not to possess stable physical forms. As creatures of God endowed with a level of agency, *jinn* can be either Muslim or non-Muslim and may interact with human beings in range of different ways that could be benevolent, mischievous, or threatening. The wide range of possible manifestations and modes of interaction with *jinn* have facilitated the integration of elements of pre-Islamic local cultures from Morocco to Malaysia, and from the Caucasus to Cape Town, into a complex mosaic of Muslim cosmologies. In this, the Maldives is not an exception, as evidenced in the characterization of a range of noncorporeal beings as *dhevi* (Maniku 1988, 7).

In Arabic Islamic traditions, *jinn* exist within a cosmology of noncorporeal beings that have been categorized into diverse types (El-Zein 2009). While the general term used for such creatures is of Arabic origin and was brought to the Maldives with Islam, many of the beings classed as such have proper names derived from Indic and island sources (Maloney 2013, 51–52, 246–52). In the Dhivehi vernacular of Maldivian Muslim traditions, a range of different types of spirits have come to be classed as *jinnīn* (Maniku 1988, 2). Traditional narratives of the conversion of the islands to Islam prominently feature a supernatural being—the sea demon Ranna Maari, whose predations are ended by the power of an itinerant Islamic saint employing the power of the recited Qur’ān. The fearsome Ranna Maari, however, is but one “spirit from among the Jinn” (Romero-Frias 2012, 74–75).

The world of spirits and that of human beings are, moreover, permeable not only by *jinnīn* manifesting themselves to us here, but also by those of our world who master the secret knowledge of *fanḍita* often glossed in English as “magic” or “sorcery.”<sup>13</sup> *Fanḍita* is a term of Indic, rather than Arabic, etymology that serves as a portmanteau for a diverse assemblage of practices associated with the supernatural that could be used for protection, healing, or more nefarious purposes. The position of *fanḍita*

within Maldivian culture had traditionally come to be thoroughly integrated within a broadly Islamic framework. For, while certain practices of “black magic” (*sihuru*) are castigated by Islamic authorities, their existence and potency are not denied. In his encyclopedic prolegomenon to a universal history, for example, the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldun notes that even though Islamic law forbids the pursuit of “false sciences” of alchemy and astrology, they are nonetheless forms of knowledge to be reckoned with. As he writes, “no intelligent person doubts the existence of sorcery, because of . . . the influence which sorcery exercises. The Qur’ān refers to it” (Ibn Khaldun 2005, 393).

With the spread of Islam across the Indian Ocean world, such conceptions of magic took root alongside other cultural influences in the Maldives (Feener et al. 2021). Major medieval manuals of Islamic magic, such as the *Shams al-ma ‘arif*, in fact, remained popular in many Muslim societies across and beyond the Arab lands of the Middle East well into the modern period. Through such works, the science of letters (*‘ilm al-ḥurūf*) for the preparation of magic spells and talismans was integrated into diverse local practices to present “legitimate” forms of magic that drew on the language of the Qur’ān as a source of power.

The positioning of *fanḍita* within a traditional Divehi cosmology was summed up by one of Clarence Maloney’s interlocutors in the 1970s, who informed the visiting anthropologist that “*Fanḍita* is not *dīn* . . . but *dīn* permits it” (Maloney 2013, 243). This conception of magic as a science compatible with the belief and practice of Islam has, however, come under increasingly strident critique by modern religious reformers. The modern government of the Maldives no longer regulates the legitimate practice of *fanḍita* in the ways that were historically established under the sultanate, and today those suspected of such practice are condemned by upholders of contemporary conceptions of orthodoxy. This has not, however, driven *fanḍita* to extinction, and across the islands one continues to encounter diverse methods of attempting to access supernatural sources of power for healing, love magic, and other ends. Along with the practice of *fanḍita*, lively traditions of ritual observance—including shrine visits, the ritual recitation of non-Qur’ānic devotional texts, the use of protective amulets, divination, and belief in spirits such as *jinnīn*—were prominent features of religious life across the islands for centuries but disappeared precipitously over the second half of the twentieth century (Feener 2021a).

Following the abolition of the sultanate and the establishment of the Republic of the Maldives in 1968, the country’s engagement with public expressions of Islam turned to new directions. Under the presidency of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (1978–2008), the Maldives became increasingly engaged with transnational Islamic religious currents of *da’wa*-oriented modernist reform. Gayoom was a graduate of al-Azhar University in Cairo and, in line with his own commitment to modern reformist ideology, he opened the country to modern international Islamic organizations, which eventually came to channel influences from Islamic reform movements in Pakistan, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia into the Maldives (Amir 2011, 48). Gayoom’s agenda to centralize the state administration of Islam in the Maldives was, however, increasingly undermined as the number of Maldivian students sent abroad to study Islam swelled in the 1990s (Naseem 2020). Upon their return, some of them served to

channel different visions of “purified” Islam inspired by Salafi scripturalism, which has in the early twenty-first century come to be the dominant understanding of Islam in the Maldives.

In international scholarship, the story of Salafi ascendance in the country is generally framed in political science terms: from its oppositional stance and repression under Gayoom, to its flourishing in the more open democratic atmosphere of the country after the election of Mohamed Nasheed in 2008 and its institutionalization within the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, to its renewed independent opposition, and more extreme manifestations since the 2010s (for example, Amir 2011; Waha 2020).<sup>14</sup> What this dominant discourse centered on political contestation tends to miss, however, is the broader cultural impact that these changes in dominant conceptions of Islam have had across the island. This has included significant transformations in the ways in which modern Maldivians understand and imagine the range of ways in which humans might interact with *jinnīn*. It is in this context that stories about bridge *jinnīn* express images of the idea of the bridge as a fluid and complex space of potential encounter with the unknown.

#### *Connections to a foreign other*

In the physical realm, the construction of the bridge also afforded the entrance of outsiders to the islands. While the burgeoning number of arrivals from China—inclusive of laborers, managerial expats, and tourists—is a rather recent development, the Maldives have been connected to China, albeit somewhat sporadically, for centuries through circulations of cultural and commercial exchange. Since at least the fourteenth century, Chinese ships are recorded to have visited the Maldives, and Chinese government treasuries reportedly held caches of cowrie shells during the Yuan and Ming Periods (Yang 2019, 29–33). In the Maldives, traces of this trade are evidenced by the distribution of Chinese ceramic sherds (Carswell 1977).<sup>15</sup> Participation in Indian Ocean exchange networks that carried such ceramics facilitated the integration of the Maldives into an expanding medieval maritime Muslim world (Rockhill 1915, 67–79).

The significance of a Muslim identity for the Maldives for maritime trade with China is particularly pronounced in the account compiled by Ma Huan of the fifteenth-century visit to the islands by the armada under Zheng He. Like that commander of the Chinese armada on which he traveled, Ma Huan was a Chinese Muslim. He thus writes approvingly of the situation he found in the Islamicized islands of the Maldives, “the king, the chiefs, and the populace are all Muslims. Their customs are pure and excellent; [and] therefore they all obey the regulations of their religion” (Ma 1970, 149). This account focusing specifically on the Chinese Muslim dimension was, however, apparently the exception rather than the norm, particularly in reconfigurations of the Maldives’ maritime connections over the medieval and early modern periods.

Today, images of Chinese by the exclusively Muslim population of the Maldives do not reflect the same solidarity we read from Ma Huan’s account of shared cultural or religious space, despite the intensification of infrastructure investment and state-level ties. Chinese investment in development projects in the country has increased





Figure 8. Foreign labor at work on the construction of the Sinamale' Bridge. Photograph by R. Michael Feener.

dramatically since the proclamation of the Belt and Road Initiative by Xi Jinping in 2013. At the same time, there has been a massive influx of Chinese tourists—who today comprise the largest single national source of tourist revenue. While these short-term visitors to the country are largely isolated on resort islands, the economic boom that—together with PRC infrastructure investment—they help to fuel has also facilitated wider increases in labor migration to the country, including Bangladeshi laborers, Southeast Asian retail and hospitality staff, and white-collar expatriates from around the world. However, there are also longer-term Chinese residents in the Maldives, including thousands of laborers working on infrastructure projects (figure 8).

Chinese laborers still remain largely isolated from day-to-day interactions with Maldivians, thus fostering forms of distancing by exoticizing the other. One Maldivian news outlet, for example, described a small section of the Usfagandu district of the nation's capital as the “Chinatown of the Maldives,” depicting an image of foreign men eating with chopsticks (Moosa 2016). In other reports, this minority migrant worker community has been the object of public allegations of being disruptive to the biodiversity and natural environment of the islands, with, for example, tensions over incidents such as the circulation of photographs of shark fins hung out to dry on the walls of Chinese workers' barracks in clear violation of a ban that has been in place on shark fishing in the country since 2010.<sup>16</sup>

The Chinese government, for its part, generally seeks to avoid public perceptions of foreign interventions in local Maldivian affairs. Growing interactions with Chinese tourists visiting the country have nonetheless afforded complex and, at times, problematic interactions with Maldivians both in and around the resorts where most foreigners stay while visiting the region. On a much smaller scale, there have also been some efforts from the Chinese side that have been made toward the management of public perceptions, including the support of youth volunteers making short sojourns to introduce island communities to Chinese language and culture. These, however, have been rather limited in their scope and impact, and thus today for many Maldivians the most high-profile symbol of “friendship” between the two nations remains the Sinamale' bridge.

Popular Maldivian images of China today are dominated by images of tourist groups<sup>17</sup> as well as images of massive new—but already locally iconic—infrastructure projects like the Sinamale’ bridge. Nevertheless, Maldivians do not generally experience the bridge as in any way specifically “Chinese,” which is in contrast, say, to the way in which Naveeda Khan (2006) has characterized the effects of cultural preference expressed by Pakistanis in relation to the Lahore-Islamabad motorway.<sup>18</sup> Rather, the Sinamale’ Bridge has more often given rise to anxieties about the presence of the foreign and a perceived threat to national independence and sovereignty. The national debt to China, Chinese control of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota International Port, and accusations of China’s repression of its own Muslim population are topics that get reported in local newspapers and media and are frequent reminders to the Maldivian Muslim public of a constant threat to sovereignty and a consequent loss of a national identity rooted in Islam.

### *The geopolitics of infrastructure in the Maldives*

Emerging prevalent anxieties over interactions with outside “others” become manifest in experiences such as ghostly encounters, which also reflect broader geopolitical contexts involving a range of international players with sometimes complementary—but other times conflicting—interests both within and beyond the Maldives.<sup>19</sup> The tandem expansion of foreign investment in infrastructure and development projects by both China and Saudi Arabia over recent years has served to displace established relations between the islands and India, while at the same time introducing new entanglements.<sup>20</sup> James Dorsey (2018, 50) has highlighted the significance of increased cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia in both economic and military spheres, as both countries have expanded their strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, and both of these nations have had an increasingly pronounced impact upon domestic developments in the Maldives.

The tandem expansion of both Chinese and Saudi Arabian interests in the Maldives is significant and complicated (Kivimäki 2017). Major investment along with construction projects by both countries in recent years further reflects the evolution of their respective overlapping interests in the region. On one end of the bridge is a major Saudi construction project, where by late 2023 work was nearly complete on the King Salman Mosque. This 41,500-square-foot, six-storey mosque replaces the thirty-four-year-old Islamic Centre. Named Masjid-al-Sultan Muhammad Thakurufaanu Al Auzam, it is the largest mosque in the country, complete with an auditorium, multipurpose hall, library, classrooms, and seminar rooms. It also provides new facilities for the Maldives Centre for Qur’ān.

On the artificial island of Hulhumale’ at the other end of the Sinamale’ Bridge, in late 2023 the airport was also undergoing a major expansion. A new runway was built by Chinese contractors, and a new international terminal was built by the Saudi Binladen Group, who came in after the Maldives dropped ongoing negotiations with an Indian company for the contract.<sup>21</sup>

The public profiles of these two major international players in the foreign investment of infrastructure in the Maldives are, however, very different. As clearly symbolized by the Salman Mosque, and actively promoted in various other

ways across the islands, Saudi projects come packaged within an imaginary façade of Islamic solidarity with significant religious benefits, as was demonstrated, for example, when the Maldives *hajj* quota was raised in 2016. Saudi Arabia has invested considerably in both religious and educational institutions in the country, while also providing generous scholarships for Maldivians to study religion in Mecca and Medina (Dorsey 2018, 51).

The strategic positioning of the Saudis and Maldivians as Muslim co-religionists can, to a degree, mitigate the sense of otherness applied to the Chinese and legitimize the overseas funding of Saudi projects in the eyes of some Maldivians. Consequently, Saudi investments have been somewhat less politicized in the national media than have those of China and India. In contrast, foreign investments by China and India receive significant public expressions of opposition at times. In the eyes of their critics, India's military arrangements with the Maldives can be cast as compromising national security and sovereignty, while the looming debt to China incurred as a result of its infrastructure investment is eyed by some as a potential threat to national independence and, by extension, the country's Islamic identity.

Anxieties resulting from the expansion of major foreign investment projects by Saudi Arabia, China, and India in the Maldives, as well as the geopolitical rivalry caused by it, get increasingly discussed in relation to religion and religious nationalism in journalistic and popular discourse. This has simultaneously prompted a renewed and active promotion of a Maldivian national identity framed within the "one nation, one religion, one language" concept, with emphasis on "one religion" dominant in many settings (Saeedh 2018; Wille 2021). In this context, stories of encounters with *jinnīn* on the Sinamale' bridge can be viewed as components of complex place-making processes that are subconscious efforts to claim ownership of this massive piece of infrastructure by reclaiming both the physical space of the bridge as well as the "abstract spaces" (Lefebvre 1991) of supernatural encounters through an exercise of affective appropriation.

#### *Infrastructures of affect and supernatural encounters*

Stories of bridge *jinnīn* present a unique way of claiming ownership of the bridge by locals through conceptualizing this new space as one of encounters with entities already familiar from local tradition. This provides one way for local residents to ascribe culturally contextualized narratives to their relation with the bridge and some of the ways in which the liminal space it creates is experienced. These "hauntings of past inhabitation" (Cresswell 2015, 7) along the Sinamale' Bridge populate a space of modern infrastructure with supernatural agents long resident in traditional Maldivian imaginaries.

Infrastructures are "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space" (Larkin 2013, 328). The Sinamale' Bridge does that, and at the same time affords a space for negotiating new relationships and understandings of the connections between individual Maldivians and much larger worlds lying far beyond their immediate maritime realm. As these encounters are sometimes narrativized with reference to elements from Maldivian folklore, the bridge is also a space where a pre-developmental past reflecting traditional

cosmology and associated practices is re-engaged in a new, modern context. Ghost stories and accounts of uncanny experiences that are narrated across generations by many Maldivian Muslims are published locally and performed in school plays and cinematic productions. One popular *jinni* story passed down orally and later documented is that of the Araamagu Dhonkamana (*arāmagu donkamana*), a story rooted in the island of Kaafu Atoll Kaashidhoo, of a man who is seduced by the voice of a woman he comes across while in the forest (Sadiq 2010).

One day, a man was cutting wood in the *valutere* (wooded area of the island) and reciting a particular genre of Divehi poetry known as *raivaru* as he went about his work. He began to hear a woman's voice beautifully reciting in response to the lines of his poem. Intrigued, he looked around and found the woman seated on a fallen tree branch. He was so entranced by the woman that he took her home and married her. The couple was then blessed with several children over the years that followed. One day, a religious man visited them at home, and upon seeing the woman immediately recognized her for what she was, a *jinni* in human form. The religious man later advised the husband to secretly (1) observe her as she gathered food for the house, (2) observe her in the kitchen, and (3) observe her when she walked. These are the three things that the woman, Araamagu Dhonkamana, had made the husband promise never to do as a condition for their marriage.

Nevertheless, the husband spied upon his wife while she was taking her bath and saw that she was dropping her long black hair into the open well and pulling out fresh fish, which explained how they always had such an abundance of food in the house. He then surreptitiously watched her as she was cooking and was astonished to see her using her feet—instead of wood—to fuel the fire. Finally, he watched carefully when she walked. He noticed that she had two thorns on the back of her heel and that her feet did not actually touch the ground as she moved. When the wife realized that her husband had broken his vows and observed these things, she was saddened and confronted him. She then assumed her actual form and took their children away to the world of the *jinnīn*. In his misery the husband lost consciousness and woke up to find men praying over him (Sadiq 2010).

Such intimate affairs between humans and *jinnīn* are considered to be very real possibilities within traditional Maldivian cosmology. Similar stories of relationships with *jinnīn* attracted to human beings can still be heard today. Many spirit entities known from Maldivian folklore are female, with one of the most popular images being that of a *handī*, which takes the form of a type of female figure with long black tresses wearing the red *libās* worn by Maldivian women (Maniku 1988, 18). She, along with other Maldivian *jinnīn*, is known to appear under the cover of darkness, often in spaces of transgression. When humans find themselves trespassing (accidentally or on purpose) into haunted spaces where the worlds of the everyday and the supernatural overlap, *jinnīn* can make their presence known in ways that may temporarily challenge, but ultimately assert, the demarcations of distinct realms.

As with the story of the female *jinni* recounted in *Vaguthu News* cited at the outset and Rasheed's taxi-driving tale of his encounter with a *jinni* on the bridge, supernatural narratives are framed within well-established paradigms of Islamic cosmology and Maldivian tradition. Such tales comprise elements of a cultural repertoire for

interpreting the eeriness and unease of trespass that can come with some of the new mobility afforded by megaprojects undertaken to improve infrastructure.

Brian Larkin has characterized the aesthetics of infrastructure in terms that go beyond representation to explore dimensions of “embodied experience governed by the ways infrastructures produce the ambient conditions of everyday life” (Larkin 2013, 336). Through a range of embodied practices, material cultural production, and discursive formulations, which would include the narration and interpretation of ghost stories, collective memory is formed in ways that Jan Assman (1995) has demonstrated can be deployed as tools for creating communal connections in new and unfamiliar landscapes.

As Saeedh (2018) has argued elsewhere, examining the ideas, emotions, and values played out in the physical and abstract spaces of infrastructure projects in the Maldives provides ample opportunity for understanding some of the complex ways individuals negotiate their lived experiences and senses of belonging in relation to the changing landscapes around them. Ghost stories such as those presented here help to map the novel space of the Sinamale’ within familiar cosmological and narrative frameworks. This kind of place-making serves as a “way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world” (Cresswell 2015, 18). The multifaceted ways that conceptions of modernity and development are internalized, interpreted, and shaped through everyday articulations in such discursive deployments demonstrate the power infrastructure commands in the conceptualization of identity with relation to place. It is through such powerful and haunting narratives that the bridge is made meaningful not just as infrastructure, but as a place with social and cultural meaning.

#### *Reconfiguring place: Haunted infrastructure*

Haunted infrastructures, such as the bridge and the myths around it, speak to existing anxieties of the specter of the foreign, the outside other introduced by modernity and development. Discourses around the invasion of the time-space continuum of noncorporeal beings by humans and vice versa, along with the supposed disruption of cosmologies and the balance between the spirit world and the human world—or more precisely the balance between the shared world of the spirits and humans—could be argued to be native methods of claiming ownership of new and burgeoning infrastructures that transform the known landscapes.

Building upon Jacques Derrida (1994), Stephen Frosh (2012) has argued that hauntings and encounters with otherworldly beings are manifestations of repressed memories from the past that are transmitted to the present. From his perspective, *jinnīn* serve as vessels through which connections to the past are engaged in the present. By considering haunting ghostly encounters’ relationship with infrastructures along such lines of temporal metaphor, theoretical attention is drawn to connecting historical imaginations to contemporary experiences, thereby literally “bridging” the past and the present to a possible future. However, the appearance of specters on the Sinamale’ Bridge, a new infrastructure space with no tangible history attached to it, presents a somewhat different context from that often associated with ruins, which have featured at the center of the work of Ann L. Stoler (2008), Emma Varley, and Saiba Varma (2018) on the spaces of spectral encounters. In the case

of the Sinamale' Bridge, however, we are dealing with a "new space" that does not carry such historical weight. As Andrew Alan Jonson (2014) has said of the hauntings of abandoned modern developments in Chiang Mai, such spaces too can become inhabited by the denizens of traditional cosmologies during times of disruptive transition. Our approach here to such ghostly encounters is likewise oriented toward mapping spaces where human actors can articulate a range of desires, anxieties, and ideological motivations arising even in newly constructed infrastructure spaces.

In her studies of ritual gift exchange, Nancy Munn (1977, 1990) highlights the symbolic work through which people continuously remake themselves through processing their experiences, while at the same time reconfiguring the spatial and temporal dimensions of the world they inhabit. Places with historical significance and subjective meanings imposed upon them by people represent deep-rooted connections between humans and their aspirational dreams, desires, and hopes. New infrastructures can have historical meanings placed upon them through such exercises of reconfiguration. As Gordon (1977, xvi) evocatively highlights, "Haunting raises spectres, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future." Discourses around the dialogic invasion and disruption of the time-space continuum inhabited by noncorporeal beings as well as by their human counterparts allow for defining the shared world of humans and spirits. They also provide a space for an exploration of the ways in which some Maldivians attempt to make sense of the new materiality of the built environment and how their bodies engage one another within these spaces.

As adumbrated above and as María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (2013, 395) have noted, haunted spaces are, by their very nature, "anything but empty." Judith Richardson's study of the haunted landscapes of the Hudson Valley highlights in particular the ways in which places of passage become sites of disconcerting encounter. For her, zones of movement are "profoundly reflected in the frequent haunting of sites of transition, such as roads [and] bridges . . ." (Richardson 2013, 496). In our case study, populating the vast and previously untraversable span between two islands with *jinnīn* serves to enfold the new structure within narratives that can be drawn upon to frame some of the complex ways in which the bridge space is experienced. As is highlighted by recent cultural studies work on what is now labeled as "spectralities," accounts of the haunting of desolate landscapes demonstrate that such spaces are far from being void spaces, since unseen forces may animate them (Blanco and Peeren 2013). In fact, ghosts and haunting are actively invoked to challenge the production of new power regimes that come with development, as Joshua Comaroff (2007) has shown to be the case with Singapore's Sago Lane.

The distinct social and cultural character of the Sinamale' Bridge described by its users gives it distinct properties that are uniquely perceived by those who move across the liminal space it creates. The affective extension of this massive new infrastructure space also extends beyond the physical location of the bridge, to a conception of place constructed through mediated discourses in ways that contribute to the shaping of both public narratives and personal experiences of the bridge locale (Agnew 1987). Social media circulations of *jinnīn* depictions in the comments sections of news articles, as well as personal stories like that of our taxi driver,

contribute to the reconfiguration of sense of place and belonging. Places are “socially constructed by the people who live in them and know them; they are politicized, culturally relative, and historically specific multiple constructions” (Rodman 1992, 164). Timelines framing interpretation are, moreover, complexly configured. Akhil Gupta has prompted us to think about the temporality of infrastructure beyond the telos of project completion to its phases of decay, ruination, and repair. He writes, “Once finished, infrastructures occupy a dead time, an inertial existence . . .” (Gupta 2018, 73). As Edward S. Casey (1996) points out, place *happens* through the actions and interactions of bodies. Affective dimensions of infrastructure produced in the built environment allude to notions of community, sociality, religion, and nationalism. In the context of uncertainties created by new political and economic developments, the Sinamale’ Bridge facilitates the carriage not only of cars and commodities but also hopes, dreams, and fears.

## Conclusion

Viewing the bridge from the historical shore of the ancient “Sultan’s Island,” one traces its long straight lines across the water to another major element of the modern infrastructure of the Maldives: Velana International Airport. The Sinamale’ Bridge has inadvertently created a space in which local experiences of infrastructure are elaborated by individuals through complex engagements with diverse elements of Maldivian Muslim cosmology and symbolic elaborations of locality and transgression that complicate any neat linear narratives about modernizing development and “progress.” Ethnographic explorations of the social and religious dimensions of the bridge can reveal some of the critical spaces for inquiry and social critique opened up by infrastructure projects, forming a vital part of the interdisciplinary tool kit required to inform nuanced analyses of the multifaceted impact that such massive interventions can have on local communities and individuals beyond the oft-discussed issues of mobility, connection, and development.<sup>22</sup>

Material forms of infrastructure features such as water meters, power cables, and post offices have been studied to explore the ways material transformations impact and shape social worlds to create and open new spaces of engagement (Mrázek 2002; Harvey and Knox 2012; Pederson 2011; Anand 2011). Looking at certain intersecting spaces such as that of a haunted Sinamale’ Bridge offers something like a wormhole through which elements of the past are conjured into the present, which then allows for ideas, thoughts, values, and belief systems to be reconstituted into contemporary and even future contexts. In so doing, our haunting approach may help to highlight the affective and cultural qualities of built structures, technological innovations, and financial investments. The ethnographic study of ghost stories coupled with historical inquiry associated with haunted infrastructure and their meditated circulations should, therefore, be considered an integral part of the interdisciplinary toolkit necessary for the exploration of the impacts of development on understandings and experiences of religion, and vice-versa (Feener and Fountain 2018). More proximately, recognizing the creative deployment of elements from premodern cosmologies and local narrative traditions in processes of the contemporary making of place around

the Sinamale' Bridge reveals significant but understudied aspects of contemporary Maldivian experiences and imaginations of development, religion, and identity.

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#### NOTES

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2. This is reworked from Saeedh (2018).
3. President of the Republic of Maldives Mr. Abdulla Yameen, as reported in *Maldives Independent* (2015). The speech can be viewed on YouTube (see Presidency Maldives 2018).
4. Mr. Wang Xiaotao, Chinese government special envoy, as reported in *China Daily HK*, August 31, 2018. See also the press release issued by the President's Office of the Republic of Maldives (2018).
5. There is a massive and continuously expanding literature on the BRI, and it is not within the scope of this article to systematically review even the sub-section of that touching on the Maldives. Despite its small landmass and lack of export commodities, the small island nation is of particular foreign policy interest to China for the strategic deep-water channels that cut through its sovereign territory facilitating direct routes from East Africa and Arabia to the Bay of Bengal.



6. In an effort to control the increasing number of accidents, the government made helmets mandatory, which did significantly reduce the traffic on the bridge to only essential riders, as well as leisure riders. The experience of wearing helmets was novel to many locals and diminished the experience of *burujehun* (joy rides), which subsequently reduced the bridge traffic during the day to more utilitarian purposes.
7. In the Dhivehi language, the plural form of *jinni* is marked by the elongation of the terminal vowel and the addition of a silent /n/ (*nūn sukūn*). Here *jinni* will be used for the singular and *jinnīn* to indicate a plural.
8. In the Maldives the word *jinni* is used inclusively to refer to a wide range of supernatural beings, including what we would commonly describe as “ghosts” in English. This includes ghosts believed to be manifestations of a deceased person, or ghosts that are a nonhuman, spirit, or demon—namely, not the spirit of a deceased person (Baker and Bader 2014). This article also discusses the place of *jinnīn* in Maldivian Muslim cosmology in more detail.
9. Translated from Dhivehi to English based on Thoiba Saeedh’s field notes.
10. In the Maldivian culture, *jinni* refers to the supernatural beings or spirits below the level of angels and devils, drawing from Islamic cosmology. There are several classes of *jinni* and other supernatural beings in Maldivian folklore, including *furēta* (demons), *avattehi kujjaa* (shape shifters), *baburu kujjaa* (“black child”), and various forms of *Dhevi* (Manik 1988).
11. Black magic (*sihuru*) and occultism (*fanḍita*) have been established within Maldivian Muslim traditions for centuries. The relation to such practices and the belief in *jinni* are discussed further in Rehan (2019).
12. A local legend of a supernatural creature inhabiting Hulhumale’ that is described in terms reminiscent of the American mythical creature named Bigfoot.
13. *Fanḍita* is a magic-religious belief system in the Maldives, drawing on local island beliefs and traditional medicine practices (*dhivehibeys*) that were incorporated into Muslim cosmology following the conversion of the islands in the twelfth century. Maloney (2013) describes *Fanḍita* in the Maldives as magic or religious science, of both “white” and “black” varieties, performed by magicians, herbalists, astrologers, or witches, and sometimes involving the conjuring of *jinni*.
14. This includes both the establishment of puritan separatist religious communities such as that on R. Maduvvari (Naseem 2020), and the enthusiasm that a number of Maldivians have expressed in joining violent Islamist campaigns abroad—as is often remarked upon in analyses of ISIS volunteerism.
15. The Carswell study collection of ceramics from the Maldives held at the Ashmolean Museum has been fully digitized by the Maritime Asia Heritage Survey; see Feener (2021b).
16. For more on this, see *Maldives Independent* (2018).
17. On the rapid rise in Chinese tourism to the Maldives, see Robinson (2015, 91–93).
18. Khan’s insights here have been discussed and further developed by Larkin (2018, 196).
19. As Andrew Johnson (2014, 8) has remarked in his work on the ruins of progress in Chiang Mai, one may view “stories of ghosts and hauntings as expressing anxiety about the possibility of knowing for sure whether one has actually attained progress.”

20. This development of a 6.74 km over-water bridge aims to connect Male' City with three other islands in the Greater Male' Region in what is to date the single largest infrastructure project in the country, and will eventually surpass the Sinamale' bridge project in both scale and cost.
21. See ProTenders (2018) and *Maldives Independent* (2016). We will be discussing aspects of Indian infrastructure projects in the Maldives in another article.
22. For more on the politics of mobility and its manipulation by island elites in the Maldives, see Wille (2018).

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## Savoring Slackness in Kingston

### Independent Japanese Tourists and Jamaican Dancehall

This article focuses on Japanese travelers between the ages of twenty and forty years old who come to Jamaica driven by their passion for its dancehall music scene. They are working-class sojourners alongside a smattering of expatriates looking for an experience that they view as affirmative, authentic, and, at times, escapist. Slackness is a Jamaican vernacular concept underscoring a resistance to hegemonic cultural and social norms, especially in relation to sexuality, and is central to dancehall. It plays a key role in drawing these Japanese visitors to the scene and ultimately Jamaica. While most men tend to view their stay in terms of acquiring subcultural capital, the desires of women are more diverse. Their varied expectations of and experiences in Kingston's dancehall scene, and engaging with its many sites—the city, the hostels, and the clubs—are windows to questioning what Japaneseness and sociocultural belonging means to many of these individuals. Engagement with slackness ranges from a brief respite to a complete break from convention and national expectations in Japan. In the end, for the dedicated follower, dancehall acts as a resistance to or even insulates individuals from dominant cultural expectations.

Keywords: dancehall—identity—Jamaica—Japan—slackness—subculture—tourism

Before the global Covid pandemic of 2019–2022, tourism was the fastest-growing sector of the Jamaican economy, making up approximately 50 percent of the nation's foreign exchange (*The Japan Times* 2020). The majority of tourists in Jamaica come from North America, the UK, Germany, and, within the region, the Cayman Islands. However, from 2018 there was a renewed push within the Jamaica Tourist Board to bring in more visitors from Asia, specifically Japan and India (*Jamaica Observer* 2019). Historically, Jamaica was an attractive destination for Japanese tourists due in part to roots reggae drawing fans since the 1970s (Sterling 2016). This tourism heyday ended when Japan's bubble economy burst in 1989 and extended recessions followed. However, at that time there were about twenty thousand Japanese tourists coming to Jamaica per year, making it easy to understand why the Jamaican government is keen to retarget them.

Japanese tourists are viewed as desirable in general. While they demand high levels of customer service and tend to stay for short spans of time, on the flipside they are mature, presumed to have a high level of disposable income, and are willing to spend lavishly, especially on local goods used as travel gifts (*omiyage*) (Guichard-Anguis and Moon 2009). A typical example here might be package tour participants engaged in a flag-following fortnight-long cruise or a similar well-defined, well-orchestrated vacation. Such travel expectations, domestic and international, are common and widely promoted in Japan. They are seen and sold as a short period of respite from the workspace, a way to bolster cultural capital, *iyashi* (healing), relaxation, or even scoping a location with an eye to it being an affordable long-term retirement option (Ono 2018). The networks in place for such Japanese tourists to comfortably and efficiently navigate many countries—often minimally engaging with members of the host country—constitute a highly developed and profitable business for both Japanese and foreign companies willing to adapt their practices to suit Japanese guests (Chen 2018; Satsuka 2015). Though some of this holds true in what follows, there are networks, better described as personal meshworks (Ingold 2011), that specifically cater to Japanese dancehall enthusiasts; the travelers discussed herein do not fit the aforementioned stereotypical norms. For a start, they are younger, poorer, and more independent. Moreover, they have different motivations, expectations, and objectives than the average Japanese sojourner. Indeed, for reasons highlighted in this article, it is difficult to even imagine the possibility of packaged dancehall tours

in Kingston. More to the point, part of the attraction for these particular tourists is the impromptu and unpredictable nature of the city and scene.

This article focuses on a group of predominately working-class Japanese, generally between the ages of twenty and forty. Unlike the typically targeted package tourist, they are not coming to Jamaica drawn to the ease and safety of travel or relaxation. Japan and Jamaica can be juxtaposed via numerous political, social, and cultural contrasts, as highlighted in this article. But starting with logistics, Jamaica is not a simple getaway. The countries are on near opposite sides of the globe, and there are no direct flights from Japan to Jamaica. Nor is safety a draw. Jamaica topped the global murder rate in 2005. Indeed, in 2018 a state of emergency had to be declared in an attempt to curb a spree of murders. The island has a violent crime rate “three times higher than the average for Latin America and the Caribbean” (USDS 2019; also see Thomas 2011). Japanese are particularly vulnerable in this regard. They stand out culturally and phenotypically, and are frequently armed with poor English-speaking skills.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the young tourists I describe seek out many of the very areas that the Jamaican government actively attempts to keep tourists from. These dancehall aficionados spend much of their time, usually at night, in the poorer areas of the capital city of Kingston. Hungry for music first and “lifestyle” second, the relentless energy with which they consume Jamaican popular culture is perceived by locals as insatiable.

Dancehall is a popular musical genre that can at least be traced back to 1960s ska. But perhaps the best way to think about it for the case at hand is as a product of contemporary musical glocalization (Hope 2013; Galvin 2014; Sterling 2010). As a domestic product it comes from toasting and dub, essentially talking over a *riddim* (rhythm) track. Artists like U Roy or King Yellowman are the grandfathers of the genre. However, the Jamaican diaspora, notably to the UK and the US, has long cycled influences to and from the small island nation (Veal 2007). Thus, American rap alongside UK trance and dub, or even earlier drum and bass, with a heavy sprinkling of funk, R and B, and soul on either side of Atlantic, has been redistilled with local influences into a distinctive Jamaican sound and aesthetic. In sum, dancehall—for its good, bad, and ugly—is an undeniably unique and popular music form. Its heartland is Jamaica, but it is increasingly heard, produced, and influential internationally (Ferguson et al. 2016; Sterling 2010).

An important point stressed in this ethnography is that these young Japanese are not interested in dancehall music alone but in the attitudes that are wedded to it in its heartland, Jamaica. The majority that I interviewed and observed over a month-long stint in Kingston in February-March 2014, another month in March-April 2017, and at a range of dancehall and rap events held in Tokyo and Sapporo from 2014 to 2020 are looking for something they contend is decidedly lacking in everyday Japan—in a word, *slackness*. Slackness is a slippery vernacular concept that is central to the ethos of dancehall music. The upshot of Jamaican cultural studies scholar Carolyn Cooper’s four-page definition and theorization is:

Slackness is a contestation of conventional definitions of law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency . . . the antithesis to uppercase Culture . . . it challenges the rigid status quo of social exclusivity and one-sided moral



authority valorised by the Jamaican elite. Slackness demarcates a space for alternative definitions of . . . [small-c] . . . “culture.” (Cooper 2004, 2–6)

There are alternative ways that one might frame Cooper’s statement without the use of uppercase culture; for example, “resisting hegemonic power structures and dominant social norms” would seem to equally capture the reactionary side of this dynamic or resistance without relying on the fraught terrain of what defines “big-C” culture. Cui Chen (2020) offers a Japanese reading of *shuryū bunka* (common or mainstream culture) and *subkaruchā* (subculture) and notes that among Japanese researchers, subculture is often conflated with *otaku* (often rendered as “nerd,” but “fanatic” might be a better description) interests or short-lived fads in fashion. Nevertheless, culture is used by Cooper, and it is also used herein as conceptual shorthand, because in the context of Japan, dancehall can clearly be defined as subcultural. As in Dick Hebdige’s original conceptualization of subculture, there is, alongside the critique of hegemonic aesthetic and moral concerns, and what constitutes proper attire or sexual agency for example, the association of underclass or outcaste belonging (Hebdige 1988). Moreover, dedication to dancehall is not a fad; for many it is a lasting obsession. As noted in this article, from dancers to DJs, Japanese devoted to dancehall overwhelmingly make ends meet as precarious workers, and dancehall and slackness are viewed by them as concomitant. They come together as a particular entwined ideological and aesthetic package. And I will argue that they are clearly viewed and consciously utilized as forms of subcultural capital, social critique, and resistance (Thornton 1995), certainly for participants devoted enough to make a dancehall pilgrimage to Jamaica.

As with Jamaican fans, the attraction to slackness and dancehall is clearly divided with regard to female and male cisgender norms among Japanese devotees. For young women the attraction is most evidently expressed via physical displays of hyper-heterosexuality, self-assertiveness, and an identification with idealized Jamaican working class, or even underclass (Chevannes and Levy 2001), women. As noted in what follows, this is a stereotype held by many informants—the presumed passivity of “typical” Japanese women in contrast to themselves as “different” and inspired by their Jamaican sistren who they see as confident, outspoken, self-reliant, and empowered (see D.A.R.Y.L. 2014 and Ross 2009 for similar arguments). This idealized image has likely emerged through the commonality of working-class single mothers and “matrifocal” families in Jamaica, whereby men, in a nation with rampant underemployment, can be seen as a liability, “just another mouth to feed,” rather than financial asset or marker of stability (Mohammed 1998, 25–28). I believe that one could also make a domestic comparison with *gyaru* (gal) and more specifically *kurogyaru* (black gal) subculture, wherein revealing attire, provocative behavior, and overt displays of heterosexuality are central, but one key difference is that involvement in it is seen as a phase, as a short-term resistance to norms and not a lasting lifestyle (Arai 2012).

Similarly, for young men dancehall and slackness are a critique of dominant forms of masculine sociocultural capital in Japan, such as education or employment status (Cook 2016). What I frame as slackness following Cooper, Ninomiya calls a youthful reverence for *baddomanizumu* (being a bad man), a resistance to hegemonic social

norms that eventually, often through a transformative medium like Christian faith, become a different type of working-class or underclass respectability in Jamaica (Austin-Broos 1997; Ninomiya 2012). But in the context of Japan, as noted in what follows, there is often no common transformation. In the cases of the DJs that I met, there was no vocalized inclination toward getting out of dancehall and becoming “respectable” in broader Japanese society. Instead, efforts were directed toward being respected in the dancehall community in Kingston and by extension back in Japan.

Thus, dedication to dancehall functions as a gender-divided resistance to, or I will argue in some cases a continuing “immunization” from (Esposito 2012), *futsū no Nihonjin* (“typical Japaneseness,” or more accurately “popularly self-typified Japaneseness”) and sociocultural expectations (Hansen 2018). In short, for women dancehall and slackness are a form of self-aware and self-empowered embodied defiance of covert misogyny—of sexism disguised in Japan through lip service to gender equality while entrenched conservatism remains unchanged. For men it allows for an accumulation of subcultural social-cultural capital in a drive toward authenticating a socially affirmed status as selector or DJ back in Japan: in sum, becoming a selector who has been to the Jamaican heartland and made personal and embodied connections in it. Such subcultural status is unavailable to Japanese men who subscribe to the dominant masculine ethos whereby rule-following, conservatism, and salaried employment play a central role in what traditionally makes and marks “proper” Japanese masculinity (Dasgupta 2013).

Conservatism aside, ask a Japanese dancehall aficionado, male or female, about what divides Japan and Jamaica and the terms *shai* or *hazukashī* (shy or bashful) and *hoshuteki* (conservative) are bound to come up as points of contention.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, dancehall and slackness are an unlikely domain for the reserved Japanese traditionalist. And slackness is a social statement rooted in an essence or a feel that is Jamaican and made all the more powerful if experienced in the flesh in the scene in Jamaica (Henriques 2010). I emphasize the word “essence” here, because it is clear that many Jamaican tropes in dancehall cannot be directly transported into the Japanese scene, such as violent homophobia or gun violence. Similar limitations have been noted in other imported and adapted music subcultures in Japan like hip hop (Klien 2020) or hardcore punk (Letson 2020) or in other locations where dancehall has made inroads, for example Germany (Pfleiderer 2018) or Singapore (Woods 2020). But as this other research also argues, the tension between mimesis, or copy, and adaptation does not detract from the seriousness with which participants take their travels to Jamaica, dancehall music, the sociocultural stance of slackness, or the formation of individual subcultural identities.

### **The cisgender divide and the lure of slackness**

The young Japanese males who travel to Jamaica are *furitā* (individuals in part-time or freelance employment) and, when interviewed, they nearly all self-identified as selectors or DJs. In Japan they get by with irregular construction jobs or work in the service industry, but their passion is music—with Jamaican dancehall and its booming

sound systems often their central interest. Intriguingly, in terms of conventional status markers in Japan, of the eighteen young men I have interviewed, I have yet to meet one with a university degree or who is not directly working in the music industry in Japan. Women travelers are more diverse. Many are dancers with modes of Jamaican dance topping their repertoire, though many are also interested in hip hop. I also met two women who were DJs. Similar to their male counterparts, women held disposable “pink-collar” service jobs either inside or outside Japan. Of the twenty-six I have interviewed, their jobs ranged from being pachinko parlor workers in Yokohama to working as au pairs in New York. Unlike the uniformity of men being DJs, some women did not claim to be serious dancers or DJs but just liked the sound and image of Jamaican popular music. Moreover, in Kingston I interviewed one Japanese graduate student on vacation from a university in the US and one woman who had just finished an undergraduate degree in development studies in Japan. Still as a minority within this group, neither of these two women were particularly drawn to dancehall music, nor did they identify as dancers or DJs at all. In sum, they were just interested in music events as part of their overall travel experience in Jamaica. Nevertheless, though clearly not statistically significant, given these numbers, a trend of marginalization, even if it is self-marginalization, is apparent. Statistically speaking, approximately 52 percent of Japanese are expected to enter college or university (MEXT 2019). Thus, Jamaica and its dancehall scene clearly attracts undercast Japanese young adults, at least young adults with precarious employment potential in Japan. But why?

Beyond these types of uncertain, make-ends-meet employment, a largely shared educational background, and the typical split between males as DJs and women as dancers (though as noted there are a minority of women who DJ, and, though not encountered in my fieldwork, men who dance are becoming more common), there are other gendered dimensions to this music-oriented tourism. For example, and as explained in what follows, the males in my sample view their time in Jamaica, often with a shorter stopover in New York or Miami, as an opportunity to accumulate social-cultural capital: they collect rare recordings, meet other DJs, pay Jamaican artistes for dubplates, and simply want to “see and be seen” in the heartland of the contemporary Jamaican music scene.<sup>3</sup> This notion of accumulating subcultural capital can also be seen in research focusing predominantly on Japanese male dancehall artists attempting to make New York their base (McCoy-Torres 2018). In this case, however, all of the males I met intended to return to Japan, their music careers authenticated and status upped by their experiences and connections made in the home of dancehall and slackness.

For most young women, their time spent in Jamaica is viewed more as a break from conservatism and convention, especially regarding culturally particular hegemonic gendered expectations, a point returned to later in the article.<sup>4</sup> Yet, these young women often spend more time in Jamaica than their male counterparts, usually a few weeks or longer. They also frequently explore the country outside the city of Kingston and its immediate attractions. Another key difference is that a number of the women who enter Jamaica (fifteen out of the twenty-six I interviewed) do so with an eye open toward romantic heterosexual connections and in some cases (4) hope

for permanent residence with a Jamaican partner. To be clear, I am not suggesting they are engaged in a form of sex tourism, a common attraction for decades in the Caribbean. The point here is to underscore that their motivations are diverse, and their willingness to spend a longer time in Jamaica is more common than that of the Japanese men I encountered. For example, I have never interviewed a young Japanese man proclaiming interest in Jamaican women. They are in Jamaica to make musical connections first and foremost with eyes always fixed on a return to Japan. But many Japanese women are open to—and open about—finding Jamaican romantic partners. As explained in the following section, Japanese women are fetishized as sexual objects by Jamaican men in ways Japanese men are not, at least not audibly, by women—whether Japanese or Jamaican. Interesting in this case is the flipping of the typified model of transnational migration. In this context, it is not young men seeking opportunities, sexual or career, in a G10 “promised land” but a number of young women open and willing to forego life in an affluent, post-industrial G10 country and actively opting for love and life in a developing one.

Finally, for both men and women, the lure of Jamaica, specifically its dancehall culture, is enduring. As in the case study that follows, travelers are often not one-off visitors, and some return once or twice per year for several years. To varying degrees, these young Japanese immerse themselves in Jamaican society as a form of resistance, immunization, or even outright escape from culturally normative expectations in Japan (Guarné and Hansen 2018), seeking slackness (cf. Cooper 2004 or Stolzoff 2000). And Japanese are well regarded. They are respected and even valorized by the Jamaicans directly involved in the dancehall music scene. In my daily trailing of Japanese frequenting, or occasionally working in, the island’s restaurants, hostels, and dancehall spaces, stories of Japanese enthusiasm for music have fostered a particular place for Japanese in Jamaican culture. As one record store owner in Kingston recounted, “Man, dem Japanese know more about Jamaican music than me! They teach me all the time looking for this or that artiste.” Chuckling, he then added, “They are more Jamaican than Jamaicans, you understand?”

### **Placing Japaneseness and locating dancehall in Kingston**

There is, thus, little doubt that dancehall in Jamaica attracts a certain demographic of dedicated young Japanese. There are people from all over the world interested in this music, but young Japanese may have more at stake through passionate involvement in the scene. While it is common in North America or Europe for young people to work odd jobs, travel, take a “gap year” and follow their dreams before success and/or settling, most young Japanese fear the employment repercussions of taking even a month out of employment, education, or even social relationships to “just” travel (Cook 2016; Kato 2009). There are simply fewer Japanese who feel they can leisurely “hang out” outside of Japan without serious negative ramifications on their future social or economic lives (Kosugi 2008).

There are several reasons for this, but two key issues are at the core in what follows. First, Japan has since been eclipsed by the rise of China and the relative increase in affluence of other Asian nations. Hence, Japan’s future tends to be

perceived by many young Japanese today as lacking hope (Genda 2005), undergirded by social, cultural, and economic precariousness (Allison 2013). Second, Japanese institutions (here widely defined) and governmental policy tend to “talk the talk” of internationalization and global experience—for instance the word *gurōbaru* (global) is deployed like an administrative mantra in education—but in fact there is very little value placed on independent long-term travel and the critical, and often uncommon, cosmopolitan perspectives that this kind of experience can foster (Hansen 2016). The safest route to security for urban Japanese, despite demographic trends and trying economic times, is not to stray from the past proven path of doing well in school; getting into a national university; from where, if lucky, one can move to a big company job; and then onto marriage as a working father or stay-at-home mother (Guarné and Hansen 2018). These aspirations remain for many young adults, despite the increasing difficulty in actually following these steps. In terms of dominant social norms, this is how young men and women, hoping to thrive in what is still viewed as a predominantly middle-class country, *should* perform Japaneseness.

But as noted, there are an increasing number of working-class or precarious Japanese young adults for whom university or a stable company career are unlikely to be a part of life, for example precariat who are not in education, career goal employment, or training (labeled NEET). Unsurprisingly, such individuals increasingly resist the rigidity of an elite-dominated, aging society that demands (now despite the lack of perks or security) that they should act like everyone else—suggesting that they should settle, conform, *gambaru* (do one’s best), and *gaman suru* (endure) with an air of *shikataganai* (things cannot be helped). Many find their place in an abundance of music subcultures that question hegemonic structures in Japan, such as hardcore punk (Letson 2020), hip-hop (Klien 2020), and of course dancehall and reggae (Manabe 2015; Sterling 2010, 2016). Here young people find their *zoku* or “tribe” and make a stand against big-C culture like corporate J-pop convention or dominant sociocultural expectations. For those devoted to slackness and dancehall, travel to Jamaica is a resistance. It is viewed as a sort of life affirming and agentive move, a rebellion against hegemonic expectations that offers an alternative vision of what it is to be Japanese. But what kind of Japaneseness emerges is an interesting question.

Elephant Man’s pioneering dancehall hit “Chiney T’ing” can function as a summary of dancehall as a music genus, slackness, and where both gender and Japaneseness fit within it.

Intro:

Elephant Man: Jano, watch dem two, watch dem two like Japanese deh, hol on, hol on, Hi ladies

Japanese Women (ostensibly): Hi Elephant Man!

E: Where you from?

J: We come from Tokyo, Jaaa-pan (sound lengthened to highlight a Japanese stereotype)

E: What you doing in Jamaica, ladies?

J: We come to Jamaica, but we don’t want no itsy bitsy man, we want Jamaican man ’cause they are black and strong. And the anaconda weh long.

E: So, you want the anaconda weh long eh?

J: Yeeees  
 E: (start of toasting) Yuh see Jamaican man fuss ting we nuh carry nuh teeny weeny ting, da sintin  
 ya fatta dan di bottle of a Heineken  
 So, when diss chiney ting tell me I she know fi climb di limb  
 When di sintin overweight dis gyal a tell mi chiney dream  
 When mi find di ting, mek she sing like how di chiney sing  
 J: cho nun cho nun cho nun ping Elephant man we want again.  
 (Excerpt from Elephant Man's 2007 "Chiney T'ing")

Thick patois may make it difficult for some readers to decipher exactly what is being said. First, the title says a lot. Asians, due to a long history of people of Chinese ethnicity being in Jamaica, are often popularly classified as Chinese. This is not accurate, but does not necessarily hold a strong derogatory meaning, much in the way that any Caucasian is popularly assumed to be American in Japan. The song itself is rife with derogatory comments, however. In sum, Elephant Man asks women from Tokyo why they are in Jamaica. They reply they want a strong, black man with a large penis. He then begins toasting. Breaking the patois down (basically): We (Jamaican men) don't have a small penis (like other men, but given the travel from Japan presumably Japanese men in particular); we have something fatter than a beer bottle. So, when Chiney T'ing (in this case clearly Japanese) tells me she wants to get on me she dreams about my weight on her. When I find her thing (presumably the clitoris) she makes a repetitive sound followed by "ping" (presumably an orgasm) with other Japanese women wanting more sex. The rest of the song details rather energetic, and certainly male directed, sex acts.

The overtly sexualized and ethnicized lyrics of this now classic dancehall song are average, perhaps even a bit tame today. Clearly, Japanese or Euro-American capital-C culture-bound notions of "woke" political correctness are not what guides the direction or appreciation of dancehall's aesthetics for fans. The lyrics are a form of poetic play, just as the space of dancehall is a space of physical play. Again, following Cooper, dancehall events are "a dedicated space for the flamboyant performing of sexuality" (2004, 3). They are places of lively contact, predictable in their promise of unpredictability, of which, again, Julian Henriques offers an outstanding ethnographic description (2010). An important point of contact here is that this popular Jamaican culture differs from the staged *nigiyaka* (lively) nightlife one typically experiences in Japan, whereby exchanges, for example in a host/hostess club, are basically scripted, rooted in safe expectations (Allison 1994; Takeyama 2016). A night of dancehall in Kingston is very far from this indeed.

To comfortably attend a dancehall event, one must be ready to deal with a hyper heterosexualized space with communicative ambiguity due to the sheer volume of the music and the playful poetry of patois; "Seen?" means "do you understand?" and "Ya feel me?" can mean the same thing or as easily be the preamble to a fist fight or worse. One also needs to be able to tactfully react to a joke in which they may be the butt, not be taken in by a multitude of minor swindles, and not flinch when being touched or grinded on by a stranger, male . . . or female. It is a relentlessly heteronormative and sexually charged atmosphere. Added to this, one can expect to be sharply bumped and

have drinks unapologetically spilled on them. All are common aspects of dancehall space interactions (see Niaah 2010 for outstanding ethnographic descriptions). These experiences are hard to imagine in the heavily self-policed mainstream of Japanese club culture (Hartley 2020). Moreover, the boundaries between official and unofficial, legal and illegal, are often precarious and tacit. One may or may not have paid their way into the event, it may end at the designated time or just be unceremoniously shut down, and for a country where the ganja was against the law at the initial stage of research, in the dancehall space its consumption has always been open and everywhere, including men with gunnysacks-full brokering break-off-a-bud sales. Yet, transgressing these fuzzy bounds can have immediate and dire consequences, legal or otherwise. Many Kingston garrison towns where dancehall events are held, like Tivoli Gardens, the famous Trench Town, or near political dividing lines like Mountain View Road, are truly dangerous areas where only luck and loquaciousness can get you out of tight spots. Local Kingstonians, linguistically competent and aware of nuance, enter with caution and only at particular times like dancehall events. Young Japanese males, but perhaps more so females, dive into Kingston headfirst.

Daring a generalization, working-class Kingstonians have an energetic and palpably passionate approach to life. They tend to jump into interactions, verbal or physical, with two feet, in a boisterous and outgoingly touchy-feely way that would be utterly alien, and alienating, in urban Japan. Take public transportation as a touchstone for cultural comparison. Beyond private buses, even on the more upscale air-conditioned city buses in Kingston, I have variously encountered people loudly playing radios, bus drivers singing at the top of their lungs, and religious believers standing up to preach or testify in the middle of a bus journey—with numerous fellow passengers nodding and chiming in with a “Hallelujah!” on cue or interjecting an emphatic “Jeeeesus!” when compelled.

Such *joie de vivre* is perhaps more manifest at the street level where dancehall is played out, but it is an overall component of Jamaicanness in general (at least to this very self-conscious author/outsider). For example, flying into Jamaica, Jamaican co-passengers are usually open and chatty from the moment one sits down, and when the plane arrives they animatedly hoot and applaud the successful landing. The point is, land or sky, down-at-the-heels or well-heeled, it would be difficult to envision a more telling counterpoint to the sterile, silent, and somber mood of public transport and its many broadcasted warnings and rules in Japan. As opposed to off-the-cuff announcements in Jamaica delivered with personal observations and jocular banter, given the rote format and intonation and repetition it is often difficult to discern the difference between a recording or a living human voice in Japan (see Flourde 2019, for example). Simply, there is a tendency, a big-C cultural acceptance, in Jamaica for people to be spontaneous, loud, and lively; as such, popular “culture” offers numerous embodied and affective resonances of vivacity from spicy food to feeling bass in your bones. My Japanese interlocutors have said as much, using the patois term “livity” as an affect-oriented marker to describe the vibrancy and energy of Kingston as contrasted with Japan. In the way that Katakana in Japanese can be used to create nearly impenetrable portmanteaux, so too with Jamaican patois. “Livity” (perhaps a combination of “life” and “vitality”) is a Rastafarian-inspired term

meaning a sort of inspired life full of vitality, an awareness of a lively and vibrant energy that encompasses all things. In an impromptu discussion with a Japanese man at a dub event I asked what he thought was different between life in Japan and Jamaica. Yelling in my ear, he declared: “In Japan life is (h)heavy, you know?” Perhaps influenced by the throbbing dub bass and his Jamaican-inflected English, I presumed he meant deep or meaningful. My face obviously betrayed some confusion at the use of the word “heavy,” but before I could respond he interjected, “it (sic.) a fucking ‘downpressing’ [depressing and repressive] place man, here has livity.” He nodded, I nodded, and Jah Shaka thundered on.

Ikeda Taiyo, in discussing young Japanese DJs interested in Jamaican music, notes that there is a resistance to both an overly conservative or local (*jimoto*) and corporately adopted or “Westernized” notions of Japanese life, alongside a romanticization of a “real placeness” (*honba*) found in Jamaica (Ikeda 2016, 229). Part of this everyday “liveliness” in Kingston is how music plays a ubiquitous role in the soundscape. From mento, the 1950s precursor to ska and reggae; to gospel or American soul classics; to contemporary R and B, rap, and dancehall, music provides an omnipresent and extremely context-dependent catalyst for embodied and affective interactions in public space. Simply, music is everywhere. There are dozens of weekly dance parties that cater to different types and eras of Jamaica’s incredibly diverse music scene, from relaxed Sunday evenings at Raetown listening to classic Jamaican music and 1960s and 1970s American soul; to bass-driven Dub overlooking the city at Kingston Dub Club, where I encountered the man above; or Wednesday nights at the raucous Weddy Weddy or Passa Passa dancehall parties, places I attended with the women described below.<sup>5</sup> Young Japanese are commonly found at these venues, and despite the title of Elephant Man’s song, participating East Asians at such events are presumed to be Japanese. They have forged a place of respect and belonging in the scene. However, where and how long they choose to stay in Jamaica betrays a great deal about the depth of their engagement with Kingston’s dancehall community and their identity as Japanese.

### **Placing dancehall: An immersion into slackness at three hostels**

Halfway Tree, a major transportation hub, can be seen as a dividing line between the hills overlooking Kingston and affluence and the gullies, garrison towns, and poverty beneath them. This liminal space is where the majority of Japanese dancehall fans opt to stay. Already a counterpoint to Japan, it is hot, dusty, and noisy, with street higglers relentlessly hawking knock-off brand-name goods. Pedestrians swarm, traffic darts and dashes, and private bus conductors hop on, hop off, or dangle from rattling buses with fistfuls of low-denomination bills making change while simultaneously, and in no way subtly, hitting on women, joking and jockeying with each other, and hollering their terminal destinations, downtown not uptown, like Parade. All this takes place over the competing stereo systems of other buses and route taxis, alongside the foreground music of stores and street vendors pumping out dancehall hits, pushing their speakers to distortion level.



Within walking distance of the Halfway Tree bus terminal there are two hostels run and owned by expat Japanese women; one hostel that was formerly run by a Japanese woman and a Jamaican man, but after their separation and the woman's subsequent return to Japan, it is now run by the man and his friends; and another large Jamaican-owned hostel. I have had week-long stays at all of them, alongside others, and they each cater to specific Japanese inclinations toward immersion in Kingston, slackness, and dancehall.

Patwah, perhaps the best known, is sandwiched between an apostolic revivalist church offering nightly mic'ed up sermons of a hell-and-brimstone variety and a somewhat unusual combination business of an aspiring-to-be-upscale nightclub / carwash / restaurant, offering thumping invitations to nightly debauchery.<sup>6</sup> The hostel has a steady flow of people passing its foreboding steel security doors and a burly, toothless, multiple-chain-wearing Jamaican security guard. In sum, and somewhat fittingly, pressed white shirts go to the building to the left, see-through miniskirts into the club on the right, and Japanese tourists dwell in between. Indeed, at this hostel guests are predominately Japanese, and from instructions on how to use the kitchen facility to the posted location of weekly events in Kingston, the information distributed in the hostel is in Japanese. Moreover, the lingua franca of the hostel space itself, less the Jamaican workers, is Japanese. There are Japanese books, manga, DVDs, and the walls have posters about reggae and dancehall events in Kingston as well as Yokohama and Osaka, again, all in Japanese. In the context of Kingston this includes a brief description of the event, costs, and a "danger" rating linked to the neighborhood hosting it.

When I was a guest, the middle-aged Japanese woman owner, her seventeen-year-old Jamaica-born son, and their drowsy dog were the only permanent residents. The owner is well-known by a somewhat derogatory, but given the above explanation hardly surprising, nickname. As a strong and independent woman, she owns it, wearing the sobriquet with pride even: "Yes, I am Miss Chin." She rightly views herself as a filtering point for many Japanese budget travelers to experience Jamaican culture. And indeed, most Japanese I spoke with, especially females, and certainly those who had been to Jamaica more than once, had stayed at her guesthouse and moved within her well-meshworked links with other long-term Japanese around the island, from other hostel owners in Negril to nail spa owners in Montego Bay.

Jada Home is the other Japanese-run hostel. It is more suburban, further uptown, and more expensive and secure. There are three locked doors to pass just to enter one's room! The owner, Kumi, was married to a Jamaican man who was tragically murdered in Kingston. Nevertheless, she opted to remain in the city and continue running the hostel after his death. She too is extremely well connected, especially within the reggae and dancehall music scene, having her own recording studio and competitive car sound system, while working as a DJ on radio as well as in clubs like the Japanese-owned Asia World, a slightly upscale Japanese-owned restaurant and bar that hosts Jamaican and Japanese DJs on Friday nights. The owner of Asia World ran a restaurant in a large US city before moving to Jamaica and employs both Japanese and Jamaicans.

While Jada Home is not as open as Patwah, beyond the Jamaican flag and Rastafari color schemes, a somewhat noncommittal attitude to sanitation, and copious amounts of ganja consumption, one would be hard pressed to differentiate these hostels from ones found in Japan. Garrison is a more immersive experience. It is an older house that has been converted to a hostel owned by Benny, a Jamaican man whose Japanese partner and son have relocated to Japan, and it is a far more “authentic” subcultural Jamaican experience. The cheaper option, costing under US \$20 per night, there are no locks on the entrance gates, flimsy ones on the room doors, and all conversations and smells in the courtyard come in through the wrought iron bar windows. Jamaican and Japanese Rastafarians are frequent visitors: coming and going, passing around a chalice (water pipe), and reasoning (discussing anything, but often politics of Babylon) for hours at a time during the afternoon or evening. There is a makeshift bar, with Red Stipe, Dragon Stout, and health tonic, but the consumption of prepackaged “herb” is by far the brisker business. Guests are a mix of Japanese and non-Japanese, and Benny can speak enough Japanese to sort out any issues that might arise in dealing with Japanese guests.

In many ways, staying at Patwah or Jada Home feels akin to staying in a Japanese outpost. Garrison is far more cosmopolitan, and its Japanese guests reflect this. Open and frequent conversations quickly developed into a hybrid of English and Japanese liberally spiced with Jamaican patois (allowing multiple avenues for miscommunication but also repeat questions and unexpected detours). And of course, Japanese stay at other hostels as well. Indeed, a few doors down from Garrison is one of the city’s larger ones, always busy and filled with Europeans and North Americans and a smattering of Japanese. It was there that I shared a bunk room with the three young Japanese dancers who I describe in the following section.

### **An ethnographic vignette: Three nights with three Japanese queens**

Outside the Japanese-oriented hostels outlined in the previous section is Rasta Hostel near the aforementioned Garrison. One of the city’s largest, it caters to a cosmopolitan crowd of young to middle-aged patrons. Many of its guests are not interested in dancehall but are simply staying a day or two in Kingston before heading off to a beach. Having stayed there before, a staff member aware of my research greeted me with, “Paul, have I got a treat for you.” He announced, “Man, you are sharing a dorm room with three Japanese ladies who are *crazy* into dancehall,” reaching over the till and prompting me to rub thumbs with him as a sign of affirmational respect for his tactical arrangement.

I walked to the room, knocked on the door, and nobody replied, so I entered and put my pack in an unoccupied corner. The other areas of the room were filled with suitcases and vibrantly colored clothes strewn about and hanging on bedframes and windowsills. I claimed the last remaining bed, a top bunk. I headed for the communal shower. Returning to the room at about 5 pm, I found three women fast asleep. I started half reading and dozing. When an alarm went off about an hour later the three immediately began animatedly chatting about where they were going to go that night. I rose up in bed, looking a bit like a sunburnt Dracula I suspect, and interrupted

with a *konbanwa* (good evening), creating dead silence and wide eyes. However, within five minutes of introductions—who I was, why I was in Jamaica, how come I can speak Japanese—they agreed to become a kind of impromptu focus group. Over the three days that followed, I was witness to their largely nocturnal Jamaican lives and privy to their views about why Jamaica and dancehall were attractive to them.

A typical night went as follows. After eating self-catered food in the back yard, they would start preparing for the evening at around 8 pm. As I was in the courtyard they would change, and when I would make my way back to the room there was always an overwhelming mix of aromas: ganja, perfume, alcohol, and cigarette smoke. Letting me tag along, we would leave around 9 pm to go to a nearby event. They would stand in the back of the venue, engage in small talk with other women (Jamaican and Japanese) and men (predominantly Jamaican, but never Japanese). Indeed, inside or outside the hostel space there was, to me, surprisingly little interest or communication across genders among Japanese compatriots, a point I return to shortly. Gradually, as the night wore on a camera would inevitably start moving around the venue filming the partygoers. As the space got crowded and libations and other substances took effect, the three would-be dancehall queens would start to dance, and usually the DJ would give some form of recognition for the Japanese ladies in the house. I would head back after midnight. The first night I was surprised when at 1:30 am my roommates came in and, while chatting and sharing a spliff and beer, simply started undressing and redressing in new outfits, occasionally offering me a katakana-inflected *sōri* or *gomen, ne* (hey, sorry), leaving me uncertain if this apology was about “the show” or being woken up.<sup>7</sup> This went on for three days. They would return around 4 or 5 am and sleep until around noon, then after showering, they would make their way to the common area to smoke, drink, and chat while tanning. This pace continued for two weeks before a brief trip to Montego Bay, where a mutual Japanese friend worked at a hotel, and then they returned to their respective homes (personal email communication).

Home for the eldest, the thirty-year-old of the trio, was New York. Originally from Saitama, near Tokyo, she had been working on and off as an au pair for wealthy Japanese families for three years. She had been to Jamaica four times. My other two roommates, twenty-three and twenty-eight years of age, were both living in Tokyo. The twenty-three-year-old was a hostess at a club but quit her job to come to Jamaica for the first time. She was also a student at the twenty-eight-year-old’s dance studio, who had come to Jamaica via New York, LA, or Miami seven times. The dance instructor also worked at a club as a bartender.

About half the young Japanese women I have met over the years intended on staying in Jamaica for several weeks, and, as noted, in a few cases indefinitely. Indeed, the eldest of the three queens was open to the idea of staying in Jamaica for good, and she had had a long-term Jamaican boyfriend before. Moreover, when I asked if she wanted to move back to Japan, she emphatically replied, “*Nihon wa iya da, muri desu!*” (Japan, no way, it’s impossible!). She paused and then waxed thoughtfully (in a combination of Japanese, broken English, and Patois). In sum, she confided that in Japan women are second-class citizens, treated like sexual objects, and not given equal opportunities. Jamaica was not radically different from Japan in this regard; it

was not some sort of liberating promised land of gender equality, but Jamaica was a *shōjiki na shakai* (an honest society). It was the *covert*ness of gender discrimination in Japan she abhorred. She felt that non-Japanese men, including Jamaican men in her experience, respected her and did not hide their intentions. Even if their first impression of her was as a sex object, given the sexualized nature of dancehall she saw this as an earnest first impression. “Dancehall is erotic (*eroppoi*),” she said. “Of course, I try to be sexy when I dance . . . and, I love sex too . . .” an unsolicited added comment that caused me to turn an unfathomable shade of red, given my sunburn. However, she added, she could play this up or down, and if a relationship developed, she felt no social obligation (*shakai tekina atsuryoku*) or expectations about how that relationship should be. In short, it was liberating to stay outside and be *immune*, as I will expand upon below, from what she saw as the hegemonic expectations of middle-class Japan, where she felt women should always be cute (*kawaii*) or playing a supporting role for men (*kyōryoku teki*). She bluntly told me she had no interest in a return to Japan or dating Japanese guys, the latter a common refrain I will return to.

Dancehall events were a big part of affirming that *she* was an independent individual in control of her relations and choices. And slackness (the word she used in English after I used it) was indeed a type of escape. But for her it was not an escape into mimetic blackness (Russell 2012). It was into an identity marked as subcultural Japanese. Being the recipient of Japanese lady “big ups” from DJs at dancehall events was a recognition of her Japanese-ness, not faux blackness. It highlighted her belonging to the dancehall “tribe” as a Japanese woman. And she was perfectly content to stay away from Japan in the US or make her life in Jamaica, if possible, literally escaping much as Sister Chin did years before, affirming and authenticating her Japanese-ness within dancehall and Jamaica on her own terms.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that for others a copying or “playing at” Jamaican-ness is absent. For her roommates, as for many young women I talked to, dancehall and Jamaica were opportunities to enjoy ambiguity outside the parameters of Japanese sociocultural norms alongside the thrill of walking around a potentially dangerous new city while being vaguely understood and being approached by men, men who were viewed as more forthcoming and honest, not to mention masculine and sexy. There is a symbiotic consumption of slackness here, whereby, beyond the obvious nature of sexualized female bodies, there is *asobi* (play and enjoyment). Japanese women can “play Jamaican” and consume the attention of Jamaican men, men viewed as more powerful and potent than in Japan (Cornyetz 1994, 115; Sheller 2003, 152–55). Asked why dancehall was attractive, the twenty-three-year-old said countless times, “*Jamaikajin wa kakkoi!*” (Jamaicans are cool), full stop. This was a frequent comment, usually combined with something marking Japanese guys as comparatively not cool. Karen Kelsky (2009) forwards a similar comparison with the popular redemptive and emancipatory nature of the “West” for some Japanese women.

Despite the common subcultural ground, young Japanese men and women had little interest in each other. Buttressing the above impression of young women was the other side of the gender equation. In every case, the young Japanese men I encountered at events and hostels were obsessed with another side of consuming Jamaica. Their time, usually only in Kingston, was marked in weeks, even days, and

though enjoyable at times, their purpose was business. It was to utilize dancehall as a form of uplifting subcultural capital back in Japan; slackness was thus the cultivation of “distinction,” in Bourdieu’s sense (1984). Their purpose was marking themselves as being hipply precarious by rebelling against big-C culture expectations, while authenticating and affirming their role as “proper” dancehall DJs in Japan, often with promoting their own sound systems as the central goal (again see McCoy-Torres 2018). In essence, these men enjoy a subcultural status in Japan (and occasionally outside) that education and employment in a traditional sense could never buy. Unlike the women, liberational or even consumptive sexuality, for example, played little role in their desire to be in Jamaica. Instead, they viewed their time in Jamaica as a road to acquire cultural and social capital. It was an internship alongside the masters and originators of dancehall; paying for dubplates, absorbing snippets of patois, and attending dancehall events with an eye, *in every case I encountered*, toward returning to Japan.

In Japan, through these men, the fetishization of Jamaicanness, and by extension blackness, takes on its most consumptive form at events like Sapporo’s weekly “*Sūpa-Black*,” a Friday evening dance party featuring Jamaican and African American music, whereby Japanese male DJs dominate, often sporting dreads and toasting in a mashup of Americanisms and patois. Indeed, women and foreigners (but not other Japanese men) are frequently enticed to enter their world without a cover charge (see Acid Room Sapporo 2023 for examples).

### **Savoring slackness: Of resistance and immunization through dancehall**

The combination of dancehall and slackness for Japanese in Kingston is an ideal example of what Foucault labeled a heterotopia (Dehaene and De Caeter 2015; Foucault 1986). As noted earlier, the scene is comprised of multiple places within the city. It is a shifting constellation of sounds, affects, and ideologies that are experienced in locations such as hostels, street corners, and obviously a plethora of nightly dance events. These heterotopic or mirrored scenes are lived locally, with a past, present, and future, but they are then encountered and interpreted individually and collectively by Japanese sojourners (see Hansen and Klien 2022 for similar examples), who are made aware of both their inclusion and Otherness within this omnipresent music scene. As highlighted in this article, local and Japanese presumptions about Japanese identity are constantly reflected back on participants—from comments about the relentless nature of Japanese record collectors, to song lyrics focused on Japanese women, to Japanese “big ups” at a party. As such, Japanese participants are able to experience both an inclusive and exclusive engagement with slackness. For example, for Japanese women this can range from a noncommittal enjoyment of the city; to a fetishized consumptive mimesis, such as the appropriation of patois to communicate with locals or the emulation of a lionized Jamaican femininity as a strong and independent woman; to reveling in Jamaican masculinity, be it a gaze or sexual encounter; to a self-affirming and literal political break, like Miss. Chin or Kumi opting to permanently reside in Jamaica. But to be clear, all encounters involve interpreting and being interpreted as Japanese by

Jamaicans and by Japanese themselves. While for the most part Japanese are viewed as outsiders in Jamaica, marked by their ethnicity for example, by that very same identification they are concomitantly widely recognized as being keen participants, albeit Othered participants, in the popular culture of dancehall by Jamaicans. There is thus a heterotopic liminality, an ability to continually reinvent or reimagine oneself through personal engagements and experiences in the city and its scene. This can be marked over weeks, months, and, for some, years.

Subculture, as updated by Ross Haenfler, is “a *relatively diffuse* social network having a *shared identity*, *distinctive meanings* around certain ideas, practices and objects, and a sense of *marginalization* from or *resistance* to a perceived ‘conventional society’” (2014, 16; emphasis in original). As highlighted in this article, most young Japanese attracted to dancehall and slackness come to Jamaica driven by varied, yet highly heteronormative, notions of subcultural affirmation. They identify first and foremost as Japanese DJs, usually male, or dancers, usually female. In Kingston, they savor their own interpretation of slackness, whether sexual or sociocultural. In the lion’s share of cases, they consume dancehall with the plan to return to Japan with an experiential and individual affirmation of their subcultural status—in short, having been *there* and done *that*. In a few cases, Japanese relocate to Jamaica. In either case (and those in-between, such as individuals who visit multiple times), the commitment to the ethos and aesthetic of slackness via dancehall is a clear resistance to a host of hegemonic norms in Japan.

Committed Japanese dancehall participants are already marginalized as precarious workers in Japan given their dedication to musical craft, but through slackness they further resist against expectations of what it means to be Japanese writ large, whether the cute and submissive woman or the obedient salaried workman. I suggest that this can be more than a resistance, however. Taking the steps to participate in the dancehall scene in Jamaica is a significant point—they must save money, often quit a job in a precarious work environment, travel across the globe to a potentially dangerous location, and for some they do this many times over several years. This, I contend, ought to be read more as an immunization. It is a considered break from the communal notion of what constitutes hegemonic cultural *belonging* in Japan but without letting go or wanting to resist *being* Japanese. It is a reinvention, I daresay a brave reinvention, of Japanese identity on individually negotiated terms. As Roberto Esposito notes, “to fully belong to the originary *communitas* means to renounce one’s most precious substance, in other words one’s individual identity. . . . If community refers to something general and open, immunity, or immunization, regards the particularity of a situation defined by its subtraction to a common condition” (Esposito 2012, 2, emphasis in original). The savoring of slackness in Kingston is an individualistic reimaging of Japaneseness through play, consumption, or indeed an earnest desire to remain and become a Japanese-Jamaican. In sum, long-term immunization is not simply prolonged resistance but acceptance, accomplished not by rejecting Japaneseness outright but by rejecting the oppressive and hegemonic aspects of what might be called its big-C elements, inside or outside Japan, while reinventing and affirming a new individually negotiated small-c identity through

dancehall, an identity deeply indebted to an essence of Jamaica and a savoring of slackness.

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#### NOTES

1. This is not to suggest that Jamaica lacks people of East Asian ancestry or ethnicity. There is a long history of Chinese immigration to Jamaica (Bennett and Sherlock 1998, 316–35; Sheller 2003, 108–42), and there are Chinese and Japanese business people and development representatives in the country. The point here is that, even given these other groups, young working-class Japanese tend to be disproportionately represented at dancehall events and in secondary venues like budget hostels. In this context, being Japanese marks them.
2. A key point regarding the “voices” of informants arose in early reviews of this article. Not all, but the majority of interviews I had with Japanese were conducted in English peppered with patois and Japanese keywords. In the main, I have opted to quote people in “proper” English or use common Japanese terms without the stereotypical inflections of Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) speakers or patois that might be confusing to some readers.
3. A dubplate is a kind of “advertisement.” A famous Jamaican artiste will “big up” (proclaim support for) a DJ (usually after money changes hands). These dubplates are then deployed in sound clashes (DJ competitions): e.g., “X artiste supports DJ Y’s sound system.” The more respected the dubplate name, the more cultural-social cache the DJ holding the dubplate receives (Veal 2007, 50–55).
4. In terms of gender parity in 2022, Japan is ranked 116th out of 146 nations. Jamaica, despite the stereotype of misogyny, in part perpetrated by dancehall, is 38th (World Economic Forum 2022, 10).
5. YouTube has numerous videos of Jamaican dance parties. Searching any of these names will produce promotional and private videos.
6. Pseudonyms are used in the following ethnography.
7. I fumblingly brought this up at the 2019 *Japanese Anthropology Workshop* meeting in Denmark. My point was that there was no need to pry information out of these informants. They were either keenly or nonchalantly forthcoming about extremely intimate details of their lives.

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## Performing Sacrificial Texts and Reenacting the “Imperial Metaphor” in Rituals of Ancestor Worship in Qimen County, Huizhou, China

Through the lens of performance study, this article analyzes five sacrificial texts that are read or sung in ritual performances worshipping ancestors (and deities) organized by the Chen and Wang lineages in Qimen County, Huangshan City, traditionally known as part of Huizhou area. Viewing these texts in a communicative process rather than as static and isolated items, I firstly entextualize them and find them to be structured in a set of distinctive communicative means or keying devices such as special formulae, parallelism, and archaism, which aim at the arousal and fulfillment of formal expectations to evoke the resonant associations among audiences. The sacrificial texts are then recontextualized in different communicative events to endow the aesthetic forms with social meanings. I find that the keying devices of sacrificial texts and their interactive processes within the ritual performances establish the ancestral authority in an imperial metaphor that both reflects and shapes current social and political realities. This article aims to facilitate a better understanding of generic flexibility, form–function relationship, and text–ritual interplay in theoretical concerns across disciplines such as folklore, anthropology, history, and literature.

Keywords: sacrificial text—ritual performance—ancestor worship—keying device—imperial metaphor—Huizhou

Since the late 1980s, there has been a performative turn within and across various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, folklore, and cultural studies that “reflects significant rethinking about human nature” (Stucky and Wimmer 2002, 12; Bell 2008, 132).<sup>1</sup> As Victor Turner argues, people are in essence self-performing and self-reflexive creatures (1986, 81). Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs (1990, 59–71) note that performance-based studies serve the scholarly interest in deciphering context-sensitive meanings of a folklore item, social interactions between performers and audiences, dynamic relationships between aesthetic forms and sociopolitical functions, as well as the reflexive arena that engages various ethnographic interlocutors. According to Bauman’s definition, performance is both “a mode of communicative behavior and a type of communicative event . . . an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (1992, 41). As such, in this case study, sacrificial texts embedded in ritual performances are both performative and communicative in the sense that their meanings are interdependent upon the generic features, intent of the composer, attitude of the audience, and the interpretive framework constructed by the related communicative events and processes (Bauman 2004, 3–4; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975, 3).

In the field of Chinese cultural history, it is increasingly important to combine the study of sacrificial and liturgical texts with a close scrutiny of their ritual contexts. As Martin Kern fairly points out, text, ritual, and especially their manifestations in one another constitute central aspects of ancient Chinese culture (2005, 7). It is thus worth “looking at the ritual structures of textual composition . . . and at the textuality of ritual practices” (*ibid.*, 7). Likewise, the study of the modern history of Chinese religions also suggests a combination of philological and ethnographic approaches to examine the social production of religious texts (Clart and Ownby 2020, 13). Since the sacrificial text (*jiwen*) is a genre commonly seen in historical records and contemporary folk life, its form must carry its own force by accumulating “resonance from the history of its uses, exceeding the intentions and awareness of the immediate users” (Noyes 2016, 132). Therefore, it is fruitful to study the communicative interplay between sacrificial texts and the ritual performances that enact them in the contemporary context with an eye on the generic features of their antecedents; at the same time, contemporary examples may also shed light on historical studies.

Using the framework of performance studies, this article examines five sacrificial texts that are recited or sung during ritual gatherings honoring ancestors (and deities). These rituals are conducted by the Chen and Wang lineages in Qimen County, which is situated in Huangshan City and is historically considered part of the Huizhou region. I argue that these texts should be viewed in a communicative process rather than as fixed and separate entities. To analyze them, I firstly entextualize them or render them extractable, lifting them out of their interactional settings so that their formal properties can be better studied from an agent-centered view of performance. These texts are organized with distinctive communicative means or keying devices, including special formulae, parallelism, and archaism. The goal is to trigger and meet formal expectations, provoking a resonance of connections among the audience. These sacrificial texts are subsequently recontextualized in various communicative settings to imbue the aesthetic forms with cultural and social significance. This examination reveals that the keying devices and interactive dynamics of these sacrificial texts within ritual performances establish the ancestral authority in an imperial metaphor that both mirrors and influences contemporary social and political realities.

### Fieldwork

Qimen County, located in Huangshan City, Anhui Province, eastern China (see figure 1) was one of the six constituent counties of Huizhou prefecture in late imperial China. Saturated with Confucian teachings and norms, Huizhou was famous for its “Confucian gentry society, strong practice of kinship organization, and far-reaching mercantile influence” (Guo 2005, 1). Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529), two great synthesizers of neo-Confucian philosophy and morality, profoundly affected the social and cultural landscape of Huizhou region. Although Huizhou



Figure 1. Location of Huangshan City (yellow area), Anhui Province (light grey area) on the map of the People's Republic of China. Qimen County is the westernmost division in Huangshan. Source: Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huizhou,\\_Anhui#/media/File:Location\\_of\\_Huangshan\\_Prefecture\\_within\\_Anhui\\_\(China\).png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huizhou,_Anhui#/media/File:Location_of_Huangshan_Prefecture_within_Anhui_(China).png)



Figure 2. A municipal ICH transmitter named Wang Hongsheng showed me the recently repaired ancestral hall in Ruokeng village, Qimen County. Photo by Wei Liu, May 26, 2021.

no longer exists as an administrative region, it gains and retains more currency in cultural and social terms.

Huizhou culture features practices of a complex lineage tradition including rituals of worshipping ancestors, compiling genealogies, repairing tombs, and reiterating family regulations and community pacts. The transmission of the lineage tradition was interrupted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) when traditional culture was denounced and feudal superstitions were uprooted, but since the economic reforms of the late 1970s, religion has been allowed greater social space, which has led to the resurgence of various religious traditions with non-Marxist ideologies (Overmyer 2003,1; Li 2016, 1). The lineage tradition has been more actively transmitted since the beginning of the twenty-first century; traditional symbols in popular religions have been promoted by various groups as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to boost domestic tourism, propagate government ideology, and enhance “China’s assertive political maneuvering on the world stage” (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013, 4). In this case, designated as ICH items at the national, provincial, and municipal levels, rituals of worshipping ancestors have been restored and ancestral halls repaired by the representative transmitters with the support of other local people (see figure 2).

I have done fieldwork in Qimen County every year since August 2015. From 2015 to 2018, I stayed no longer than a month each year to establish initial contacts and get familiar with local ritualists and their village life, paving the way for my later sojourn from June 2019 to April 2020 when I did extensive fieldwork for my dissertation research. In May 2021 I rounded off my research by revisiting old informants and clearing up some remaining questions. From 2015 to 2021, I visited several villages and lived with people mainly surnamed Chen and Wang. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, villagers were required to cancel all big events, including ancestor worship, that are often performed in public during and after the Spring Festival. Thus I was not

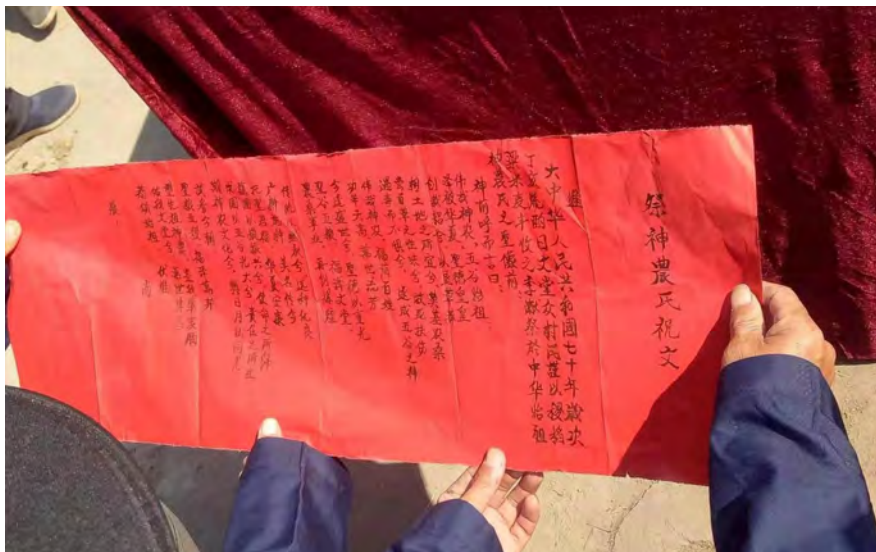


Figure 3. The sacrificial text of Wentang villagers worshipping the harvest god was held and sung aloud during the harvest festival. Photo by a Wentang villager who wishes to remain anonymous, September 30, 2019.

able to record any performances due to the Covid situation, but local villagers had videotaped their annual ritual performances before and gave me access to some of these videos. In this article I will also draw on a complete performance that I was able to record live in 2018. This article is therefore a combination of autoethnographic sources and my own fieldwork.

I obtained three of the sacrificial texts from people of Chen lineage in Wentang village. They instructed me to download a video of ancestor worship from the *Youku* website, which was made by the local TV station in 2010. In that year, villagers held a big event because they had just finished compiling the genealogies and wanted to celebrate this, but the video does not record the whole ritual completely, so the sacrificial text is not read as a whole in it. Later in 2021, I asked the main ritualist and provincial ICH transmitter Chen Xiaomin to write a complete sacrificial text for me, which turned out to be different from the one in the video. I also obtained the sacrificial text of Wentang villagers worshipping the harvest god (*shennong shi*) as an ancestor of the whole Chinese nation during the harvest festival held on the National Day of 2019 (see figure 3). The harvest festival is a recent invention by the local government to boost the tourism industry.

The last two sacrificial texts come from two villages close to Wentang: Taoyuan and Limu. Taoyuan is home to another branch of the Chen lineage who also held ancestor worship in the ancestral hall in their own way. The ritual master Chen Dunhe was designated a national ICH transmitter in May 2018.<sup>2</sup> I attended and videorecorded a ritual performance of ancestor worship in May 2018, during which I digitized the sacrificial text. The ritual was staged for a photography workshop sponsored by the People's Government of Huangshan City, whose aim was to train photographers, archive images of local life, and advertise Taoyuan village (and Huangshan City more broadly) as a fantastic tourist destination (see figure 4).





Figure 4: Taoyuan villagers performed ancestor worship in their ancestral hall for a photography workshop. Photo by Wei Liu, May 19, 2018.

Moreover, the fifth sacrificial text was obtained from ritualist Fan Zuren in another adjacent village, Limu in Qimen County, who composed it for the Wang lineage to worship their famous ancestor Wang Bi near his tomb (located in Tongluowan, Shanli town, Qimen County) in 2010. The ritual of ancestor worship performed at the tomb is open to all people surnamed Wang nationwide. Fan Zuren is not surnamed Wang, but he has become a member of the Wang lineage through uxorilocal marriage, because in his twenties, his family of origin was so poor that no girl would marry into his household. His skills in writing the sacrificial texts and performing rituals result from the motivation to make money and his interest in reading.<sup>3</sup> Another ritualist, Wang Hongsheng of the same Wang lineage in another village, Ruokeng, handed me the videos of worshipping Wang Bi in 2013, 2015, and 2019 (the 2015 video was used to apply for the municipal ICH item, and the other two videos record almost the same ritual proceedings) and explained ritual symbols and procedures to me. He is an important coordinator in the Research Committee of Wang Bi Culture and the Association of Wang Lineage Members from Xin'an, Langya as well as a municipal ICH transmitter.

#### nte tual at on of sa r al te ts

Entextualization is “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a text—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 73). Bauman categorized these devices into different types, including special formulae, language use, paralinguistic features, parallelism, and appeals to tradition (Bauman 1984, 16; Bender 1996). On the linguistic level, performers use archaic words and jargon to enhance their communicative competence. In terms of paralinguistic features, they rely on shifts in register, gestures, posture, and other behaviors to express unspoken meanings. On the one hand, the sacrificial text is a performance integrated into the whole ritual of ancestor worship; on the other, it is extractable from its original context as a bounded entity with a distinctive poetic function. This article studies various ritual

performances in the cultural landscape of Wentang village and nearby villages, which form the “performance-scape” with similar literary structures and interconnected motifs (Bender 2010, 120). The following section will focus on the marked and artful form of the sacrificial text featured by special formulae, archaism, and parallelism.

#### *Special formulae as genre marker*

A special formula is inherent in the performance to begin and end the narration (Bauman 1984, 21). It functions as the marker of a genre and indicator of the relationship between performers and audience. It also has some referential functions. According to Xiaoguang Zhou and Jihong Guo (2016, 187–89), in the late imperial era the sacrificial texts in Huizhou area could be divided into three types: an invocation to deities (*zhu jiwén*), mourning for the dead or worshipping ancestors (*ai jiwén*), and others (*za jiwén* such as celebrating ancestors’ birthdays, the accomplishment of renovating ancestral halls, and the installation of ancestral tablets). Sacrificial texts of mourning (*ai* or *dao*) can focus on either releasing one’s sorrow over the deceased or lauding the virtues of the deceased (Zhang and Xie 2010, 83). But more often than not, the texts for ancestor worship express more of an invocation (*zhu*) to deities than mourning (*ai*) for the deceased relatives, because as time goes by, the ancestor is deified.

Dating back to the origin of this genre, the boundary between the two categories of sacrificial texts is blurry. Junling Zhao (2013, 102) argues that, generally speaking, the sacrificial text derives from the oration or invocation (*zhu*) by an officer to communicate with spirits in an activity of sacrifice. The oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions of Chinese characters *zu* and *zong* (combined to indicate ancestors) are pictorial symbols showing descendants holding the meat to display in front of ancestral spirits and invite them to taste (Du 2019, 2). The critic Liu Xie (c. 465–c. 522) (see Liu 2012, 109) stated that from the beginning of the world, people invoked and expressed gratitude to spirits. He further elaborated that in the *Yili* (Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial) the invocative texts of sacrificing to ancestors were no more than inviting the deceased to feast on offerings but evolved to include praising virtues of the deceased in the Han and Wei dynasties (ibid., 113). Gradually the sacrificial texts were divided into two types: one was sacrificing to deities represented by spirits of mountains and rivers, and the other to dead relatives and friends (ibid., 115). Tang Biao (1989, 151) of the Ming and Qing dynasties argued that sacrificial texts have four functions: praying for rains or sun, driving away evil spirits, pleading for blessings, and mourning over the dead. Texts serving the first three functions emphasize honorific wording and sincere emotions without haughtiness or exaggeration. The last one stresses the expression of earnest sorrow by describing their life stories and regretting their quick deaths.

Even today, the sacrificial text of worshipping ancestors still oscillates between the invocative (with religious undertone) and the mourning (purely in memory of the deceased and a demonstration of filial piety), a generic flexibility for manipulation (Briggs and Bauman 1992). But be it invocative text or mourning text, it usually begins with the word *wei* and ends with *fuwei shangxiang* (Zhou and Guo 2016, 189). The Limu text begins with *wei* and ends with *fuwei*, while the Taoyuan text doesn’t have such a

beginning but ends with *fuwei shangxiang*. As for Wentang village, the video does not show such a beginning, but it ends with *shangxiang*, and the ritualist Chen Xiaomin's text and the sacrificial text of worshipping the harvest god both begin with *wei* and end with *fuwei shangxiang*. The word *wei* does not have any specific meanings, but it functions to call the audience's attention to the following main messages. The ending remark *fuwei shangxiang* means that the worshippers prostrate on the ground and respectfully invite the ancestors to eat the offerings to their hearts' content. Along with the signal of beginning *wei*, the performer speaks to an audience that includes all the participants present in the ritual, on the one hand, and invisible ancestral spirits, on the other. It opens up a communicative space that engages both worshipers and those to be worshipped, so in a ritual of ancestor worship among the Chen and Wang lineages there should be two sets of texts that are structurally dialogic, containing the worshippers' praise of the ancestors' merits and plea for blessings, and the ancestors' answers to their prayers. In Wentang and Limu ancestor worship, the sacrificial text that ends with *fuwei shangxiang* is the main text analyzed in this article. There is another text of benediction saying that the ancestors bless the descendants, which I will discuss later.

A complete sacrificial text also gives contextual information such as the date and place of worship, participants, the offerings, and the name(s) of the ancestor(s) at the beginning.

#### 1. The Limu text

Starting the sacrifice in 2010 CE, during the reign of the Great People's Republic of China; in the lunar calendar February 12, the year of Geng Yin, the day of Bingzi; Offering wine, cups, incense, paper money, and silk; To our first ancestor, Wang Bi, Duke Daxian, the Grand Master of the Palace with Golden Seal and Purple Ribbon, and Minister of the Ministry of War of the Tang dynasty, in front of your tomb. (Fan 2010)

#### 2. The Wentang text of ancestor worship

On a day of Shuzhuo,<sup>4</sup> in the first month of the lunar year of Xinchou, 2021 CE, Wentang descendants respectfully offer fish, eggs, and meat as sacrifice to all ancestors and deceased parents before ancestral tablets in the ancestral hall. (Chen 2021)

#### 3. The Wentang text of worshipping the harvest god

On a day of Shuzhuo, in the 70th year of the reign of the Great People's Republic of China, the lunar year of Dinghai; in the season of harvest, Wentang villagers respectfully offer grain, rice, and wheat to the divine statue of the harvest god, the first ancestor of the Chinese nation. (Chen 2019)

#### 4. The Taoyuan text of ancestor worship

(A superior man is) as perfectly virtuous as water or earth that nurtures every creature but does not crave fame. Chinese civilization is longstanding and well established, with respecting ancestors as its traditional virtue. Descendants of Duke Dingxin, the first ancestor of the Taoyuan Chen lineage, respectfully prepare deli-

cious food, solemnly stand in the ancestral hall of Baoji, and prostrate in sacrifice. (Chen 2018)

In all four texts, the contextual information or the metacommunication serves to connect the main message with the broader performance context in a way that finds favor in the present audience and is archaic for them to interact with the objects of worship. The Limu and Wentang composers use *da* (the great) to add to the majesty of the current political authority, as was always done in each previous generation, such as *da Qing* (the Great Qing dynasty) and *da Ming* (the Great Ming dynasty), showing that this performance is traditional and transmitted from the past.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Wentang and Limu composers detail the titles of the ancestor and the harvest god, aiming to elevate them to the honorable position of being worshipped and elicit respect from the audience. After this contextual information, the second Wentang text written by Chen Xiaomin lists seven ancestors' honorable titles in a call for their spirits to descend. The invocations in their texts were written specifically for lineage members and serve the purpose of solidifying the lineage organizations. In comparison, the Taoyuan text is slightly different by downplaying the influence of ancestors but framing the performance to be a show of praiseworthy virtue of filial piety that glorifies the Chinese civilization. The reason that the Taoyuan and Wentang texts of worshipping the harvest god both show a broader view of the Chinese nation is because their performances serve the current political and economic interests of identifying with the authoritative discourse. Instead of stepping into the grey area of popular religion (with its superstitious content under question), they skillfully manipulate the cultural resources to stage sanctioned performances that fit into the dominant slogan of rejuvenating the Chinese dream.<sup>6</sup>

### Archaism

In addition to the special formulae, archaism is another feature of the sacrificial texts, which is consistent with the linguistic style of the verbal instructions running through the ritual performance of ancestor worship. Composers employ ancient Chinese words or classical Chinese idioms to achieve the effect of traditionality, the esoteric, and a sense of estrangement. The sacrificial texts are replete with four-character idioms—some of which are quite commonly seen now, while others are seldom used in current daily life. For example, the Limu text describes Wang Bi as a capable, virtuous, and important minister who did much meritorious work to save the Tang empire from collapsing. Some idioms are plain to understand: *debei caiquan* (virtues and talents are both complete), *niuzhuan qiankun* (miraculously turning things around), and *dongzheng xitao* (fighting against enemies on every side) (Fan 2010). But some are hard to explain without the composers' interpretation: *biyao kuichan* (Wang Bi is gloriously radiant, attracting others to surround him), or *shudong laoge* (trained in martial arts to skillfully use weapons) (Fan 2010). Moreover, the Limu text continues to narrate that Wang Bi raised nine children, in whom so many Wang descendants find their origin. Before concluding the text with a plea for blessings, the composer also mentions how Wang descendants gathered and worshipped before Bi's tomb. In his narration, some unfamiliar idioms such as *ke shao ji qiu* (to inherit one's father's and grandfather's meritorious work) and *sanduo cengjin jiuru* (three more

blessings and being like nine things)<sup>7</sup> are taken from Confucian classics *The Book of Rites* and traditional Chinese popular art.

This tripartite linguistic structure of archaism in the sacrificial text shows the layered communicative competence of the performance. First of all, the basic plain Chinese idioms should constitute most of the sacrificial text, so that the main messages can come across to the general audience without much difficulty. After all, both participants and audience need to have a basic understanding of how and why they should worship the ancestors or at least appreciate it. Then the second layer of linguistic choice taps into people's knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, and the third layer is esoteric knowledge. The traditionalization of the sacrificial text alludes to the eminent and illustrious status of a family (*mingmen wangzu*) featured with high literacy, good education, and excellent literary writings. The esoteric is like the shibboleth, establishing the composers as a distinctive group of artisans with their own expertise that cannot be easily copied. The esoteric further creates a sense of estrangement among the audience, which in Victor Shklovsky's term means distancing and making strange (Shklovsky 1997, 4). Estrangement makes art artistic as "shifting perspectives and making things strange can become an antidote to the routinization and automatization of modern life that leads to mass apathy and disenchantment" (Boym 2018, 421). From the perspective of performance, the esoteric shapes the artistic form of the performance that distinguishes its message from the mundane surrounding stream of discourse. This is what performance usually does: to sharpen, intensify, and stylize the lower-level, improvisatory, and all-inclusive social patterning (DaMatta 1991; Noyes 2016, 133). From the functional point of view, the elusive style of wording aims to bring the audience out of its familiar environment into a new realm of solemnity, mystery, and majesty, so as to arouse interest and influence emotions and minds. As is noted by Jan Assmann (2006, 133) in his study of Egyptian religion, "[i]t is their foreignness and their foreign-language nature that helps us to transcend our own nature." But in order to enhance the communicative competency of the performance, the composer should weigh between the drive to make the text esoteric and the demand to connect with daily discourse, so as to balance the intelligibility and artistic estrangement.

#### *Symmetrical balance and parallelism*

Lastly, the aesthetics of sacrificial texts as literature and performance are also governed by symmetrical balance and parallelism. Chinese poetic lines are composed with couplets that generally convey a sense of semantic completeness and metrical balance, especially the type of parallel couplets "in which the two lines follow the identical syntactical pattern but use words with opposite or complementary meanings" (Egan 2010, 41). The linguistic parallelism reflects the innate bipolar symmetry of nature. As Liu Xie (2012, 402–3) wrote, "Nature, creating living beings, endows them always with limbs in pairs. The divine reason operates in such a way that nothing stands alone. The mind creates literary expressions, and organizes and shapes one hundred different thoughts, making what is high complement what is low, and spontaneously producing linguistic parallelism."<sup>8</sup>

In my case study, the sacrificial texts are full of couplets (some of which are parallel ones) that add to the beauty of linguistic symmetry, emphasize the key messages, and make their delivery more efficient. For instance, in the Limu text, one parallel couplet is *dingding weiguan xianhuan, daidai beichu nengren* (every man is a prominent officer; every generation produces capable men) (Fan 2010). The Wentang text of worshipping the harvest god reads, *mou guo yi liang zhenxing xi, shiming zhi suogui; qiu guo yi wugu guangda xi, zeren zhi suoza* (it is his mission to rejuvenate the country with food; it is his responsibility to glorify the country with five grains) (Chen 2019). The two lines in each couplet are complementary and repetitive. In written literature, the complementation always serves artistic purpose, but in oral performance, complementary lines in a couplet express one message repetitively for pragmatic concerns, to repeat the message in case the audience didn't get it the first time. Another kind of parallel couplet is made up of contrasting words. For instance, the Limu text reads, *zhifen wanpai, maixi jiu Zhou* (lineage divided into tens of thousands of groups; bloodline ties nine districts)<sup>9</sup> (Fan 2010). The Taoyuan text reads, *qingfang yongji, jiuze nanwang* (your fragrance will be forever remembered; your old blessings are hard to forget) (Chen 2018). Although the two lines in each couplet are not contrastive, the three sets of opposition: *fen* (to divide) and *xi* (to tie together), *qingfang* (fragrance that is as close as if in front of the audience) and *jiuze* (blessings from the distant past), and *ji* (to remember) and *wang* (to forget), cause tension in the couplet and achieve audience arousal. Since the experience of ritual is sought out but not necessarily wanted and distraction is licensed, the archaism and parallelism of wording become ritualists' skills to attract attention (Noyes 2016, 144–45).

Not only do sacrificial texts display the linguistic symmetry and parallelism, but the ritual performances of ancestor worship also show thematic symmetry and other parallel constructions. In the Limu and Taoyuan sacrificial texts, they mention both civil (*wen*) and military (*wu*) achievements of their ancestor(s). Akin to the principal duality of yin and yang, the complementary opposition of *wen* and *wu* undergirds many Chinese folkloric imaginations of a superior man or deity (Boretz 2011, 40; Louie 2002, 10–11). *Wen* covers the civil sphere of society that includes the literati, moral values, or cultural and educational success, while *wu* indicates the merits earned by military service (Filipiak 2015, 4). The Wang lineage ancestor Wang Bi is depicted as adept at literary writing (*kuiwen beiwu*) and full of valor and vigor to conquer enemies (*pingkou weigong*). The tomb garden of Wang Bi is also guarded by two stone men: one is a civil official and the other is a military officer. The Taoyuan text lists some famous Chen ancestors that include both a civil officer (minister of the revenue division) and a military general. In Wentang ancestor worship, there are two performers taking the roles of “number one” scholars in the highest civil and military imperial examinations. In the ritual, it is the civil scholar who reads the main sacrificial text and the text of benediction. As to the military scholar, if someone is disobedient in the clan, he is responsible for meting out punishments. In terms of other parallel constructions, in the Limu and Wentang videos, the whole space (ancestral hall or Wang Bi's tomb garden) is divided into halves by table(s), and there are an equal number of performers standing to each side (see figure 5). They repeatedly salute each other by using the typical gesture of an open hand covering a



Figure 5. The whole space of Wang Bi's tomb garden was divided into halves by tables, and there were an equal number of performers standing to each side during the ceremony on March 18, 2019. Screenshot of the video provided by Wang Hongsheng.

closed fist. The Taoyuan performance was the same, except that there was no table. A speaker gives instructions throughout the ritual, and another performer stands on the other side to keep their positions symmetrically balanced. When the ritual master offers tributes to ancestors, on each side stands an equal number of assistants. In the Wentang video, when performers start to circumambulate the table, except for the ritual master who is in the middle, they are divided into two groups and walk side by side. The linguistic, thematic, and spatial parallelism throughout the ritual is used to create a temporary order or construct a harmonious performative world. Because Confucianism treats the world of lived experience as fundamentally broken, chaotic, and discontinuous, people need to generate patterns and order through ritual (Seligman et al. 2008, 17–18).

### Re onte tual at on of sa r al te ts

A sacrificial text is created as part of a ritual performance, so it tends to be restricted by the nature and atmosphere of the ritual (Ye 2015, 104). The sacrificial text is intricately associated with other texts in the performance, the performance itself, and the situational context of the performance (Wang 2010). For most of the rituals of ancestor worship in my case study, the sacrificial texts are written on red paper, read or sung aloud during the ritual, and burned in the end to be sent to the other world. They thus have semiotic functions in the performance realm that are beyond what verbal language can convey. Bauman and Briggs argue that the decontextualization of a folklore item from one social context involves its recontextualization in another, and since the process is transformational, it is worth noting “what the recontextualized text brings with it from its earlier context(s) and what emergent form, function, and meaning it is given as it is recentered” (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 74–75). As I can see from both the linguistic and paralinguistic uses of the sacrificial texts in cases of the

Wang and Chen lineages, the texts carry illocutionary force that is both traditional and context sensitive. In the following section, I will discuss how sacrificial texts are dialogically structured with other texts in the ritual performance and how they transmit various social and political messages in different communicative contexts.

*Dialogue between sacrificial texts and ritual performance*

The sacrificial texts of the local lineage are organized dialogically with texts of benediction to facilitate the conversation between ancestors and descendants. Because “religious ritual addresses a postulated subject,” to represent that subject the ritual should include an extravagant completion address and a performance of petition and response (Feuchtwang 2001, 156). In the video of Wentang ancestor worship, during the ritual performance, when the ritual master and his assistants kneel down before the portraits of ancestors, a performer (in the role of “number one” civil scholar) on behalf of all the community members reads two texts to ingratiate themselves with the ancestors. The first one is the sacrificial text mainly narrating the history of Wentang village, which can be dated back to the Song dynasty, when the first ancestor Shun Chenggong started to farm the land and sired a large family.

The Chen family has long kept to the traditional values of loyalty and filial piety . . . and in the later generations, famous ministers and scholars came forth in large numbers. They have left rich inheritance for their descendants. Their fame and grace should be remembered, and all the descendants keep silent before ancestors in reverence. Generation after generation, they benefited from ancestors’ virtuous work. Therefore, by no means could this ritual of worship be replaced or discarded. (Jia Yuan 2010)

This sacrificial text, replete with archaic words and phrases, is sung in Qimen dialect. As a eulogistic message, it aims to please the ancestors and invoke a sense of pride and pleasure in people’s hearts.

The other text of benediction later read by the performer is called *guci*, beginning with a proclamation that all the ancestors who have passed away bless them so that various blessings abound in them. Reading this text is a symbolic act of ancestors ordering a representative to speak out their blessing on the descendants. Then it further details what kind of blessings will come upon them. “You will get more filial sons and filial grandsons and have a good harvest because the Heaven will respond to your request, your plants flourish on the land, and you will have a long life” (Jia Yuan 2010). Similarly, in the Limu ancestor worship, performers not only read the main sacrificial text (*du jiwu*) analyzed earlier but also proclaim benediction (*baoguci*) almost the same as the Chen lineage. From the content and language use of these two texts, it is inferred that they integrate a plea for ancestors, praise of their virtuous work, and a confirmative answer from the ancestors. In other words, it is an interaction between descendants who express admiration and their forefathers who bestow blessings.

However, the Taoyuan performance is quite different in terms of the interaction between the texts, which tones down the religious invocation but enhances the political awareness. After the reading of the sacrificial text (which is less archaic than that of Limu and Wentang), there is no benediction from ancestors, but instead



a Chen elder and a Chen descendant read two texts to express their appreciation of the ancestral exemplarity and their motivation to cultivate the virtues of filial piety and benevolence, and to follow the lead of the Communist Party to make great social contributions. Their words respond to the opening remarks by Chen Dunhe, the national ICH transmitter who organized the whole ritual performance. In his talk, he clearly stated that “the purpose of holding this ritual is to demonstrate the didactic meaning of folk customs, the transmission of lineage rules, and that the ritual can profoundly prosper local culture, edify common people, and cultivate descendants’ virtues.” Even the sacrificial text in the Taoyuan ritual is quite modernized and has the most plain Chinese idioms compared to other sacrificial texts from the Wentang Chen and Limu Wang lineages. For instance, after describing ancestors’ virtuous works, the sacrificial text moves to a description of descendants’ humility and diligence (*xuxin haoxue*), politeness and moral integrity (*mingli chengxin*), patriotism and lawfulness (*aiguo shoufa*), generosity (*leshan haoshi*), thrift and self-improvement (*qinjian ziqiang*), and so on, which is almost the same as the code of ethics issued by the current government.

#### *Reenactment of imperial metaphor*

In addition to textual dialogism, the ritual performances of ancestor worship in my case study imply an “imperial metaphor” (the folk spiritual world modeled on imperial bureaucracy) that has sociopolitical implications in the contemporary context.<sup>10</sup> The ritualist Chen Xiaomin provides an indigenous exegesis of symbols in the Wentang ritual performance. He said the form of this ritual is called *jinji*, a state ritual performed for emperors. Because their ancestor Chen Baxian is an emperor of the Chen dynasty in the period of Northern and Southern Dynasties, they adopt this form of performance. In this ritual, each performer has his own bureaucratic role. The speaker and the silent performer standing on the two chairs play the role of *jindian chuannu*, the court eunuchs serving the imperial majesty. One of their responsibilities is to summon ministers who honorably present themselves before the emperor. The ritual master is the leader of the community. The assistants are called *yinzan*, *zhongjunzan*, and *zhuangyuan*. *Yinzan* is the leading role of ancient minister of rituals; *zhongjunzan* is a role of messenger to accompany the general. Two other assistants take roles of “number one” scholars (*zhuangyuan*) in the highest civil and military imperial examinations.<sup>11</sup> Through his explanation, this ritual is like a minister presenting himself before the emperor on behalf of his big family. He also prepares the food and eats with the emperor. This scene of meeting ancestors is thus alternatively explained as a submission to imperial power. Likewise, before the ritual of the Wang lineage formally starts, there are two rows of villagers holding a precious canopy (*baogai*) that is used to shelter the imperial authority or deity, and a pair of boards—one says *sujing* (silence) and the other says *huibi* (avoidance)—parading toward the tomb. The ritualist Wang Hongsheng told me they indicate the guard of honor before an emperor or minister.<sup>12</sup>

The imperial metaphor reveals the culture of public display (in Michael Nylan’s term) in which “awesome authority” (*weiyi*) is established through visual magnificence of ritual performances as well as the archaic rhetoric, special formulae,

and symmetrical constructions of sacrificial texts. According to Nylan (2005, 24), as early as the Warring States, the public display culture was theoretically founded on assumptions about men's desire for connection with each other, cravings for pleasure and spectacle, and their experience of mimetic desires. In ancient China, the ruling class in command of a plentitude of resources regularly sought to demonstrate its power before large audiences; the emperor in particular was presented to embody the center of all the collectivities operating within the public display culture, and the ruler's will was supposed to be followed by the entire population, whose desires could be satisfied by a reward-punishment mechanism (*ibid.*, 26).

In contemporary society, the same logic behind the public display culture might be still at work. As I observed at a recently invented festival of picking local oranges in Longyuan village, Xin'an town, Qimen County in November 2019, the local government staged performances entitled "The Best Song for Our Country" (*zuimei de ger xiangei zuguo*), "Singing again a Folk Song for the Communist Party" (*zaichang shan'ge gei dang ting*), "Ten Verses of Farewell to the Red Army" (*shi song hongjun*), and "Singing in Praise of the Motherland" (*gechang zuguo*) in addition to other folk dances and songs (see figure 6). During breaks, the hostess asked the spectators to answer several questions, and winners could get awards. Her questions were all pertinent to government policies that had been implemented recently. These performances and Q&A sessions were designed to shape common people's desires in line with the current political authority. During the festival, a retired teacher shared his poem with his friends, and I accidentally saw it. The poem was applauding the festival organized by government leaders and sharing their vision of rural rejuvenation:

Village committee enthusiastically develops agritainment,  
offering oranges to express sincerity.  
(People) taste original and natural flavor,  
and the county in the mountain will march on a new journey.

Returning to the ritual performance of ancestor worship, from the perspective of local villagers, the imperial metaphor in the public display culture is not simply historical reenactment but rather the appropriation of the symbols and structure of the imperium to "articulate and manifest the power inherent in their own collective solidarity" (Boretz 2011, 41; Feuchtwang 2001). Imperial majesty demonstrated both verbally and visually is to enforce power and solidarity. In the ritual performances of the Chen lineage, especially the Taoyuan ritual, the roles enacted by the various performers and the sacrificial texts read by them are a vivid reflection of the local people's desires to act in conformity with the government and cravings for economic and political rewards generated by their being amenable. "Ritual typically has powerful interests behind it, and the aesthetic experience is often mobilized towards the reproduction of established power" (Noyes 2016, 145; Bloch 1989). The presence of the emperor is not an empty signifier, but on the contrary is politically mystified as the reign of the current government. This wish of following the emperor, if placed in modern context, is a tendency to follow the dominant official discourse. In both Taoyuan and Wentang villages, the locals seek the government's favor due to political and economic advantages. After gaining the imprimatur of national and provincial



Figure 6. All performers and government officials sang the song “Singing in Praise of the Motherland” (*gechang zuguo*) together in the festival of picking local oranges in Longyuan village, Xin’an town, Qimen County. Photo by Wei Liu, November 9, 2019.

ICH items, Taoyuan and Wentang people received much funding to renovate and decorate their ancestral halls and develop cultural tourism.

In the ritual of the Wang lineage, the imperial majesty is more projected onto the lineage authority that strengthens the social solidarity of the Wang lineage as an influential organization (*zongqin lianyihui*), which can generate great social capital for its members. Wang Hongsheng told me that as the coordinator of the tomb sacrifice, he has been honored by many Wang lineage members; especially on the day of sacrifice, many cars were stopping in front of his house and waiting for his command. He claimed that it was such a great honor (*fengguang*) that he felt it even better than a *zimo* win (win by taking a tile from the wall) in mahjong. He also told me that some Wang lineage members are wealthy businessmen who can purchase tea leaves from him.<sup>13</sup> He earns his living by planting, picking, and processing tea leaves (which Qimen County is famous for), so lineage members’ assistance in his work shows the economic value of lineage social networking. The anthem of the Wang Lineage Association is “Unity Is Strength” (*tuanjie jiushi lilian*), which aims at unifying all Wang lineage members in reciprocal ties.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Bauman has noted that performance entails complex, highly organized rhetoric and aesthetic devices; these serve, as Noyes noted, in “how messages resist entropy” (Bauman 1984; Noyes 2016, 132). By entextualizing the sacrificial texts collected from the Wentang and Taoyuan Chen lineages as well as the Limu and Ruokeng Wang lineages, it is easy to see that they are set off by keying devices of special formulae, archaism, and parallelism, and held together with the internal pillars of respecting ancestors, praising their merits, and demonstrating the worshippers’

virtues of filial piety and loyalty. Then by recontextualizing the sacrificial texts, they are fleshed out stylistically and semiotically in ritual performances of ancestor worship that acquire deeper sociopolitical meanings. This illustrates how genre both constrains and enables the production and interpretation of new texts. The generic flexibility between invocation and mourning has persisted into the contemporary performances, which can be swayed by the decisions of composers considering the power dynamics and audience expectations of each occasion on which the sacrificial text is performed.

The sacrificial text is constrained not only by its own generic form but also by the communicative process of the ritual performance that includes, for instance, the dialogue between texts within a performance and various functions of the sacrificial text in different situational contexts. In the ancestor worship, the ritual proceeding is completed through the petition and response to prove its efficacy, so the sacrificial text as an appeal to the ancestors should be responded to by the text of benediction from the postulated ancestor subjects. However, due to the genre ambiguity, the sacrificial text of worshipping ancestors can be categorized more as a mourning text than invocative text, so as to erase the religious connotation and make it acceptable in the current social context, as is shown in the Taoyuan case. When the sacrificial text is more broadly contextualized, its aesthetic form has the social function of the majestic display of ancestral authority that points to the public display culture from the imperial past and constructs an imperial metaphor reified in the current sociopolitical context as the dominance of political power and the solidarity of the lineage organization.

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Wei Liu graduated from the Ohio State University with a PhD in Chinese literature and folklore. Her dissertation research examines the revival of local folk culture and Confucian tradition in the context of early twenty-first-century government initiatives such as the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) movement and President Xi Jinping's promotion of "excellent traditional culture." Her recent publications include "Religious Ambiguity, ICH, and Mulian Performances in Contemporary Huizhou, China" in *CHINOPERL: Journal of Chinese Oral and Performing Literature*; and a review essay of Zhang Shishan's book "Li yu su: Zai tianye zhong lijie Zhongguo" in *Western Folklore Journal*.

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#### NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Dr. Mark Bender and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions and comments.
2. For a discussion on the general application process, qualifications, and roles of representative transmitters of national-level Intangible Cultural Heritage items, see You (2020, 205–7).
3. Interview with Fan Zuren, January 12, 2020.
4. Xiaomin claimed that in the past people defined the Day of Shuzhuo as the first fifteen days of every month. Chen Xiaomin, WeChat communication, June 30, 2021.

5. Interview with Fan Zuren, January 12, 2020.
6. For more theoretical discussions and case studies on the interaction between the state and local society, see Zhang (2019).
7. It means in addition to having more blessings, a longer life, and more children, one prospers like the high hills, the mountain masses, the topmost ridges, and the greatest bulks; one increases like the stream ever coming on; one is also like the moon advancing to the full; like the sun ascending the heavens; like the age of the southern hills, never waning, never falling; and is like the luxuriance of the fir and the cypress. One being like these nine things originally comes from the *Book of Odes*.
8. Translated by Charles Egan (2010, 41).
9. *Jiuzhou* (nine districts) is another name for China.
10. In 1965, Arthur Wolf's (1974, 131–82) article *Ghosts, Gods, and Ancestors* interpreted the folk supernatural world of Chinese society as reflecting its imperial bureaucracy, whose line of argument was picked up by Emily Ahern (1981) and Stephan Feuchtwang (2001). Ahern argues that Chinese people's ritual interactions with spirits are often modeled on political processes, which is conducive to the established authorities. Feuchtwang's presentation of imperial metaphor means that the performance and imagery of local religious rituals and festivals display a sense of place and power that works as a supplementary universe to that of the ruling orthodoxy.
11. Interview with Chen Xiaomin, June 2016.
12. Interview with Wang Hongsheng, May 26, 2021.
13. Interview with Wang Hongsheng, May 26, 2021.

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## Reviews

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## Film Review

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**Coralyn V. Davis, prod., Carlos Gomez, dir., and M. S. Suman, writer.**  
***Sama in the Forest***

United States, 2023, 77 minutes, color. <http://cinemanga.org/news/sama-in-the-forest/>

The stories and rituals told and enacted by humans everywhere are a key component of defining our identities, aspirations, and dreams as well as our challenges and boundaries. Based on the well-known story “Sama” and its associated annual ritual Sama Chakeva from the Mithila region of northern India, *Sama in the Forest* explores issues of changing gender norms through an innovative and compelling mingling of storytelling, art, and theater.

In Mithila, a cultural region that spans the India-Nepal border in northern Bihar, girls and women frequently tell the story of Sama, a tale that celebrates the brother-sister tie that is so important to women across northern India. Given the historical and current predominance of arranged marriages and often strained relations between a woman’s natal and affinal families, the brother-sister link is a vital connection for sisters disconnected from their core kin. Disconnected from her kin in her affinal family due to rules about visits and communications, a woman’s brother often is her only connection to her natal family, and when things go wrong in her marital home, her refuge.

The other dominant theme relates to the rules governing female behavior, especially mobility outside of the home, as it relates to a family’s respect and place in society. This film, produced by Coralyn V. Davis of Bucknell University while on a Fulbright scholarship in the northern Bihari town of Madhubani, is an innovative portrayal of that tale, its associated ritual, and issues of changing gender behavior in a conservative region in modern Bihar.

The core story is simple: the god Krishna, here married, has a son and a daughter, Samb and Sama. As a properly devoted and loving sister, Sama takes superb care of her brother Samb, making sure that he gets to school, that he is fed properly, and that he is well taken care of. He reciprocates her love, but as he matures, he leaves Krishna’s palace for foreign places. Sama too matures and wishes she could move out of the confines of the palace as her maids and others do. At one point she says: “I would like to feel what the world outside is like.” Eventually she quietly leaves the palace to venture into the forest, a wild place where normal rules and norms do not apply. There she picks flowers and eventually begins to care for a sage in deep meditation under a banyan tree. She cleans his space and provides food.

Watching her is Chakeva, the sage's son, a kind and loving young man. Soon they meet and fall in love. But watching them is Chugla, a servant in the palace who, like all servants, thrives on gossip. He soon tells Krishna that his beloved daughter is not only wandering in the forest every morning but is friends with a strange boy. (Chugla, one narrator tells us, hopes that once Sama is compelled to remain in the palace, he can win her for himself). One narrator says that she doesn't know which came first, Chugla (the name) or Chugli (*cughli*), the Hindi-Urdu term for gossip. As the film continues with its focus on the real world of twenty-first-century Madhubani, gossip emerges as a strong driving force in controlling women's behavior. As women move into the modern world, they are no longer isolated in their homes but visible on the streets and in schools and jobs. Several narrators remind the viewer that a woman's every move outside the house is watched by thousands of eyes, and the respect of the family is dependent upon its women's behavior.

Furious at learning of Sama's time in the forest, Krishna turns both Sama and Chakeva, along with all the sages and ascetics living there, into birds to fly in the forest forever. Returning home, Samb discovers what his father has done to his beloved sister and vows to meditate for ten thousand years if needed to regain her human form. Meanwhile, Chugla is vilified for his evil gossip, but he sets the forest on fire to force the love birds out. The villagers respond by encircling the forest and push Chugla back whenever he tries to escape. Samb's meditation is successful: Sama and Chakeva regain their human forms and marry.

The uniqueness of this telling is its presentation. Davis, filmmaker Carlos Gomez, and writer (and Mithila native) M. S. Suman combine storytelling, traditional theater, and the renowned Mithila art form to tell the story—and eventually the associated ritual. Key moments are told via theater, but storytelling and associated comments on values and norms dominate, with a mixture of some five main female tellers, ranging in age from those in their late teens to those possibly in their eighties. These include the three middle-aged teachers at the Mithila Art Institute, Davis's main affiliation in Madhubani. Several men also tell their concerns and stories. This mixture of voices both provides variety for the viewer and validity of the values being discussed across ages, gender, and social position. Equally important is the introduction of Davis, Gomez, and Suman and their roles in situ early in the film.

A fall ritual (Sama-Chakeva) celebrating the brother-sister tie is the focus of the latter portion of the film. A wicker basket is filled with clay figures representing the characters in the story as well as the forest, presented with a clay base and long straw topping. Gathering in households or small community groups, the girls sing of Sama and Chakeva and voice obscenities and abuse to Chugla. The forest is then set on fire, and Chugla's mustache and hair are ritually burned. The ritual ends with the girls' brothers breaking their "bird" Sama figures to free her once again. This will give the brothers long lives and prosperity.

While the first portion of the film concentrates on the core story told through the various forms and multiple voices, the latter portion focuses on issues of change, particularly girls' and women's gender roles. Sama's trips to the forest become one young woman's desire to study in a college some distance away. One male artist complains that the girls should not be out at night for their ritual. He also laments his inability to take his wife "out" with him, as it is not safe and one bit of gossip would ruin his family's reputation. A teenage girl says that it is not good for women to travel as their needs

can't be met. As she notes, boys and men can sleep on a footpath while women need better accommodations. The old times when women were purposely kept oppressed and secluded in family compounds are gently compared to more modern times when girls are educated and moving about. One young woman explains that people were sad when a girl was born and they didn't want to even educate her as she'd be leaving their family soon. In contrast, she explained that a boy's birth led to immediate discussions of how they'd spend the dowry obtained when he married.

This is a rich offering with multiple points of entry and themes. In a time of rapid change, it retains a focus on women's mobility, education, and male-female relationships. Other forms of female oppression and violence to women are absent, but given the tenor and mood created here they are rightfully ignored.

This film is slow paced and also captured in haunting soft background music and interludes of rural scenery, but the varied forms of storytelling and the multiple voices, who this viewer began to relate to rather quickly, were highly effective and not boring. Yet for classroom use, it is long—most probably two sessions. I think some significant cuts would be beneficial, but clearly were not the goal of this team. On the plus side, the cinematography is superb—the image of Chugla watching the lovers in the forest is forever stuck in my brain. Despite this, the content is such that there are multiple points of discussion. For example, when talking about a girl's possible relationships with boys, the narrator goes on a riff about Krishna's dallying with seventy thousand milkmaids (*gopīs*) as an example of the inequality of rules for men and women and lamenting Krishna's unfair treatment of his daughter. In addition to presenting a changing society challenging entrenched societal norms with wonderful commentators, it is beautiful, compelling, and truly ingenious.

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## China

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**Wilt L. Idema and Allard M. Olof**  
*The Legend of Prince Golden Calf in China and Korea*

Amherst: Cambria Press, 2022. 308 pages. Paperback, \$49.99. ISBN: 9781638571261.

This co-authored book by Wilt L. Idema and Allard Olof, two leading scholars of early Chinese and Korean vernacular literature respectively, contains complete translations of seven variants of the legend of Prince Golden Calf from the two countries. The earliest source of this subject is the apocryphal Buddhist scripture *The Sutra on How a Filial and Obedient Son Achieved Buddhahood by Self-Cultivation, Pronounced by the Buddha* (*Fo shuo xiao shun zi xiu xing cheng fo jing*), which dates to around the sixth century. This text survived only in fragments among manuscripts found in the sealed library of the Dunhuang cave temple. Later, this legend became popular in both China and Korea, but the majority of written versions date to the comparatively later period (seventeenth-nineteenth centuries).

In this book, the authors attempt to trace the origins of this subject, which is a difficult task. Its earliest written version adopted the format of the jataka, a story of one of the

prior lives of the Buddha. However, this subject still has not been discovered among known jatakas and other texts in different versions of the Buddhist canon. Still, there are some signs that indicate the foreign provenance of this subject in China. At any rate, it was not completely a product of Chinese culture.

The second version of this story included in this volume comes from the *Record of the Ten Stages of Self-Cultivation of Tathagata Shakyamuni (Shijia Rulai shi di xiu xing ji)*, the Chinese work from around the fourteenth century that survived only as a Korean reprint. This work has dropped from circulation in China and at an unknown date was brought to Korea, where it enjoyed popularity; the earliest surviving edition of this collection was reprinted in Korea in 1660. In this text, the story also takes the jataka form, and the other nine narratives in this collection retell famous jatakas. Later Korean redactions of this story presumably were based on this source. One of them, *The Story of Golden Calf (Kŭm Songaji Chŏn)*, translated from the late-period transcription published in 1923, is also included in this volume. This narrative was very important in Korea, as it was considered to be one of Korea's earliest novels.

Thus, this work takes a transcultural comparative approach and is centered on interconnections between Chinese and Korean literature. This subject demonstrates the influence of Chinese vernacular literature in early modern Korea. The original version of *Golden Calf* transmitted to Korea was a prosimetric text (i.e., it includes a significant number of poems, which was typical of Chinese vernacular narratives). Such borrowings are less well-known than those in the field of classical literature. The traditional Korean perception of this tale as an indigenous one is especially noteworthy. Only recently has it been confirmed that its original version was composed in China. It is not a unique case; another example of a completely “naturalized” Chinese narrative with Buddhist meaning was the legend of Butcher Zhang that became well-known in Vietnam, and its Chinese origin also was forgotten (Nguyen 2022).

Another extended version of this narrative from China is *the Precious Scroll of Golden Calf*, an undated modern manuscript possessed by a performer from Gangkou in Zhangjiagang, Jiangsu. It is a performance-oriented text, which preserves the Buddhist connotations of this story. Its translation by Idema is supplemented by the translation of a prequel found in the lithographic edition of another recension of the precious scroll, printed by Youxin publishers in Hangzhou in 1924. Thus, a reader of this volume can observe the development and transformation of this story in China.

In a special research note, the editors have put *The Story of Golden Calf* into the context of oral literature studies. It represents the motif 707 of Aarne-Thompson-Uther's (ATU) system of classification of the folktale types (The Three Golden Sons). In folk literature, it is often combined with one or more other motifs, as we also see in the earliest Chinese version. In China, it is also represented by the famous tale “Crown Prince Replaced by a Cat” (later associated with the famous Judge Bao), and the authors have suggested historical connections between the two. The subject of the Golden Calf fits into a broad picture of connections between jatakas and folk literature. It is well-known that many folktales widespread across Eurasia can be traced back to ancient Indian transcriptions. In this regard one can ask the question of how typical is the story of the Golden Calf, first appearing as a Chinese jataka?

Another mode of adaptation of a Chinese Buddhist tale in Korea is represented by the tale of Prince Allakkuk that is based on the Chinese material but was greatly elaborated on in the vernacular Korean narrative, the earliest version of which is included in the

*Wōlin Sōkbo* (Moon Impressions and Sakya's Record) collection (1459). It is considered to be another earliest indigenous story in Korea, though also presented as a jataka story. The translation of its earliest recension also is included in this collection of translations.

Concerning the research part of the book, chapter 1 consists of an overview of Chinese literature concerning bovine (*niu*) subjects, demonstrating their important place in traditional Chinese culture. Though not directly connected with *The Story of Golden Calf*, it presents a background of the story's development in China, and thus may be especially useful for nonspecialist readers.

*The Legend of Prince Golden Calf in China and Korea* makes rare textual materials on folklore and popular literature more accessible, so the book can be highly recommended not only for specialists but also students of Chinese and Korean literature, as well as all those interested in world folklore, comparative literature, and the history of intercultural exchange and translation in East Asia. It is an impressive contribution to the field, combining high-quality translations of intriguing premodern narratives with a necessary introduction to their historical background and special features. Still, this volume does not contain an extended analysis of differences between early Chinese and Korean versions, which could be very useful. The authors did not provide information on the spread of this story's subject in the literature of other East and Central Asian countries. Tracing the history of transmission of this motif (ATU 707) throughout Eurasia also is a task awaiting further research. One can hope that these unanswered questions can attract potential researchers of this topic, when they read the book by Idema and Olof.

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**David George Johnson**

***The Stage in the Temple: Ritual Opera in Village Shanxi***

Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2022. 190 pages. Paperback, \$25.00; paperback + ebook, \$37.50; ebook, \$24.95. ISBN: 9781557292018 (paperback), 9781557292025 (ebook).

The next time you walk into a temple complex in China, turn around and look to your left and right. There, you will often see an empty stage that faces the main hall housing the temple's deity or deities. During temple festivals, operas are performed on these stages for the entertainment of those deities and the festival attendees who stand and sit on stools set up in front of the stage. *The Stage in the Temple: Ritual Opera in Village Shanxi* is about some of the local operas that have been performed on temple stages in southwest Shanxi Province in northern China over many centuries.

The book's author, David Johnson, begins the introduction with an impassioned and elegant tribute to the importance of studying village life in China, in which the operas

performed at temple festivals discussed in this book play a central role. Throughout the book, one is struck by the importance of ritual operas in local society and the staying power of particular local genres over centuries. The evidence of this can be seen in the number of stages. Johnson notes that before the Cultural Revolution, there were almost ten thousand stages in Shanxi, most in temple compounds, and “in the high Qing, the numbers must have been considerably greater” (5). As “an integral part of the rituals honoring gods’ birthdays” (*ibid.*), these operas “were old, deeply rooted in their villages, and essential to the rituals that brought blessings to the village and protection from bad weather, disease, bandits, and the like” (11). While performance traditions tend to navigate a vital line between continuity and change (cf. Toelken 1996), Johnson notes that the ritual operas he writes about “were intensely conservative because they were offerings to the gods; some villagers believed that changing the scripts would displease them” (3). According to Johnson, this conservatism essentially shielded the genre from the influence of other genres, with the local ritual opera scripts focused “almost entirely about events in Chinese history” (*ibid.*).

Johnson notes that much of the research for this book was originally done for his book *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China* (2009), but he found that his in-depth discussion of ritual opera and the larger questions he raises about content and function ultimately required an entirely new book, thus giving rise to *The Stage in the Temple*. This new book fills in several lacunae, both geographically and textually. Johnson notes that while *Spectacle and Sacrifice* focused on village festivals in southeastern Shanxi Province, the ritual opera scripts of that region have been lost. In contrast, *The Stage in the Temple* focuses on a number of handwritten scripts from southwestern Shanxi of a local ritual opera genre known as Za Opera (*zaju*) (a different genre from the more famous Yuan dynasty *zaju*, which the author refers to as “Yuan Drama”). Following the introduction, the book is divided into four sections, which look at scripts of Za Opera, the history of the genre, how village opera was performed, and various questions raised, together with the author’s conclusion. There are also three appendices that provide a list of temple stages in Shanxi Province, several of which are still extant, a discussion of the provenance of the scripts, and a list of scripts donated by the author to the C. V. Starr East Asian Library at the University of California, Berkeley. The latter will serve as an important resource for scholars who want to do further research on these operas in the future.

The first section of the book, “Scripts of Za Opera,” looks at opera scripts “collected by government teams in southwestern Shanxi villages between the 1950s and 1980s” (11). Many of the operas are of the military-historical variety, “focus[ing] on military action involving well-known historical figures” (66). Their protagonists are not plucked from village life but are instead “kings and generals,” and the operas “are set not in villages but in the palaces and battlefields of great dynasties of the past” (152). Some of the operas are moral and didactic, while others are amoral and heterodox. Johnson focuses on eight scripts out of dozens available, analyzing their plots and themes, and conducting a bit of textual sleuthing as to possible influences and sources. In some cases, he points to particular operas’ connections to novels and other literary works; Johnson looks at similarities and differences between the versions, noting a conflict in one opera “is presented in harsher terms in the village opera” than the novel (16), and how, in another opera, *The Banquet at Hongmen* (*Hongmen hui*), “the high drama of *Records of the Historian and Romance of Western Han* has been turned into innocuous entertainment” (20).

For the latter opera, Johnson discusses different registers of speech in the opera that suggest a combination of sources, including the novel, storytelling traditions, and so on. While Johnson writes, “that these elements survived the transfer from storytelling to stage suggests that the playwright had an extremely crude conception of opera,” he adds, “this is solid evidence that *The Banquet at Hongmen* was little influenced by mainstream drama and may well have been in part very old” (21). Johnson does a good job of including the reader in his process of textual research. For example, later he writes about the opera *Changban Slope* (*Changban po*), “The substantial amount of verse in the script suggests that a ballad or *chantefable* may possibly have been a source, so I looked at two candidates—a sixty-six-page *shipaishu* version and a twenty-two-page ‘Big Drumsong’ (*dagushu*) version—but neither bore any resemblance whatsoever to the opera” (29–30). For another opera, *The Fire Assault Stratagem* (*Huogong ji*), which draws on the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Johnson writes, “Although the action of the opera closely follows the novel, sometimes using the novel’s exact phrasing, the opera also drops many incidents and adds new ones” (31).

Several of the scripts examined “show a connection, never close, with Ming novels” (32), and the Za Operas are diverse enough that Johnson suggests that “there is no Za Opera genre in the narrow formal sense” (33). The operas range in length, content (humorous versus serious), and political or religious morals. In looking for what ties them together, Johnson writes, “What they have in common is neither literary form (though most verses are written in seven-character lines) nor content (though historical subjects are heavily favored) but their mode of performance: the roles were played by villagers, the music and stagecraft were unsophisticated and probably very old, and they were performed on temple stages” (33–34). Noting the combination of unique local variations and the way the operas were carefully conserved over time, he extends his idea from *Spectacle and Sacrifice* of the “ritual autarky” of northern Chinese villages to what he calls “operatic autarky”—fiercely held local traditions of opera scripts and performance (34).

There is clearly an intentionality and a selectivity involved in the composition of these scripts. In *Thrice Inviting Zhuge Liang* (*San qing*), an opera from Xinzhuang village in southwestern Shanxi about the ruler Liu Bei’s repeated attempts to acquire the brilliant Zhuge Liang as his military strategist, Johnson shows how the opera rewords language from the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* for expressive purposes and dramatic effect: “Here the author takes a passage from the novel, changes a few words, and radically changes its meaning. He is turning the language of the novel to his own purposes” (39). Although the opera scripts could be edited and restored by local educated elite, the villagers saw each opera as “part of their patrimony as a village, and the writer felt an obligation to hand it on to future generations in the best possible condition” (44, italics in original). Johnson concludes, “Clearly there was what we would call a Xinzhuang Village identity, and this opera was part of it” (*ibid.*). Part of the building blocks of that identity were what Johnson calls the operas’ “tableaux,” referring to “moments of high drama in popular operas that formed a cultural vocabulary for people in all walks of life” (58). He notes that the playwright’s confidence that “his village audience would understand the allusion [to those moments of high drama] shows just how present opera was in the minds of ordinary people” (*ibid.*).

The second section discusses the origins and early development of the genre; its early stages; local funding, which shows the early popularity of ritual theater in various localities; and the presence of ritual opera-related objects in tombs. Johnson notes that



across classes “opera was intimately connected with ritual life” and “it appears that by the twelfth century opera had taken hold all across the society of rural southern Shanxi and northern Henan and no doubt elsewhere in north China” (87). He goes on to discuss the effects of various historical migrations on the spread of the genre and notes the continuity of elements within the genre from the Song dynasty to the early twentieth century. As further support for the idea that such elements could persist over centuries, he looks at village opera material from Anhui Province as a “parallel tradition,” suggesting that “the Anhui material provides us with irrefutable evidence that village ritual opera could last virtually unchanged for many centuries” (99).

The third section, “Village Opera in Performance,” looks at Za Operas and other genres performed in villages, noting how “remarkable similarities in stagecraft” suggest that many “village opera genres in north China . . . had a common ancestor” (111). One “archaic element” (157) common to several of these genres is the role of the Director, a sort of master of ceremonies who leads community prayers for the village, summarizes the plot of each opera for the audience, invites the actors to the stage, and acts in minor accompanying roles (118). Johnson notes several ritual opera genres in other localities with similar roles, variously referred to as the Bamboo Staff-Holder, the Master, the Announcer, and the Leader (157). Other genres addressed in this section include *yuanben*, which was part of festivals but not ritual programs, consisting of “off-color farces that were performed at night behind the locked gates of the temple compound” (126); *Tiaoxi*, a genre from across the Yellow River in Shaanxi Province; and others.

The fourth and final section, “Questions and Conclusion,” addresses the probable functions and rationale for these ritual operas. Johnson begins by comparing Za Operas to other types of popular village plays, such as those translated in Sidney Gamble’s well-known collection (Gamble 1970) and the abundance of shadow puppet plays (*piyingxi*) in the region. Johnson notes that many of these popular plays speak to themes of contemporary importance to the lives of their local audiences and suggests that such plays can provide “a window into the feelings of ordinary people” (150). As an example, when an oppressed female character fights back against those who bully her, members of the audience may experience a vicarious enjoyment of speaking back to those in power. However, the Za Operas seem to be focused almost exclusively on historical and military dramas involving superhuman characters. Johnson asks if the Za Operas might be “intended to teach orthodox morality” but decides against this idea, given the way the ritual operas “portray violent conflict, ranging from assassination to rebellion to grand battles” (154). A key difference between the Za Operas and other popular village plays is that the former’s key function was “as offerings to the gods,” while the latter were intended “as entertainment” (152).

Regarding the historical and military subject material, Johnson suggests that there was a standard understanding, going back to the Song dynasty, that historical operas were “what the gods preferred” (156). As to why deities preferred this type of opera as ritual offerings, Johnson writes that “men in the great dynasties of the past—kings, noblemen, and generals, men who shaped history—were the most powerful of terrestrial beings” and “only their stories were appropriate offerings to the divine Powers” (*ibid.*). He also notes connection between rituals and opera in terms of their performativity—both belonged to “a single system of scripted performances; they were *alike*” (*ibid.*, italics in original).

While the principal purpose of the Za Operas was as ritual offerings for the gods, Johnson points to several elements of the operas that would have appealed to their human audiences. Besides offering “exciting spectacles,” the operas “showed that even at the highest levels, life was struggle—war, in fact” (155). They also taught that cleverness and cunning outweigh virtuous behavior, a point that Johnson describes as “peasant wisdom writ large” (ibid.). At the same time, the operas “provided an elementary sense of the functioning of the Chinese state in those lofty realms that farmers would never experience personally,” giving them “a rudimentary conceptual vocabulary for national politics” (ibid.). Given the way that villagers themselves were involved in the editing, performance, and percussive accompaniment of these ritual operas, Johnson concludes that the Za Operas “helped the villagers make Chinese history their own history” and “in a sense taught them what China was” (ibid.).

This book, together with Johnson’s previous work, represents a groundbreaking contribution to our understanding of ritual performance in China. *The Stage in the Temple* would make an excellent addition to undergraduate courses on Chinese and East Asian popular religion, performance, and popular culture.

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***Memory Making in Folk Epics of China: The Intimate and Local in Chinese Regional Literature***

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Since the New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century, the question of whether the Han Chinese have an epic tradition has been a subject of scholarly inquiry and debate. The question of whether there were epic traditions circulating within the borders of China is a somewhat different question, one that began being answered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the discovery of epics (*shishi*) among Mongol, Tibetan, and Kirghiz ethnic groups in the north and western areas and among certain minority groups in the southwest. By the end of the 1950s, many epic traditions had been cataloged from these and other groups in a process that has resulted in extensive documentation by think tanks such as the Institute of Ethnic Literature in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. By most definitions, these epics of the ethnic minority groups, divided by Chinese scholars into the northern/western heroic epics (*yingxiong shishi*) and the origin or creation epics (*chuangshi shishi*) of the

south/southwest, conform to long-standing conceptions of “epics,” a term derived from the Greeks with associations of the heroic character-types of the Homeric epics. The ancient cosmogonic epics of the Middle East (such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which were not called “epics” in their respective languages), provide instructive parallels to the origin/creation epics of south China. This leaves the question of “Han” epic traditions on the table. Scholars of the New Culture Movement, such as Wang Guowei, early on raised questions of the existence of a Chinese epic tradition, and later Zheng Zhenduo suggested that the local prosimetric forms of *baojuan*, *tanci*, and *pinghua* in both orally delivered and written-to-be-read formats could qualify as epics due to prosody and length, though there has been resistance to including them under what has become an ever-expanding global recognition of long narrative poems or prosimetric works under the culturally powerful title of “epic.” In the Chinese case, nativist terms for these long poems and prosimetric works include *jiangchang wenxue* and *shuochang wenxue*, and many or most are considered part of the giant family of *quyi* (art of melodies) forms, which in some instances has included the long narrative poem styles of some minorities that are widely termed as epics (including Tibetan, Hezhen, and Bai) (Zhongguo Dabaikequanshu 1983, 13–14). Since the refocusing on folk literature after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), certain candidates for the title of an epic originating among the Han people have occasionally arisen, especially since the 1980s. One of these is the prosimetric cosmogonic long narrative called *Hei yin zhuan* (Legend of Darkness), which in many ways parallels content in creation/origin epics from the southwest minority groups (Liu 2002, 5–6). Another candidate is the 1,350-line version of an oral poem called *Guo Dingxiang* concerning a love triangle tied to the origin of the stove god, which has been called the “number one epic of the Central Plains” (Bai 2007, 1–2).

In *Memory Making in Folk Epics of China*, the author’s most recent study of Lower Yangzi Delta folk culture, Anne McLaren employs the term “folk epics” to describe the “long narrative songs” (*changpian xushi ge*, as noted in the introduction, xvi)—a current term among Chinese academics that is influenced by terminology in *Oral Epics of India* (Blackburn et al. 1989). This utilization of “epic” to describe a Lower Yangzi oral art tradition is very much in the trend to move away from the narrow confines of the Greek heroic model (and Chinese associations of “*shishi*” with Mongol, Tibetan, Kirghiz, and other groups’ heroic epics) by contemporary scholars worldwide. McLaren stresses length, prosody, narrative, and the formative effect on community identity. In this context, the term “folk” suggests an association with orally delivered texts within (assumed) rural communities that are less literary than written-to-be read epics (whether oral-connected or otherwise), although the calculus changes once the orally performed epics enter into the process of transcription, translation, editing, and publication, and orally transmitted texts become artifacts in writing (Honko 2000, 15–18).

McLaren offers readers deep insights into the folklore of the Lower Yangzi that will inform other studies of the folk literature of this region. Of particular interest is the “feminized rice spirit” that invokes a “ritual technology” of ritual and agrarian practice and concepts of sexuality that McLaren details at some length (xviii). Another key term in this work is the “epichonic,” meaning the ecology of expressive forms that circulate within the linguistic and sociocultural boundaries within a local environment that it supposes molds key aspects of the local culture—as does wet rice agriculture. The theme of environmental context in relation to local folklore and folk literature is explored throughout the text, aptly beginning with the theme of water in chapter 1. A key theme of

the book, discussed in the coda, is “memory making.” McLaren states that “remembering” refers to both the “singer’s concentrated toil in ‘remembering’ (composing) the song or folk epic and to the memories of the past that the song transmits,” and the idea that singers “draw on a range of memory frameworks that implicitly involved notions of time passing and space crossing” (215). The notion of frameworks—and their content—aids in drawing attention to the manipulation of many sorts of details and identifying processes that unfold within versions of the narratives in the transmission process.

In chapter 1, McLaren examines a “culture of locality” (xiii) in the Lower Yangzi Delta, stressing the importance of working intimately in local languages, communicative styles, and idioms in the context of local culture as it exists in the larger framework of China. The author’s effective fieldwork strategies have yielded a study of great insight into the social meaning of the body of folk songs that help understand the regional cultures of the lower Yangzi in the not-so-distant past and into the present. Chapter 2 focuses on reconstructing a historical context for the folk epics of the Lake Tai region, investigating the impact of factors including song competitions, amateur song troupes, and the market for books that contributed to the formation of the long-sung narratives. Focus is first on the early phases of the Wu kingdom in antiquity, then the late imperial period, with Feng Menglong’s song anthology of the early nineteenth century, folk opera, printed song booklets, and song competitions held in rural marketplaces or special timber pavilions down into modern times. Song troupes composed of skilled amateur singers were sometimes hired seasonally to relieve the monotony of rice planting and were in greater demand in the flatlands than in the mountains, which saw less agricultural production. McLaren notes other geographical factors such as travel by boat that contributed to the transmission and formation of the long-style folk songs in local flatland contexts.

Chapter 3 examines how the convergence of versions of the folk epic *Shen Seventh Brother* and local geography dialogue with the “canonical myth” of Wu Taibo, who is said to have brought civilization from the cosmopolitan northern Chinese regions to the “barbarian” Yangzi delta region millennia ago and is remembered in two local historical monuments (8). In a process of cultural mitigation, the story of *Shen Seventh Brother* practically displaces the civilization-builder Wu in folk epics that relate how he and an immortal maiden introduce sedentary rice cultivation (something Wu Taibo of the millet-raising north would not have done) and folk singing to the locals, who in the words of the epic, “wore skins for clothes, dwelt in shacks, and plucked berries from the wild” (79–80).

Chapter 4 delves into the song of “Fifth Daughter,” the best documented and best known of the regional folk epics. The appendix supplies a rather literal translation of key passages of the version sung by Lu Amei (c. 1981). A version based on her singing was published soon after and helped bring the tradition to the attention of scholars. As McLaren notes, “Fifth Daughter” concerns illicit love, a theme common in the so-called “mountain songs” (*shange*) and folk epics of the region (and with parallels in antiphonal song traditions in other regional cultures in China, such as the Guangxi love songs (*qingge*) tradition and northwestern flower songs (*hua'er*). The sample passages in the appendix illustrate how the folk epic tradition is a merger of mountain songs that feature many common motifs and formulaic lines entwined within narration and conventions for revealing thoughts of characters and brief passages of spoken dialogue. McLaren supplies a fascinating discussion of the themes of the “secret passion type” (116) of the epic narratives, which feature tragic outcomes of illicit affairs. They are

framed in the tradition as actions of real people living a few generations before, and structured “entirely around kinship relations” (ibid.), which form a contextual web in which a young woman of the family (always referenced by a kinship number, such as third, fourth, or fifth daughter) and an outside lover (often with some sort of associations with urban places across the delta) become ensnared. The folk epics serve on one level as cautionary tales, but the effect is compounded in the embodied “lamentation” (112) mode of the singers, especially when evoking the lingering ghostly presence of the victims of what is often familial violence in the local area. In the discussion of “Fifth Daughter,” McLaren describes the rhetorical features of performance in the “Twelfth Month Flower Song” ballad form, which is utilized by contemporary singers. It is a more concise mode of delivery than the long narrative versions (of which Lu Amei was the sole remaining singer) and is organized on the annual cycle of blooming flowers (119). Aside from changes in voice tenor in the lamentation mode, a singer may employ shifts in bodily movements and melody, along with paralinguistic conventions such as the “*diluo sheng*” (121), which mimics the sounds of sudden bursts of rain, so common in regional weather patterns and related to local rice paddy weeding tunes. Lu Amei’s long-version performances, which feature some aspects of the twelve-month style, provide much more elaboration of scenes and detail of local folk customs. One example illustrates the “complex visual code of romance” by describing embroidered patterns of peonies, lotus buds, persimmons, and dragonflies on four handkerchiefs presented to the fifth daughter by her itinerant peddler lover, the young Atian (127). Certain passages, sung depending on the nature of the audience, are sexually suggestive and at times explicit. In some versions, subplots involving the fate of a fourth sister are also related. Thus, the folk epic tradition in the long form featured a flexible frame of performance manipulated at will by the singer’s needs.

Chapter 5, “Replacing the Bride,” concerns what the folk consider “real” (164) stories on the theme of the replacement of a wife or betrothed, and includes plots with ghost marriages that deal with the “vexed issue” of how to ensure the dead (which could be a wife spurned in favor of a younger sister, or a male that dies of lovesickness after his plans of replacement are thwarted by family objections) are appropriately commemorated. Such themes are clearly productive for embellishing into longer narrative content. McLaren offers several versions from oral and written sources of such “unconventional liaisons” and suggests that the songs containing descriptions of courtship and lovemaking are in essence mourning songs for those who ruined their lives through moral transgressions, linking this sentiment to the folk idea of good harvests resulting from the proper nurturing of rice (139).

Chapter 6 concerns the “The Song of ‘Hua Mountain Lifter’”; with a transcribed version at twenty thousand lines, it is the longest of the Yangzi delta epics. The epic deals with masculine heroism and violence, narrating the exploits of a band of renegade farmers who resist imperial and local militia forces in their mountain fortress. McLaren expounds on the theme of violence that runs through many of the other epics and notes how the “Lifter” epic differs from the well-known Chinese classic *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuàn*), set in northern China, which has appeared in written and oral forms for a millennium, differing especially in the more positive portrayal of women. The song is unique because it is the product of one family; due to its subversive content, it was transmitted (until recently) only by men and in relative secrecy. As with the other chapters, McLaren summarizes the themes and content of versions of the epic (which

are related to collective memories of rebellions, rent resistance movements, etc.) and presents background on singers, which sometimes includes snippets of interviews and passages of songs.

In the coda, McLaren reflects on the process of creation in epics performed since the late 1990s, when the inroads of modernization were rapidly supplanting the material culture of farming and other aspects of the traditional agricultural cycle that had survived largely intact into the early decades of the PRC and was available as context to singers and audiences alike—a tradition that for now seems to have gone silent. With the emergence of newer lifeways and cultural actors, the question of how memories are made and transmitted in the process of performance (or other means of transmission) is discussed, interwoven with the theme of how cultural memories were transmitted over generations in the previously oral realm of song and story. McLaren notes the role of stock imagery that resonates to maintain memories, including that of the environment and agricultural cycle, items of material culture (such as the embroidered love tokens), scenes of disputes between protagonists, the “agonistic dialogues” that in resolution propel the narrative forward, and the stock language of intimacy and emotion (sometimes erotic) that in turn invites heightened focus on the performative actions of characters, with undertones of a moral order based on the goals of successful rice harvests that is more “agrarian” than Confucian (219–20). Many of McLaren’s observations could be profitably applied to other long narrative poetic/prosimetric traditions in China, including other recently identified Han local epics previously mentioned and the more urbane Lower Delta professional storytelling traditions.

McLaren’s comprehensive and insightful treatment of a distinct oral narrative form in the Lower Yangzi Delta will serve as model and inspiration for further studies of Chinese oral narratives that now may exist in a variety of mediums, including online formats. The term “epic” engenders powerful cultural “soft power” for governmental and business entities that seek to place their heritage items on global display. The term may also open up access to scholars and others working outside the nativist academic circles that would utilize Chinese categories created since the early twentieth century. Whether these Delta narratives are best considered “epic” or as I have recently suggested “epic-adjacent” (a term allowing recognition of native categories), this study will become essential reading for folklorists and scholars of cultural heritage (Bender forthcoming).

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**Sidney C. H. Cheung**  
***Hong Kong Foodways***

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022. Ix + 104 pages. Paperback, \$15.00. ISBN: 9789888754359.

Sidney C. H. Cheung's concise and evocative book about the political stories of the production and consumption of ethnic and foreign cuisines in Hong Kong provides a delightful provocation for anthropologists and those who are interested in the cultural meanings and social significance of food in Hong Kong. Cheung covers various domains: migration, agricultural practices, globalization, gourmet eating, and heritage conservation. These changes in food production and consumption practices have become the object of the most important discourse in Hong Kong in the postwar and post-handover periods. Cheung has focused precisely on the changes in foodways since the postwar era and analyzed how people shift their patterns of consumption and identity politics with dramatic social and political transformation (6).

The book consists of five content chapters based on different periods in the postwar era and loosely different themes. Chapter 1, "Local Food Production," is purely historical. It sets the stage nicely by explaining how the ecological character and geographical location of Hong Kong gave rise to the local production and consumption of indigenous oysters since 977 BCE. Yet, large-scale fishpond farming and cultivation of *gei wai* shrimp began only after the 1950s due to British governance and the changing Hong Kong–China relationship (23–26). Chapter 2, "The Arrival of Migrants' Food in the Post-War Era," deftly explains how different groups of migrants have changed the foodscapes of Hong Kong, reflecting the evolvement of the economy from being an entrepot trading center for China during the immediate postwar period into an export-oriented light manufacturing industrial city during the 1950s and 1960s. On the one hand, many rich Shanghainese came to Hong Kong with capital, bringing in Shanghainese food ingredients and cuisines for self-consumption, business development, and identity expression. On the other hand, Hakka food was particularly popular among the workers of the light industries, due to the large amount of strongly favored meat, which provides the highest sources of energy.

Chapter 3, "The Rise of Nouvelle Cantonese and International Cuisines," carefully traces the different trends of the incoming Western-style restaurants. In addition, the study of the emergence of deluxe, hybrid Cantonese nouvelle cuisine, and that of Japanese cuisine and international cuisines, beautifully links the analysis of the forces of globalization and consumerism, such as tourism and the global food supply system, to social value, social class, and identity construction among the middle class in the postwar

era under the transformation of Hong Kong from an industrial economy to its successful development into a financial center.

Chapter 4, “In Search of Nostalgic Food,” uses *puhn choi* and private kitchen food as examples to illustrate the new meanings of a marginalized village food and everyday home-cooking that have played upon people’s nostalgia for tradition and remembrance of the “good old days,” as a reflection of the ambiguous emotion of the local people since the handover of Hong Kong to China. Chapter 5, “The Awareness of Food Heritage,” provokes readers to understand the importance of the systematic aspects of food heritage. By showing the ecological role of polyculture freshwater fish farming, the retail network of snakes, and family recipes with details, Cheung illuminates their connection with the transcended values embedded in the local social context for the benefits of global humanity (79), while at the same time raising important questions like the paradox of defining food heritage and the ways to preserve it.

The political stories of food production in this book are interesting. Throughout, Cheung convincingly argues that these consumption practices are intimately connected with the politics of production and consumption, not simply ecological or nutrition factors. Cheung effectively uses historical records to show deeper patterns that lie behind immediate change. Cheung draws on a trove of archive collection, ethnographic data, and personal reminiscences to explain the impact of geopolitics upon food production, the internationalization of Hong Kong foodways and the performance of identity, and the emergence of nostalgia under the context of rapid political change during the post-handover period.

As to the description of food, identity, migration, consumerism, globalization, and reinvention of tradition, this book is useful for non-Hong Kong specialists who are not familiar with these topics. For Hong Kong specialists and those who are familiar with recent developments in Hong Kong, there is hardly anything new. However, Sidney Cheung has done a fine job in showing chronologically how the popularity and decline of certain food practices are related to the changing food system, tastes, and social values that are connected with the rapid social change, economic development, and government policy in the postwar era of Hong Kong (79).

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## Japan

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**J. Christian Greer and Michelle K. Oing**

***Kumano Kodo: Pilgrimage to Powerspots***

Kyoto: OSGH Press, 2020. Paperback, \$18.00. ISBN: 9798985917307.

Kumano Kodō, or the “old roads of Kumano,” is a modern appellation for a constellation of historical pilgrimage routes on the Kii peninsula. Located on the southern tip of the peninsula, Kumano has a remarkable history that includes ancient asceticism, lavish journeys by retired emperors, devotion by the country’s first pilgrimage confraternities, the emergence of Japan’s mountain-based tradition of Shugendō, and more recently, recognition by UNESCO. Kumano has centered in cultural imagination throughout this history, ranging from an underworld for the dead in eighth-century mythology to a pure



land of the bodhisattva Kannon. In J. Christian Greer and Michelle K. Oing's recent *Kumano Kodo*, the region is again reimagined as a world populated by misfit *yōkai* (monsters) and *hidden kami* (local spirits), visible especially to the subversively inclined pilgrim.

The book is not an academic monograph, nor does it try to be. The authors, moreover, are not scholars of Japan (Greer studies religion and the global history of psychedelic spirituality, while Oing is an expert of sculpture and performance in late medieval Northern Europe). To familiarize themselves with Kumano, they cite useful anglophone research on the area. Their approach draws from pilgrimage studies (notably, Victor Turner and Edith Turner), heritage studies, *yōkai* and folklore studies, *manga*, and the beatnik movement. Styled as a travelog (that begins with daily itineraries, consumed beverages, and even “shit blasts”—or in more euphemistic terminology, dirty bowel movements taken on the pilgrimage), the book neatly divides into two parts: the first on the historical and present-day background of Kumano, and the second on Greer and Oing's pilgrimage along the Nakahechi (most well-known among the Kumano Kodō routes) to its three main sites of Hongū, Shingū, and Nachi. While the first part unfortunately lacks in factual accuracy and adequate background, the second makes up with an inspiring countercultural trip along the old road that is delightfully funny and intellectually engaging.

The first part, “Walking with Monsters,” attempts to situate the Kumano region within a series of significant historical moments, ancient up through the present. Their critiques on the environmental degradation of the Kii peninsula in service of Japan's imperial expansion as well as the political and economic motives behind UNESCO site designation raise valid concerns for the present condition of Kumano and stimulating points for discussion in the classroom. Yet readers should also proceed with caution, as some passages fall short on trustworthy information and context. For instance, the authors locate the temple of Ōminesanji (literally, “the temple of Mount Ōmine”) on Mount Kōya, an error that elsewhere confusingly (mis)places practitioners of Shugendō at Kōya, the famous Shingon headquarters, instead of Ōmine, the historical center of Shugendō. In a more conceptually problematic example, Greer and Oing assert in a section on Shinto that “the ideological program of Shinto, more accurately termed State Shinto, subsumed the archipelago's local cults under the unitary myth of divine sovereignty” in an “imperial take-over of Japan's spiritual universe” (54). This might be plausible if the time period in question was the late nineteenth century (when the term “State Shinto” is used by scholars). However, the authors locate this history in the ninth century, when the geographic reach of the court was quite limited and no ideology of Shinto yet existed. Mistakenly situating Kumano as forever suppressed by this alleged era of subjugation, the authors then seem to dismiss today's shrines (Hongū as the main example) and their clergy as cloaked in “the empty priestcraft of imperial religion” (57). This impression permeates their views on Shinto, yet I would venture that Shinto and all of its permutations are surely more vibrant than this sad assessment.

While this first part might induce scholars of Japanese religions to cringe at times, the second part, “Fieldnotes for the Nakahechi Route,” is worth the ride. Taking the style of a travelog, it is whimsical, irreverent, and reflective. The pages seem to channel the voices of Jack Kerouac (whom they regularly recall) in his wanderings as a Dharma Bum, Robert MacFarlane in his historically situated peregrinations, and perhaps even Hunter S. Thompson in his gonzo-style subjectivity. Their daily observations are reflected through a prism of *yōkai*, local spirits, and mythological deities—some haunting (like the hunger-

triggered *daru/hidaru*) and others protective (the antihero Susano'o serves as their guardian spirit). Setting out in March of 2020, even Covid-19 becomes a *yōkai* (Coronachan), casting a spectral haze of silence over Kumano and suspension of human activity around the world. Evenings are saturated by the steam of hot springs, the disappearing candlelight of ghost stories recounted in the old style of *Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai*, "impromptu fertility rituals," and hallucinatory dreams lurking with *bakemono* (strange beings) and ascetics at Nachi.

Despite some reservations I have, Greer and Oing's book ultimately offers an engaging journey into the Kumano region, punctuated by uncanny moments and humorously underlaid by a defiance against the bureaucratic engines of the state and UNESCO. Its pages invite us into a liminal plane that emerges on the social periphery of the pilgrim's path. In that sense, *Kumano Kodo* implicitly encourages its readers to explore the world themselves with heightened awareness, levity, and an openness to all that presents itself on and off the trail. Modeling this approach, they begin:

Following the polar star of high weirdness, the fellowship forged while trekking the pilgrimage road included lovers, animals, plants, *kami*, stones, synchronicities, weather patterns, *yokai*, and *bakemono*. Intercoursing with the spirits that haunt the annals of Japanese folklore (as well as the eccentric pantheons of saints, buddhas, and demons we already carried within ourselves), we unbounded our imagination. (xviii)

Having walked sections of the Nakahechi myself, I couldn't help but revisit my own memories of its uncanny subtleties and daydream about the next adventure. After putting down this book, I imagine many readers will feel beckoned to wander the old roads of Kumano or perhaps other lands of wonder.

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**Sonja Ganseforth and Hanno Jentsch, eds.**

***Rethinking Locality in Japan***

London: Routledge, 2022. 288 pages, 27 figures, 7 tables. Hardcover, \$176.00; paperback, \$48.95; ebook, \$36.71. ISBN: 9780367900823 (hardcover), 9780367469481 (paperback), 9781003032137 (ebook).

"Locality in Japan," as evoked in the title of this edited volume, has been a staple of Japanese studies for many decades, from the early ethnographies of rural villages (Embree 1937; Dore 1978) to more recent studies (Ivy 1995; Robertson 1991; Klien 2020). Locality and its many layers of meaning impact greatly everyday lives and high-end administrative choices. Accordingly, this volume focuses on the historical process of the constitution of locality, the actors involved, and the site-specific characteristics of local-ness in Japan. Originating from the 2018 German Institute for Japanese Studies symposium "What Is 'the Local' in Japan?," this edited volume is comprised of sixteen essays over four sections: "(Re)lating Localities as Lived Spaces in Japan," "Local Social World at Risk," "Localities Under Contestation," and "Local-National Dynamics."

In the introduction, the editors present the volume's core concepts as derived from the so-called "spatial turn" in the social sciences and humanities, according to which space is to be thought of "not as an objectifiable, homogeneous, and measurable container"

is to be thought of “not as an objectifiable, homogeneous, and measurable container” but rather “a contingent product of social, political, and cultural relations” (4). In the Japanese case, such relations take the shape of matters such as welfare, volunteering, depopulation, rural revitalization, brand invention, municipal administration, and other specific themes dealt with in the essays.

The first section, “(Re)lating Localities as Lived Spaces in Japan,” focuses on the discrepancies emerging between the lived spaces of informal everyday life and the formal space of administrative policing. Themes include individual well-being (Holthus and Manzenreiter), urban-rural dynamics in face of the ongoing aging and depopulation processes (Kelly), and neoliberalism (Klien). The second section, “Local Social Worlds at Risk,” examines the constitution as well as the threat of disintegration of *locales* (Giddens 1984) in relation to social, economic, and environmental changes, presenting studies on coping about nuclear risk (Katramiz), welfare, precarity, and neighborhood informality (Jentsch; Gagné).

The third section, “Localities Under Contestation,” focuses on municipality mergers and their consequences in the course the twentieth century and includes discussions of how local identities persevere under political and socioeconomic pressures to merge (Kramer); how transport services can preserve town borders and protect artificial unification from “above” (Thelen and Oguma); how coastal fishery cooperatives as composed by municipal and administrative boundaries but also as historical, informal, and cooperative places are reproduced (Gasenforth); and brand construction in winemaking terroir and rural revitalization in the countryside (Kingsbury).

The fourth and final section, “Local-National Dynamics,” presents reflections about the interaction between *locales* and macroscopic national administrative processes of transformation and (re)definition, with case studies focused on special forms of taxation and the moral connection with local areas. Rausch and Koji, for example, explore the formation of a moral space through the relation between locality and the idea of a “good” life. Hijino, however, focuses on local political representation or the lack thereof, as the autonomy of Japanese local governments is notoriously poor, leading to a weak citizens’ participation in local politics.

In the concluding chapter Peter Matanle produces a broad, reflective perspective on climate change and the threats it implies for humanity at large. The return to a more local and collective lifestyle (“decenter and decelerate,” 273), as advocated by several climate scientists and activist movements (see Dixon-Declève et al. 2022), appears to be a viable strategy to mitigate the damages we are quickly moving toward.

Considered synthetically, *Rethinking Locality in Japan* brings us a thorough and up-to-date mapping of the contemporary academic concerns about the subject, consolidated by vivid ethnographic testimonies as well as promising theoretical developments. It certainly represents a significant addition to the researcher’s and lecturer’s library, containing a precious reconnaissance of “hot” academic themes from a prestigious group of well-known researchers. Readers lacking preparation in the historical, sociological, and anthropological literature about Japanese locality, however, are likely to find the content excessively focused and difficult to grasp. If the lean form of the five-thousand-word contributions drives, perhaps excessively, the authors’ scopes, it does without doubt leave the reader avid for their upcoming, in-depth monographic publications.

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## South Asia

**Pushkar Sohoni and Torsten Tschacher, eds.**

***Non-Shia Practices of Muḥarram in South Asia and the Diaspora: Beyond Mourning***

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When does Muharram (*muḥarram*) become a non-Shi'i practice? This question is the focus of Pushkar Sohoni and Torsten Tschacher's edited volume, *Non-Shia Practices of Muḥarram in South Asia and the Diaspora: Beyond Mourning*. For the Shi'a, commemoration of the martyrdom of the third Imam named Husain and his supporters at the battle of Karbala (Iraq) in 680 CE, as well as the suffering of the Imams and family of the Prophet Muhammad, known as the Ahl-e Bait, are periods of mourning. Among non-Shi'i communities in South Asia and the diaspora, the ritualized remembrance of Husain's martyrdom at Karbala during the month of Muharram has acquired myriad significations over the past four hundred or five hundred years. The chapters emphasize "secular" and nonsectarian dimensions of Muharram rituals in South Asian communities. The volume is divided into two parts, the first engaging with regional and linguistic perspectives, and the second with contexts in which Muslims (particularly Shi'as) are distinct minorities. Many of the chapters focus on the hypervisible ritual of the Muharram procession (*julūs*) on 10 Muharram ('*āshūrā*'), when devotional objects such as *ta'ziyas* (Lyons, Dandekar, Sohoni, Vahed), *tābūts* (Tschacher), and *tadjahs* (Korom) are taken out.

In chapter 2, "Ḥusayn's Hindu Defenders," Tryna Lyons introduces the history of the Mohyal (*mohyāl*) subcaste, which because of "the tumult of the nineteenth century engendered a spectacular series of legends that enlisted several thousand years of world history and at least three religions [Hinduism, Shi'ism, Sikhism] in the service of caste glorification" (15). Lyons traces narratives of Mohyal warrior-priests taking up arms for

Imam Husain to Bhera, a town located on the Jhelum River. In Bhera, and generally in the Punjab, during the late nineteenth century there were few public Muslim holidays, so “the visible face of Muslim piety was primarily their Shi’i rituals” (17). As political fortunes shifted at the end of the nineteenth century until the cataclysm of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, Lyons maps shifts in Mohyal identity, as many Brahmins dedicated to Husain (*husaynī brāhmaṇs*) who stayed in Pakistan practice a form of *taqīyyah* (religious dissimulation) or have converted to Islam, while those who crossed over to India have publicly proclaimed their caste status. While Lyons’s essay fills a lacuna about a Hindu community with claims to Imam Husain at Karbala, and which continues to participate in mourning his martyrdom during Muharram, this essay does not connect well with the others in the volume, which focus on processions, rituals, and material practices of non-Shi’i communities.

In her essay, “An Ethnographic Exploration of Muḥarram(s) in Pune, Maharashtra” (chapter 3), Deepra Dandekar describes Muharram as a *festival* that has political importance and multiple meanings, especially in Hindu majority contexts, such as a “shared Marathi, *Puneri* [*sic*] (or Pune-ite) identity” (24). Dandekar argues that the participation of Hindus in Muharram processions by making *ta’zīyas* (replicas of Imam Husain’s Karbala shrine-tomb), sponsoring musical bands, and walking in processions fosters “Marathi Muslim belonging and citizenship in Pune,” which produces their *punērī* identity as “ambivalently Hindu.” Muslims as a minority are thus another variety of “Hindus” (*ibid.*). To understand how religious minorities perform “Marathi-ness” to negotiate Hindu politics through the deployment of Sunni *ta’zīya* processions, Dandekar employs a hydraulic model of compensatory counterbalancing between different communities engaged to maintain equilibrium. She also focuses on how Muharram rituals performed by Sunnis with their syncretistic qualities and Hindus with their cultural character have excluded the Shi’a from participating in Marathi-ness because “they are often labelled ‘Irani’ and as foreigners to the region, despite the independent history of Shi’ism in Western India” (32). Dandekar’s fieldwork identifies multiple Muharram(s) that are in communication, productive of different understandings of Imam Husain’s martyrdom, and responding to the varying pressures and modalities of Hindu nationalism through strategies of compensation and counterbalancing (36).

In chapter 4, “Visual Languages of Piety and Power: Ta’zīyahs and Temples in the Western Deccan,” Pushkar Sohoni’s essay offers historical perspective to chapter 3. In this chapter, Sohoni focuses on the *ta’zīya* as, quoting Chelkowski (2009), “the interpretive, imaginary representation of Ḥosayn’s tomb that is carried in procession” in Mumbai and Pune in the nineteenth century (42). Sohoni describes the role of eighteenth-century Hindu temple architecture as a model for nineteenth-century *ta’zīyas* in the Western Deccan (47–49). Sohoni argues that these “new architectural forms were emblematic of the region, and of political sovereignty,” and “that they evolved together” (49). Despite Tilak’s political desire to establish a ritual specifically for Hindus with the Ganesh procession, Sohoni’s chapter points to a larger pattern of co-evolution of ritual in the Western Deccan, which can be read as a counterpoint to Dandekar’s essay.

Chapters 5–7 shift focus to Muharram in the South Asian diaspora. In chapter 5, “The Idea of Religion and the Criminalisation of Muḥarram in the Straits Settlements, 1830–1870,” Torsten Tschacher traces the history of Muharram in the Straits Settlements during the British colonial period. Beginning in the 1860s, a series of incidents, culminating in the Penang Riots of 1867, led colonial authorities to ban public Muharram

festivities, which they linked to criminality. Indian convicts, Hindu thugs, and mixed-race descendants of Indian fathers and Malay mothers, known as Jawi Pekans (or Jawi Peranakans), were enthusiastic participants in Muharram in the Straits, raising alarm among the British who saw them as “‘the vilest of the vile’, [who were] responsible for turning an innocent religious ceremony into a raucous carnival” (53).

In the second half of the nineteenth century in the Straits, “religion” emerged as a contested category by which non-Christians had to explain to British colonial authorities the meanings of their ceremonies and to justify their processions (61). Tschacher argues that the delegitimization of Muharram was not because it became more political after the 1870s, but that colonial authorities classified such public religious events as “religious” (65). The irony is that the prohibition of Muharram in the Straits Settlements, which the government identified as a “religious” Shi’i event, had never existed, and “the Shia origins of the festival were immaterial” (65). However, it was the classificatory discourse by which the state evaluated Muharram rituals that linked religion, politics, race, and criminality (65).

In chapter 6, “Contestation and Transformation: Muḥarram Practices among Sunni Muslims in South Africa, 1860–2020,” Goolam Vahed shows the central place of Muharram rituals in the life of Indian Muslim indentured laborers in Natal, South Africa from the colonial period until the present. While the majority of Muslims in South Africa are Sunnis, Muharram was the first public Indian religious ceremony performed in Natal in 1860. The annual three days’ leave granted to indentured laborers, referred to by whites as “Coolie Christmas,” was celebrated with great enthusiasm by all Indians in Natal, serving as a vitally important social outlet for their “rigid and highly-controlled lives on plantations to sing, dance, play music, and generally enjoy themselves” (73). Vahed maps the transformations of Natal’s Muslim (and Hindu) communities over the past 150 years and the constantly shifting meaning of Muharram rituals shaped by the impacts of urbanization, as well as forced relocation caused by Apartheid policies, and labor migrations that were influenced by religious reform movements (87). The multiplicity of Muharram traditions, beliefs, and practices “underscore[s] that there is no hegemonic, universally authoritative Islamic tradition among Indian Muslims in South Africa” (87).

In the final chapter of the volume, “‘It Ain’t Religion; It’s Just Culture, Man!’: Muḥarram Controversies in the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora,” Frank J. Korom brings the reader to Trinidad and the United States (Queens, New York, and southern Florida), where he explores debates about the secular nature of Hosay (derived from the name “Husain,” and which takes place during Muharram). In the Indo-Caribbean festival of Hosay, *tadžahs* are constructed and taken out in procession accompanied by cymbals and kettledrums (*tassa*). The perennial debate that circulates for Indo-Trinidadians regarding Hosay is whether one “prays” or “plays.” Korom argues, it “depends on whom you ask the question to” (97). Korom proposes a process of “creolization” as a model for global culture, which can be applied to the continuities and ruptures in material practices associated with *ta’ziya* as it has traveled from South Asia to the Caribbean (and beyond) (107).

A concluding essay weaving together themes and issues recurrent through this collection would have strengthened the volume considerably. How do we make sense of the popularity of Muharram among diverse religious communities in the subcontinent with their processional traditions, practices of auspicious gazing, and immersion of enlivened images; or the appeal of practices of ‘Alid devotion in the subcontinent and

diaspora; the tension between Muharram as a cultural rather than a religious event, so evocatively exemplified in Korom's essay by the declaration, "It ain't religion; it's just culture, man!" (91); and finally the role of Muharram as the annual event that provided a social outlet for indentured laborers of diverse religious backgrounds across the Indian Ocean World and the Caribbean? Each essay should have included a reference list at the end of the chapter, which would have made it easier for the interested reader to follow up sources and for individual essays to be assigned for classroom use.

Sohoni and Tschascher's *Non-Shia Practices of Muḥarram in South Asia and the Diaspora* provides compelling material, ritual, and documentary evidence of how the Muharram ritual complex has taken "on new shapes and guises" (4) outside of South Asia and has become an integral part of non-Shi'i ritual calendars in the subcontinent.

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#### Peter Berger

##### *Subaltern Sovereigns: Rituals of Rule and Regeneration in Highland Odisha, India*

Berlin: de Gruyter, 2023. 486 pages, 6 tables, 3 maps, 58 photos. Hardcover, €114.95. ISBN: 9783110458077 (hardcover), 9783110458831 (ebook).

When Peter Berger began his PhD research among the Gadaba people of the Koraput Uplands in Odisha in 1999, he was struck by the proverbial wisdom of the Indigenous people of the area as expressed in the following saying: "*rājā dasarā, joriyā nandī, māli bāli, gāḍābā go'ter*." This proverb, spoken in the Desia language, consists of four doublets, each one consisting of a social group followed by a ritual that defined the group. A preliminary descriptive translation of the saying might go as follows.

In the Koraput Uplands, the local royal family is renowned for the role they play in the annual Dasara ritual; the indigenous Joria people for their annual performance of the Nandi ritual; the Mali, a gardener community, for their Bali ritual, and the indigenous Gadaba for their *Go'ter* ritual, a life cycle ritual involving the sacrifice of buffaloes that honours the spirits of their dead. (1)

Having observed the *Go'ter* ritual of Gababa people firsthand, he reasoned that the proverb was an atomic conception of the values that informed the ritual thoughts and actions of a "sacrificial polity" in the Koraput Uplands. He resolved to explore its implications for understanding the cultural and historical geography of the region and for debates about tribes and castes in India more generally. The problem was, however, that while the Dasara ritual of the ruling Raja of the Koraput Uplands was obviously a local variation on the ancient and widespread annual ritual celebrated all over Hindu India, there was little in the ethnographic record about the specific form of the Dasara ritual found here. Furthermore, he could not find any reports on the Nandi ritual of the Joria or on the Bali ritual of the Mali. Berger wisely resolved to limit his PhD to a study of

the rituals of the Gadaba people and to postpone his analysis of the proverb as a topic for his postdoctoral research.

This book, *Subaltern Sovereigns: Ritual of Rule and Regeneration in Highland Odisha, India*, is the product of twenty-plus years of Berger's historical, comparative, and ethnographic postdoctoral research on the religious life of the Desia-speaking people of the Uplands. It puts the region on the cultural map and calls into question the received opinion about the values that inform religion and culture in twenty-first-century India.

Why, asks Berger, do "tribal" villagers in this area continue to observe the rituals of a kingdom whose official existence has long passed, a region where hydroelectricity developments and Maoist insurgencies flourish alongside the performance of these ancient rituals? Furthermore, he muses, isn't the very idea of "tribal kingdom" a contradiction in terms? Berger does not have all the answers to these questions, but, as the main title of his book suggests, he strives to grasp the paradoxes in the "native point of view." The religiosity of the Desia speakers of the Koraput Uplands is his prime concern. The book is also a study of the joys and sorrows of life as expressed in the ritual actions and thoughts of the Desia speakers of the Koraput Uplands in their sacred poetry, their singing, dancing, drinking, and feasting. But to live life to the full we all must die, and Berger's account of how the Desia speakers resolve this contradiction does not gloss over the fact that the gruesome ferocity of their sacrifice rituals, as well as their alleged practice of human sacrifice, have upset European sensibilities.

The Koraput Uplands is of theoretical importance for a study of the deep history of Indian sociology because it is here, the archaeologists tell us, that the three great movements of migrants into India meet: the Indo-Aryan speakers from the northwest, the Dravidian speakers from the southwest, and the Munda speakers from the northeast. A distinctive hybrid culture has emerged over the millennia. Desia, an Indo-Aryan language, is the lingua franca today, but the multilingual Gadaba, Joria, and others continue to speak their dialects of Munda and Dravidian languages. The distinctive culture of the region is founded not only on this deep history but also on the distinctive ecology of the region. The Koraput Uplands is part of the Dandakaranya (DNK) physiographic region of east-central India, the source, among others, of three important tributaries of the lower Godavari River Basin. A transect from west to east across the DNK begins at 200 meters on the Weinganga River in Maharashtra, rises rapidly to 800 meters up the Abujmarh Hills, falls to 600 meters across the Bastar Plateau, then rises to 900 meters across the Koraput Uplands, to descend sharply to the coast of Odisha. The three tributaries of the Godavari have their source in the Koraput Uplands where they exist as slow-flowing streams suitable for terraced rice cultivation using the transplantation method of farming. Farmers on the Bastar Plateau 300 meters below, and the lower plains more generally, by contrast, must rely on rainfed irrigation methods of production and the inefficient broadcast sowing method of production. In both areas millet is grown on the dry lands and hillside slopes.

Here, then, is the source of the many paradoxes the region presents. Outsiders regard it as an insignificant peripheral region, but for insiders, it lies at the center of Indian culture. This ethnocentric Desia conception is true in the geographic sense and not without merit in the deep historical sense. The region is the home of the most efficient rice farmers in India and, the archaeologists speculate, an independent origin of rice cultivation. However, it is also an economic backwater. Its chief exports today are hydroelectricity



and water from the many dams that capture the runoff; Maoist insurgents, for their part, have found the place attractive for their revolutionary activities.

For the Raja, Joria, Mali, Gadaba, and other communities in the Uplands, ritual activities remain extremely important. It could be argued that they have become more important and culturally involute over recent decades. The four rituals identified in the proverb, for example, can take anywhere from ten days to a couple of months. Staple food in the form of rice and millet are key symbols found in the rituals, the sacrifice of buffaloes and other animals are a key theme, and the singing of epic poetry often accompanies the performance of some of the rituals. Brahmin priests officiate at the king's rituals, but so do local non-Brahmin priests of many kinds. Female ritual specialists called *gurumāi* sing sacred poetry in the form of oral epics as well. The relationship between the ecology and sociology of the rituals is further complicated by the political history of the region. The king's palace, for example, moved from Nandapur in the Koraput Uplands to Jeypore on the Bastar Plateau; associated with this has been the movement of Desia speakers and their rituals onto the Bastar Plateau. This has produced seasonal and dramaturgical variation in the rituals. The Bali ritual, for example, is performed all over the DNK, but in strikingly diverse ways in separate places and in different seasons.

Berger documents this extraordinary complexity and strives to develop some general theses, but his prime concern is to "let the rituals speak for themselves" and to pose new questions for debate. The book is divided into two main parts. The first part, entitled "Kings, Subjects and Subaltern Sovereigns," sets the theoretical scene with an exhaustive review of the relevant literature. The second, "Proverbial Performances," presents the results of his own original ethnographic research in its comparative ethnographic and deep historical context. This analysis, as Berger is at pains to stress, owes much to the ethnographic research of his colleagues in Germany, France, the UK, India, and elsewhere who have done pioneering ethnographic research in the Koraput and neighboring regions in the early twenty-first century. Berger's contribution is to bring it together in the form of a masterful synthesis and interpretation of the ethnographic research. He develops a new theory of sacrifice that negotiates a path through that controversial terrain where many theories contend.

What constitutes sovereignty from the indigenous point of view, he asks. He argues that it is "the faculty of being sacrificers that establishes the senior status of the founders of a village, the earth people" (30). He finds the answer in their "ability to navigate the flow of life through sacrifices to the Earth Goddess in particular, . . . it is a sacrificial sovereignty, a sovereignty of life" (30). The king, for his part, is a sacrificial sovereign who performs at the global level what his subjects perform at the local level. For Berger, the power and status of the king relative to his subjects is an empirical question for investigation rather than a power relation whose meaning is assumed. Kings in India have been stripped of their political and economic functions over the years, but for those locals who continue to acknowledge and respect them, they retain their function as sacrificer, or rather that of co-sacrificer with the subalterns who assert their own sovereignty. Berger uses this idea in a creative rather than reductionist way to show how the complex, many-faceted rituals of the Uplands are open to various interpretations and perspectives. He is concerned to open debate, rather than to close it down. He does this by locating his own arguments in their historical and comparative context.

The second part of his book is a rich ethnographic analysis of the four doublets of the proverb. It is not simply a representation of the "native point of view" but a critique of

it. For example, the Joria are renowned for two rituals, not just one. Part 2, then, consists of five chapters, not four. The first chapter of part 2 (chapter 5) considers the Dasara ritual. This chapter identifies the specificity of the Dasara ritual in the Koraput Uplands kingdom by means of a series of comparisons: its performance in the capital versus its performance in the villages, and its performance in the neighboring tribal kingdom of Bastar versus its performance in Hindu kingdoms of Mysore and Puri.

The next two chapters (chapters 6–7) deal with the Ganga and Nandi festivals of the Joria. The names “Ganga” and “Nandi” evoke images of “Ma Ganga,” the Hindu River Goddess, and Shiva’s vehicle, Nandi the bull, but Berger found that these translations were false friends. The rituals are extremely complicated dramatic performances that defy simple summary. “Drama” is an apt metaphor in the case of the Ganga ritual, because the minute the invoked deities arrive in the village to “play” and “dance” around, a number of Joria “actors” assume the persona of three different social groups: the low-caste Dom, the Ghasi, and the high-caste Paik, the latter two of whom are rarely found in Joria or Gadaba villages. The three actor groups lead the worship of the Ganga deities as they parade around the village over the next ten days, a performance that includes a monkey dance and ends with a stilt dance. This ritual, held in January, is followed the next month by the Nandi ritual, a radically different six-day ritual that involves wall-paintings, women ritualists known as *gurumāis* who sing a long epic poem, and the worship of termite mounds and millet.

Chapter 8 deals with the Bali Jatra ritual of the Mali community. Like the festivals of the Joria, the Bali Jatra is concerned with regeneration and well-being in the general sense. Like in the Nandi ritual, the *gurumāi* plays a key role, but her epic tale is radically different. Millet is conspicuous for its absence as a key material symbol in the Bali Yatra. Its place is taken by wheat, a grain not grown in the Koraput Uplands. Another key performer is the god Bhima, well known all over Hindu India as one of the five Pandavas in the Mahabharata. However, once again Desia speakers conceive of this Hindu god in a unique way in the Koraput Uplands and over the broader DNK region more generally, where he is associated with the coming of rain. Bali means “sand,” so the fetching of sand from the riverbed and its return twelve days later defines the beginning and end of the final twelve days of the ritual. This final twelve-day sequence is, in turn, one part of a ritual that can last for up to two months in total. As in all the rituals, trance dances and sacrifices punctuate the performance.

Berger’s last substantive chapter (chapter 9) deals with the description, analysis, and interpretation of the Go’ter (“tearing”) ritual of the Gabada. Again, he introduces us to an extraordinarily long and complex ritual that is radically different from the others. Whereas the Dasara, Ganga, Nandi, and Bali rituals are annual cycle rituals that invoke great gods and goddesses, the Go’ter ritual is a life-cycle ritual centered on death and the spirits of the dead. Its concern is to transform the dead (*duma*) into ancestors (*anibai*). At these rituals, the ritual specialist invokes the *duma* spirits who assemble in the outward and visible form as a herd of water buffalo. The different buffaloes are identified with different recently deceased ancestors. Berger relates how his Gadaba interlocutor walked through the assembled herd introducing Berger to his deceased kin. The climax of the ritual is a bloody, gruesome event where the living set upon their *duma* in buffalo form and quite literally tear them apart as they struggle and fight for the tongue and entrails of the living beast as it slowly dies. The ritual attracts spectators from everywhere in their

thousands. In colonial times it attracted the attention of missionaries and colonizers, for whom the ritual was proof of the “savagery” of these “backward tribes.”

In his concluding chapter, “Navigating Life,” Berger offers his thoughts and speculations about the meaning of all these ritual actions. Three appendices provide a glossary of local terms, summary accounts of twenty-five key myths, and a translation of a Nandi song.

The rituals of the people of the Koraput Uplands are quite literally fantastic. Berger takes us on a journey into a world full of surprise and wonder. The book is nothing less than an invitation to think again about what it is that makes us human. What is truly “shocking” about this book is that it asks us to take seriously the idea of his informants that human sacrifice makes us human. It is an open secret in the Koraput Uplands, one transmitted by means of whispers, that human sacrifice persists to this day. Berger reports the whispers he heard and demonstrates, for example, that the Go’ter ritual “not only transforms the dead but also—by means of a ‘human sacrifice’—nurtures the living” (39).

The idea that a human being is the supreme gift that one can make to a god is an ancient and widespread one, so widespread in fact that it is hard to find examples where it did not exist. Berger is not concerned with the hoary question of whether human sacrifices “really happen” but with the fact of the continued existence of this ancient and widespread practice as a valued idea. What does this fact of value tell us about ourselves? How does the ethnographer write about “whispers” of its continued existence in the Koraput Uplands in a way that conveys honor and respect on the ethnographic subject rather than seeing it as evidence of “barbarism” and “savagery”? Why have outsider members of the political elite been ever-keen to label beliefs of this kind as “savage” and “barbaric” when only a slight acquaintance with the deep history of religion is needed to realize that values of this kind are among the defining characteristics of *homo sapiens*? Such are some of the questions that occur to me as I read this fascinating, ethnographically rich tome. It is a true treasure house of proverbial wisdom.

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### **Elora Halim Chowdhury**

#### ***Ethical Encounters: Transnational Feminism, Human Rights, and War Cinema in Bangladesh***

Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2022. Xii + 225 pages. Paperback, \$32.95. ISBN: 9781439922255.

On the face of it, experiences of women feature more prominently in nationalist narratives of Bangladesh than in the parallel narratives of its neighboring nations. While contributions of women to the freedom struggles in India, Pakistan, or even Sri Lanka are, at best, acknowledged in footnotes, the story of Bangladeshi liberation celebrates stories of resistances by women, especially those suffering from sexual violence at the hands of Pakistani soldiers. Yet, as Elora Halim Chowdhury points out, the adulation is largely restricted to what men have found praiseworthy: the only legitimate nationalist narrative for women is one of suffering and self-sacrifice for the war. Any feminist politics that departs from this narrative faces immediate dismissal, as in the case of *Meherjaan*, a film depicting a Bengali woman’s romantic involvement with a Pakistani

soldier, that had to be pulled off theaters in Bangladesh after widespread protests in January 2011.

*Ethical Encounters* squarely takes up this question of women's voice and representation with respect to nationalist narratives in Bangladesh. By studying a corpus of films that explore multiple and competing politics surrounding women and the liberation war, Chowdhury aims to create what she calls "an alternative and disruptive archive of feminist knowledge," where women's experiences of the war act as resources to challenge and criticize nationalist glorification of *muktijuddha*, the liberation war. Drawing upon Black feminist theory and the broader perspective of human rights cinema, the book attempts to create a new approach to gender and war cinema in Bangladesh beyond the binaries of oppression/resistance and victimhood/agency.

Chapters 1–3 focus on one film each: Rubaiyat Hossain's *Meherjaan* (chapter 1), Nasiruddin Yousuff's *Guerilla* (chapter 2), and Shameem Akhtar's *Itihaash Konna* (chapter 3). *Meherjaan* is the most controversial of them all, and the author closely analyzes the narrative of the film as well as the controversy after its release, exploring social and personal anxieties about trauma, sexuality, and national unity. In many ways *Guerilla*, a critical and commercial success in Bangladesh, stands in stark contrast to *Meherjaan*; it narrates the story of a woman soldier who gives her life for the struggle. For Chowdhury, *Guerilla* (the only film closely analyzed in the book that is directed by a man) represents the patriarchal and nationalist image of seeing women in the liberation war solely through the lens of victimization, death, and erasure. She contrasts *Guerilla* not just with *Meherjaan* but also with the more complex ethics of female friendship in *Itihaash Konna*, the story of a Pakistani researcher documenting the war crimes of 1971 and meeting her childhood friend in Bangladesh. Drawing on Leela Gandhi's concept of "dissident friendships," she argues that friendship between women can allow "for the possibility of intimacy and affliction across borders and boundaries" (102)—something that is simply not possible within the patriarchal and nationalist rubric of *Muktijuddho*.

Two competing strands of cinematic representation of women and *Muktijuddho*, in other words, are identified by the author for feature films: a patriarchal-nationalist one celebrating women's victimhood in service of the nation (*Guerilla*) and a feminist one foregrounding women's narratives to narrate alternate histories (*Meherjaan* and *Itihaash Konna*). The final chapters (4 and 5) extend this distinction to the realm of documentary and nonfiction films, such as Leesa Gazi's *Rising Silence*, Farzana Boby's *Bish Kanta*, and Shabnam Ferdousi's *Jonmo Shathi*. Inspired by interventions of Black studies scholars, Chowdhury studies these documentaries as archives of unacknowledged forms of oppression and domination that challenge and disrupt the nationalist narrative of liberation.

Simply by virtue of bringing to light an oft-ignored corpus of visual sources, the book is an important contribution to cinema and gender studies in relation to the historiography of modern South Asia. Studies of Bengali cinema tend to remain confined to internationally acclaimed directors, mostly male, from Kolkata. Productions from Bangladesh are typically ignored or dismissed, with perhaps the sole exception of the works of Tareque Masud and Catherine Masud. Chowdhury, in contrast, has focused on works from a cinematic tradition that, while significant in Bangladesh, has hitherto received little attention abroad. For this original research alone the book deserves praise, and Chowdhury has done a marvelous job in teasing out the narrative complexity and historical specificity of each film, yet putting several films in dialogue with each

other. While developing on the works of Yasmin Saikia and Nayanika Mookherjee, she has framed her argument not just in the form of a critique of national narrative but in dialogue with broader theoretical frameworks on transnational feminism and human rights cinema, especially in dialogue with recent Black feminist theory. It is a bold and commendable comparative move that will create interest in the book beyond the specific field of South Asian studies.

The argument could have been strengthened by closer attention to the networks of global capital and the political economy of activism that constitutes the material context of the films under consideration. This lacuna is especially clear in the analysis of *Meherjaan*, where the author tends to defend the director (Rubaiyat Hossain) from purportedly nationalist critics within Bangladesh yet stops short of a critical investigation of the social location and the “transnational” positionality of the director. But to what extent did networks of capital and patronage influence the politics of an alternate cinema, given that Bangladesh is still heavily dependent on humanitarian aid and NGOs? Was the target audience—or intended consumers—of *Meherjaan* and *Rising Silence* the same as that of, say, *Guerilla*? “International” human rights cinema, like all cultural commodities, has its own market and its own consumers. The author occasionally observes this aspect in passing, as when she notes that *Bish Kanta* was recorded with a Handycam Camcorder in Bangladesh while *Rising Silence* was produced in HD format by a London-based crew (120). But the political-economic and social implications of such divergences are never quite drawn out. Exploring this material aspect of the productions could have pushed the analysis beyond a somewhat stark opposition between nationalist history and transnational feminism.

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**Elora Halim Chowdhury and Esha Niyogi De, eds.**

***South Asian Filmscapes: Transregional Encounters***

Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2020. 340 pages. Hardcover, \$105. ISBN: 9780295747842.

South Asian films and cultural scenes are not homogenous. Instead, South Asian nation-states are divided by national boundaries, ethnicity, language, politics, economy, and cultural and religious differences. There are historical connections and contentions between and among the various regions and subregions of South Asian countries. Against this context, *South Asian Filmscapes: Transregional Encounters* explores how film archives in South Asia provide a “multisensory” historical lens into the connected histories of the region, featuring a wide range of essays and analyses from leading scholars and filmmakers covering various topics related to South Asian cinema. In this insightful book, many chapters delineate the cross-border mobility of film arts, and practitioners have dislocated the fixed notion of national identity. In contrast, other chapters question the

cinematic representations that converge on nationalistic, sexual, gender, religious, and linguistic discourses. The authors argue that despite the tendency for infrastructures of production and exhibition to be restricted by national and global regimes of finance and knowledge, the cinema is also open to competing social and political claims made by its filmmakers, financiers, and target audiences. The form can exceed or transcend divisions and hierarchies and critique cognitive categories such as regional, statist, or global.

The book is divided into three sections, each focusing on a different aspect of films in South Asia. Part 1, “Nations and Regional Margins,” examines films that navigate borders and differences internal to Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. Here, the politics of nationalism, identity, and representation are at play. In this section, among five chapters, two concern Bangladeshi films, two Pakistani films, and one Indian film. All the chapters revolve around the idea that the oppressed do not take oppression for granted. Instead, they oppose or negotiate with the oppressors and their oppressions. In chapter 1, Fahmidul Haq elucidates how Bangladeshi independent cinema often presents a specific understanding of national identities based on “Bengaliness,” “Muslimness,” or both. This chapter argues that independent films in Bangladesh often engage in alterity to “Muslimness.” The author calls for a syncretic narrative of popular religion to reduce conflict. Similarly, Glen Hill and Kabita Chakma in chapter 4 illustrate the marginality of Chakma cinema within the dominance of Bengali-Muslim cinema. They argue that despite having broader appeal across the globe, the indigenous Chakma films are being marginalized by the hegemonic representational politics of contemporary Bengali-Muslim films, which show Bangladesh’s identity as homogenous, disregarding the non-Muslims and non-Bengalis such as hill tribes living in Bangladesh.

Kamran Asdar Ali in chapter 2 and Nasreen Rehman in chapter 5 discuss films from 1950s and 1960s Pakistan that challenged the moral and ethical boundaries of Pakistani nationalist narratives. Ali analyzes two films from the 1960s, *Saheli* (1961) and *Neela Parbat* (1969), and Rehman analyzes *Neend* (1959) to foreground differences rather than cultural unity in the prescribed social order. These films challenge ideas of class, gender, religion, nationalism, sexuality, and a “perverse” desire to disrupt entrenched moral arguments in narratives. However, these films buck the trend in asserting agentic power or the ability to act for oneself, which dislocates various structural boundaries but simultaneously reinforces other boundaries, such as patriarchy and masculinity, as demonstrated in *Neend*. In chapter 3, Amit Ranjan has explicated the politics of representation of the Sikh community in India. Analyzing films such as *Border* (1997) and *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), Ranjan explains that these films tried to romanticize the contribution of the Sikh community when it comes to Hindu nationalism and attempt to erase the memory of violence to the Sikh community, especially the 1984 massacre. However, many Sikhs still carry the legacy of Sikh rebels and feel the injustice done to them.

Part 2, “Transregional Crossings,” looks at film histories of porosity and cross-fertilization on the subcontinent and beyond. This part contains six chapters, of which three are from Pakistan, two are from India, and one is from Bangladesh. All the films discussed in this part connect the hyphenated history of the Indian subcontinent during the pre-partition and post-partition eras. With the neoliberalization in the 1990s and onward, films have gone global, drawing on the diasporic lifestyles in the movies that connected the local with the transnational spaces. In chapter 6, for example, Madhuja Mukherjee argues that these cities in the Indian subcontinent during the 1920s and 1930s became sights/sites of vibrant cosmopolitanism through active film cultures. The author

explores the links between Bombay, Calcutta, and undivided Punjab, showing how the traffic of films, personnel, and capital between these places was fervent, and that these connections eventually produced particular types of popular cinema. In chapter 7, Lotte Hoek discusses the film *Son of Pakistan* (1966) and its relevance in understanding contemporary Pakistani and Bangladeshi cinema. The author mentions that the details of the film are unclear and not well recorded but suggests that looking through the Bangladesh Film Archive can present alternate perspectives on established historical narratives of the nation-state.

In chapter 8, Esha Niyogi De argues that transnational exchanges in the film industry often inscribe “categories of difference” into systems of cross-cultural contact, but the small-scale Urdu film industry in Pakistan, with its focus on economic collaboration and commodity material across national borders, spawned a border-crossing aesthetic that was inspired by multiple regional influences. In chapter 9, Hariprasad Athanickal analyzes films from different South Indian languages to understand the literary aesthetics of realism and its relation to the production of realism in South Indian cinema. The concept of *ur* (Tamil), or identification with place, contributes to the complexity of understanding realism in South Indian cinema.

In chapter 10, Gwendolyn S. Kirk examines how two films, *Pehlwan Ji in London* (1971) and *Jatt in London* (1981), depict and challenge popular ideas about diasporic identities and experiences. The chapter notes that Punjabi cinema in India and Pakistan often reinforces regional culture and tradition within the diaspora. The recent resurgence of Pakistani cinema has primarily excluded Punjabi and Pashto cinema, and the effects of these changes on the representation of transnationalism and diasporic identities are yet to be seen. In chapter 11, Zebunnisa Hamid argues that the development of New Pakistani Cinema serves as a case study for the factors that led to its emergence and the issues that small cinema cultures may face. The growth of Pakistani cinema has been affected by changing global politics and the desire for counternarratives. The new cinema audience shares viewing practices and preferences with transregional and international audiences.

Part 3, “Fractured Geographies, South Connectivities,” focuses on border war and trauma and how these issues are represented in films. This part comprises four chapters from two countries—three from Bangladesh and one from India. In chapter 12, Fahmida Akhter discusses the 1971 documentary “Stop Genocide,” directed by Zahir Rihan during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The film is seen as an ethical cinematic appeal for humanity and justice and creates a dialectical cinematic language opposing dominant cinema practices and following the aesthetics of Third Cinema. However, the author argues that the representation of women in the film has been criticized for linking their image to victimization and spectacle. At the same time, men are often glorified as heroes in the war. Despite the impulses of a Third Cinema structure, the film has been seen to reconstruct gender stereotypes within the nationalist struggle.

In contrast to the Bangladeshi women, Alka Kurian, in chapter 13, examines documentaries to understand how Muslim Kashmiri women, despite experiencing severe human rights violations, have gone beyond their cultural symbolism as widows, half-widows, or grieving mothers. The author explores how their resistant narratives not only subvert the traditional role of women within the militarization process but also play a significant role in the struggle for independence from the Indian state.

To understand the role of cinema in raising consciousness over commercial gain, in chapter 14 Naadir Junaid highlights the work of two prominent Bangladeshi filmmakers,

Alamgir Kabir and Zahir Raihan, who made important politically oriented films before their untimely deaths. The author suggests that there needs to be more experimentation and critical commentary on political issues in Bangladeshi cinema. Elora Halim Chowdhury, in chapter 15, studies modern war movies. She finds that unlike older films that showed men as honorable and women as shameful, new films give different views on gender from the 1971 archive. These films also show chances for healing and understanding in close relationships, similar to Akhter's views. However, despite this focus on women's narratives, the films still leave the reintegration and location of women within the nation ambiguous. The chapter also touches on the concept of "controlling images" and how they justify the state's disciplining certain bodies and groups, in this case, the *birangonas* (brave women). The author suggests that instead of accepting these controlling images, feminist scholars should ask how objectification is mobilized in specific historical contexts and what alternative reading practices could create a representational space for women as sexual subjects and citizens.

Overall, the book provides a comprehensive examination of how films in South Asia reflect and shape the social and political realities of the region. The authors delve into selected archives of cinema in South Asia, uncovering complex spatio-temporalities and shedding light on how films can reinforce and subvert dominant ideologies. The book accommodates write-ups from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh but not from other countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, or even Afghanistan. Furthermore, the volume is about encounters, but it does not deal with contemporary hegemonic and counterhegemonic relations among the nation-states and their culture industry. In addition, the book mainly talks about film archives and texts instead of larger contexts of film production, circulation, and viewership. Despite the limitations, this book adds value to the literature on South Asian film and cultural history. No doubt, students, faculty, and researchers in South Asian movies, media, and cultural studies will benefit from this book.

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### **Dolly Kikon**

#### ***Living with Coal and Oil: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India***

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019. 188 pages. Hardcover, \$32.00. ISBN: 9780295743950.

It was a cold winter evening on December 4, 2021, when Indian paramilitary forces ambushed and massacred six Naga civilian coal miners at Oting village, Mon district of Nagaland, on the pretext of "mistaken identity" (as reported). The incident resulted in a violent clash between paramilitary forces and protesting Naga civilians that led to the killing of another eight civilians and one paramilitary fighter. People worldwide poured condemnation against the atrocious act of the Indian security forces and its draconian legal sanction—Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). A few years before this horrific event, Dolly Kikon's book engages on the everyday lives of the people in this region.

The book is an excellent ethnographic sketch in the foothills of Assam and Nagaland—a "carbon landscape" as Kikon describes it—that provides a fascinating account of the varying yet entangled social, political, and economic lives and relationships of people living in a "disturbed" militarized zone of Northeast India. The book attributes coal and



oil extraction as a base that attracts heterogeneous ethnic groups, traders, laborers, investors, state authorities, security forces, and militants in the foothills and assembles its vibrant dynamics into establishing ethnic alliances and aspirations, violence, conflicts, poverty, and militarization. Kikon navigates her argument in these complex, multilayered configurations of power, claims, and assertions through extractive activities of competing state and nonstate actors—or the “triadic state”—over resources in the region. Kikon conceptualizes a triadic state as the presence of multiple state authorities and sovereigns in the foothills. In a statist sense, she refers to the state of Assam, Nagaland, and India as triadic; Assam functions as economic state, Nagaland as cultural state, and India as security state operating for varied interests in the foothills (75). She further encapsulates the concept of “sovereignty” beyond the normative notion as being synonymous with “state”—constructed and claimed by multiple nonstate actors (NSCN and other homeland-bound insurgent groups), ethnic bodies (tribal councils), village authorities, and so on. Kikon refers to this as “resource politics” (iv), as suggested in the title of the book, for self-determination and explains this mosaic multilayered setting, characterized by a variegated process of negotiations and contestations that shape and reconfigure social relations and power dynamics in the foothills.

Employing Henri Lefebvre, Kikon conceptualizes foothills as an ambiguous space, sometimes a limited boundary, that allows a locus of contact for multiple lifeworlds and enables diverse groups of people to make sense of interconnectedness around them. Situating beyond the long hills and valley framework used in various political and administrative demarcations, and drawing on works of Edmund Leach (1973), James Scott (2009), and others, Kikon presents the lived realities at the foothills that are often unaccounted for or unrepresented in the politics of hills and valley discourse. In doing so, the book intrigues readers with the myths and legendary stories embraced by both the people of Nagaland and Assam in the foothills, as-yet uncelebrated in popular Assamese as well as Nagamese oral histories. Kikon maintains that these myths and stories are not “about reiterating or rejecting [the] hills-valley framework. Instead, it forces us to reexamine accounts of escape, war and mobility as well as how people appropriate local legends and the past to establish social and political alliances for resource extraction” (16). Interestingly, the foothills, besides exhibiting sociocultural ties and economic transactions, also delineate expressions of power relations and hierarchies among communities. While narrating people’s stories about land conflicts, hygiene, and food taboos, Kikon shows how people from the Brahmaputra Valley (mostly Hindus) assert themselves as superior in a civilizational yardstick and stereotype hill people as “smelly,” “unclean,” and “unhygienic,” close to the colonial notion of “savagery” (95). The manifestation of these power relations navigates their everyday lives and continues to remain a space of belonging for both hill and valley people.

The book also carefully unpacks the abject poverty and lack of social infrastructure in these resource-rich foothills, which Kikon refers to as an “absence of state love” (80, 81). To illustrate, Kikon refers to the Konyak region at the foothills (eastern Nagaland), which has one of the largest carbon concentrations; extractive mining takes place among the poorest districts in various socioeconomic and infrastructural parameters in the state. This mirrors an affair of how the nature and pattern of resource extraction in the region is casting the same as that of the central peninsular region. It markedly traces the link with the current movement for separate statehood for eastern Nagaland, which places its origin in the stark development disparities as compared to other core hill districts of

the state. As Kikon ingeniously puts it, “state love stays up in the hills, it doesn’t filter down to foothills, and in Assam, it got ‘trapped in the Brahmaputra valley’” (63–64).

Another important contribution of the book lies in the unfolding of the development of social hierarchy, class structure, and power relations that have surfaced in the tribal foothill villages. In Nagaland, although land and resources are owned and controlled under customary institutions and protected through a special constitutional provision (371A), often tribal elites, contractors, and politicians have exploited these resources. Kikon offers rich empirical accounts of coal and oil operations and contends that tribal societies are not as homogenous, egalitarian, and autonomous as they seem. Irrespective of social class, the poor, wealthy, landowner, landless, politicians, entrepreneurs, men, and women dream and aspire to improve their livelihood, quality of life, and living standard around the prospects of oil and coal mining.

A fascinating portion is the chapter on “Love or ‘*Morom*,’” where Kikon narrates the understanding of love, *morom* (a Naga word), as being closely intertwined with kinship, gender relations, ethnicity, religion, and resources in coal mining villages. Through the medium of nonfiction stories, Kikon illustrates the way it invokes the “language of love to assert the notion of purity, social order, and meaning in the foothills” (62). Kikon further identifies the complementary relationship between “ethnic politics,” the politics of self-determination, and extractive mining activities in generating new forms of gender inequalities and acts of masculinity, defining gender roles through the life stories of women in coal mining villages.

“Carbon citizenship” (135) is another captivating concept that Kikon introduces. This concept deals with ideas of citizenship, militarism, governance, and development in the foothills and is closely intertwined with coal and oil extraction. The concept also unpacks the nature of how the dynamics of the carbon landscape are determined through the techno-rational power of science and state over the people, which vividly exposes the unruly Indian state governmentality that continuously portrays the region as “dangerous,” “peripheral,” “conflict ridden,” and “underdeveloped” through a security prism, yet also a desirable location for resource extraction and explorations. Security profiling of native people, suspicion of militant alliance, and other similar activities remain a regular occurrence. Even philanthropic corporate social responsibility (CSR) appeared to be devised toward expanding mining exploration. Words from a CSR officer, “We only invest in places where we can get some benefit” (141), speak of the instrumental approach of welfare activities initiated by the mining corporations in the foothills. Overall, this chapter exemplifies a case of “adverse inclusion” conceptualized by Virginius Xaxa (2012) in relation to Adivasi development in the mining region of central India.

The book concludes with an epilogue on the miseries and aspirations of people in the foothills: stories of a school functioning on the ruins of the ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation) building; students wearing a cardboard that reads, “I’m a donkey, I speak in Assamese/Nagamese”; a man guarding a precious oil field without electricity in his village. Security profiling and disciplining to produce loyal citizens mirrors the larger structural issues of poverty, exclusion, militarization, colonialism, and capitalism in the foothills of Assam and Nagaland state. The book is a path-breaking addition in the literature of Northeast India and South Asian scholarship. It is a must-read for any scholars and readers interested in understanding emerging dimensions of heterogeneity,

citizenship, indigeneity, ethnicity, border studies, and gender relations in contemporary India and beyond.

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**Douglas Ober**

***Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India***

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. 394 pages, 15 illustrations. Hardcover, \$95.00; paperback, \$32.00; ebook, \$32.00. ISBN: 9781503635029 (hardcover), 9781503635036 (paperback), 9781503635777 (ebook).

The fact that Bodh Gaya is now a global destination, always teeming with Buddhist devotees, can make its ruined and neglected state as reported in an 1886 newspaper article by Sir Edwin Arnold (1832–1904) difficult to imagine. But the lament over the sorry state of the place where the Buddha became enlightened by the author of the popular poem "Light of Asia" (1879) has often been described as a major catalyst for reviving Buddhist activity there. This includes even the drawn-out battle that developed over ownership of the temple after the Sri Lankan Angarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) struggled against local Hindu authority. Such emphasis on the actions of Anglophone elites is typical of the approach used to recount Buddhism's resurgence in South Asia, as Douglas Ober points out in *Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India*. Ober effectively challenges this approach by presenting an almost dizzying array of details about how individuals in South Asia engaged with Buddhism over the last two centuries. What emerges in his study is a clear sense of shifting and developing networks in which Buddhism helped to unsettle an established status quo, undermining any simple view that India is essentially truest as a place of Hinduism.

In his introduction, Ober usefully outlines four interventions, contending that: (1) the theory of Buddhism's "disappearance" from the subcontinent is little more than useful fiction, which allowed a complicated situation to be largely ignored; (2) while it is true that Buddhist institutions declined in the subcontinent, even the much discussed colonial revival was in fact led as much by Indians and other Asians as it was Europeans; (3) India's modern Buddhist revival began one hundred years earlier than that which is frequently designated (i.e., 1956 when the Indian government celebrated "2,500 years of Buddhism" and when B. R. Ambedkar [1891–1956] led many converts to the dhamma); (4) there is too little awareness of how the Buddhist revival contributed to shape modern Indian history, ranging from the emergence of Hindu nationalism and Hindu reform movements, to Dalit and anticaste activism, Indian leftism, and Nehruvian secular democracy.

The book is organized in a broadly chronological manner, where distinct aspects of developing networks are explored in seven individual chapters. Ober traces Buddhism's resurgence beginning in the nineteenth century, demonstrating that much occurred

before Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 along with almost five hundred thousand followers, the moment often credited with the inception of Buddhism's renewal in South Asia. The view offered is riveting on many levels, revealing varying intentions as Buddhism focused the energies of many individuals drawn out of the shadows by Ober who wished to revive or sometimes suppress it. This view firmly displaces one of an indigenous population largely unfamiliar with and uninterested in the Buddhist material and tradition, with sharply drawn characters making very specific efforts of intervention.

A concern to be raised about Ober's otherwise fine study is how to define what constitutes the disappearance of Buddhism in India, the central premise that his project confronts and means to prove false. Is it to be designated by the end of institutional monastic practice, removing Buddhism as a significant force in the complex religious landscape of the subcontinent? Or does it embrace the complete disappearance of any form or awareness of Buddhism there? For such consideration, how do we avoid making Buddhism a dead normative tradition? One way is to register as carefully as we can the changing nature of its influence as the power earlier wielded by monastic players developed in new ways and with different agents. Despite some targeted studies such as that by Arthur McKeown (2018) that demonstrate how some Buddhist practice continued in South Asia after the thirteenth century, there is no question that this activity is much diminished from earlier times. While some might see Ober's protest as disingenuous, the great value of his stance is how it reminds us that all activity of Buddhism should not be evaluated only in religious terms. Ober's approach allows us to consider the ramifications of religion and those who employ it in ways that include more than what might be called normal religious activity. It is an exciting perspective, especially if we move away from focusing just on matters of "continuation." Buddhism then becomes a factor in South Asia after the thirteenth century that could be recreated, recalled, or reengaged.

Ober draws upon the concept of "un-archived histories," as introduced by the historian Gyanendra Pandey (2013). By scrutinizing broader categories of evidence in material that has been marginalized and ignored, Ober builds a robust view of Buddhism's continued presence in the subcontinent. He ably demonstrates the faulty nature of a narrative that has largely focused on the role of outsiders (administrators, archaeologists, and scholars who were principally British) for initiating the rediscovery and redevelopment of the Buddhist homeland. Without ignoring those efforts, Ober complicates the story by delineating the diverse nature of actions by individuals across South Asia, creating a fuller view of overlapping connections. We learn much about even relatively well-studied figures such as Angarika Dharmapala when put into networks of interaction with others. The well-known founding by Dharmapala of the Maha Bodhi Society chapter in Calcutta, for instance, was actually preceded in 1887 by the Chittagong Buddhist Association by Krishna Chandra Chowdhury (1844–1910). There was also the Bengal Buddhist Association founded in Calcutta in 1892 by Kripasan Mahathera (1865–1926). Ober is especially effective in charting the increasing activity in the early twentieth century, comparing the many efforts to branches of the banyan tree that appear as separate trees but actually stem from a single trunk. Likewise, his exploration of how the modern Hindu appropriation of Buddhism and the Buddha has had various consequences, brings together at certain moments conflicting trends and individuals. He continues in later chapters to chart diverse intentions as, for instance, how labeling Buddhism as Hinduism was also sometimes a rhetorical strategy, as done by the Punjabi advocate Pandit Sheo

Narain (c. 1860–1936), who incorporated Buddha’s teaching alongside those of Krishna, Christ, and Muhammad to highlight religious brotherhood.

An example of the useful broadening Ober achieves with even known material begins in his first chapter, “The Agony of Memory,” in a discussion of a short Buddhist manuscript, the *Vajrasuchi*, whose publication in 1839 was prompted by a British diplomat, Lancelot Wilkinson (1804–41). The text has garnered attention in religious studies, especially for questions of its authenticity and attribution to the early Buddhist scholar Ashvaghosa. But Ober emphasizes its long-lived popularity among those with anticaste sentiments that demonstrates the vibrant regard for such treatises, which is made all the more interesting for the inclusion in the publication of a rebuttal by Wilkinson’s Sanskrit tutor, Pandit Subaji Bapu (dates unknown).

Another example of how Ober highlights the ramifications of certain actions occurs in his second chapter, “Dispelling Darkness,” where he describes the considerable presence of Buddhism in what became a widely used, nineteenth-century school textbook in India, despite the unease it caused to some readers. Titled *Itihās Timirnasak* (*itihās timirnāśak*) or *History as the Dispeller of Darkness*, it was composed in Hindi by Raja Sivaprasad (1823–95), who recorded that he found British histories of India and the Purana accounts inadequate. His promotion of the study of the past as necessary for improvement embraced a significant focus on Buddhism and the life of the Buddha, even characterizing the early tradition as a popular protest movement.

Ober repeatedly identifies the marked concern for social reform and anticaste activism as seen in his discussion of P. Lakshmi Narasu (1861–1934) and Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), two interesting leaders that significantly but differently promoted the work of the Shakya Buddhist Society in Madras. Thass wrote in Tamil, while Narasu was more broadly educated and connected with a wider range of audiences. Narasu’s writing often emphasized how Buddhism was important for contemporary problems, and Ober points out that Ambedkar in 1948 called Narasu’s *The Essence of Buddhism* (1907) the best book of Buddhism. Ober’s sensitivity to anticaste activism when considering how Buddhism was deployed in the last two centuries is particularly welcome for testifying to an interreligious awareness within India that deserves to be better known. The book will no doubt be useful to scholars and students in a range of disciplines, but the narrative is compelling enough to engage even general readers. *Dust on the Throne* opens up a path that can lead to many further discoveries and connections, making it a timely book as increasing authoritarian actions throughout the world work to suppress a sense of complexity in the past.

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## Southeast Asia

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**Alexander Soucy**

***Zen Conquests: Buddhist Transformations in Contemporary Vietnam***

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. 256 pages, 11 illustrations. Hardcover, \$68.00; paperback, \$28.00. ISBN: 9780824889982 (hardcover), 9780824893132 (paperback).

Anthropologist Alexander Soucy describes his astonishment when visiting a temple outside Hanoi. Unlike the temple he describes in *The Other Side of Buddha* (2013), where women prayed to Buddha alongside other spirits, Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery presented itself as self-consciously Zen. Here, monks promoted a vernacular liturgy, and participants engaged in silent mediation. This brand of Zen appealed to urban middle-class residents, men and women and old and young alike, for it offered a mode of self-fashioning that was both distinctly modern and Vietnamese.

Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery is affiliated with the teachings of Thích Thanh Từ. Soucy describes his form of Buddhism as a “missionary movement,” a Zen conquest of both northern Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora as exemplified by more than forty centers worldwide. Soucy traces the movement’s roots to the early twentieth century. During this period, monks and scholars increasingly labeled Buddhism a “religion” in order to distinguish it from popular cultural practices infused with magic, superstition, or devotionism. In northern Vietnam, these reform movements were cut short in 1954 with the territorial division of the country, but they flourished in southern Vietnam and beyond. Monks drew on the tenets of engaged Buddhism and traveled eastward to Japan and the United States. However, unlike Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Thiên Ân, two well-known monks who studied and taught in the West, Thích Thanh Từ followed a different path. His biography depicts his dissatisfaction with Buddhist practice and his quest to revive a distinctively Vietnamese form of Zen, Trúc Lâm, which first appears in annals from the fourteenth century. This form of Zen, as Soucy argues, may draw its legitimacy from the past, but it is based on modernist interpretations in the early twentieth century and situated in the global processes in which Zen emerged as a key trope premised on individual experience.

*Zen Conquests* is both an ethnography of a particular place and an analysis of the roles of reform movements and secularism in redefining Buddhism as a category of social life. One strength of Soucy’s analysis is in how he reads the social space of the monastery and the activities of participants through his earlier work. He notes how activities, unlike in other temples in northern Vietnam, do not follow the lunar calendar; nor is the air thick with smoke from people burning offerings in a furnace. People instead gather to listen to monks deliver lectures and sit in meditation, distinctive practices that Soucy links to global transformations of Buddhism that are nevertheless always localized. In the final section on participants, for example, Soucy focuses on the experiences of women, men, and young people who attend Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery, some attracted by the healing power attributed to meditation, others by its emphasis on individual practices, still others by the status that Zen confers in contrast to what they consider traditional Buddhism.

He also provides a context for the appeal of Thích Thanh Từ as patriarch of a distinctively Vietnamese type of Zen Buddhism that goes beyond the place-based focus

on the Sùng Phúc Zen Monastery or the experiences of participants themselves. In chapters 1 and 3, Soucy examines global processes, such as the 1893 Congress of World's Religion held in Chicago, that offered Asian leaders a stage to proclaim Buddhism more appropriate than Christianity for the modern age. Likewise, he shows the contradiction in Buddhism's global appeal and TrúC LâM's nationalist rhetoric, a tension found as well in analyses of Zen Buddhism in Japan.

Globalizing forces, as Soucy reminds his readers, never follow a straight line, for they must always be localized. In this regard, Soucy's analysis of TrúC LâM is situated in northern Vietnam, even though many of the monks are from southern Vietnam. His analysis leads the reader to wonder what ethnographic insights would be generated from other sites, such as TrúC LâM Monastery in Vietnam's central highlands or in one of its branches in Santa Ana, California. Thích Thanh Từ's teachings are themselves, then, vehicles for Buddhism's globalization because of their influence on how Buddhism is practiced, both in Vietnam and in the diaspora. Monks claim legitimizing power by attending retreats at his centers with grounds that are immaculately tended.

This book would be a welcome addition for a seminar on global Buddhisms. Select chapters would also be effective for courses in religious studies or Asian studies for how they provide compelling material about the role of secularism in shaping religion as a category and the rise of the middle class. Above all, *Zen Conquests* does Buddhist studies and Southeast Asian studies an enormous service by making available the contributions of Thích Thanh Từ's teachings for English-language readers.

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