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Embodied Entanglements: Gender, Identity, and the Corporeal in Asia

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Fengyuan Zhen recently completed her PhD in Asian Studies at the University of Auckland. Her doctoral thesis, titled *Heisei (1989–2019) Evil Woman: Textualising Murderous Women in Contemporary Japan*, investigates the gendered narratives surrounding murders committed by women. Her research focuses on how various textualizations challenge and reshape prevailing discourses on gender and societal issues, including shifts in gender division of labor, consumer culture, and the expanding cyberspace—topics of significant public concern during the Heisei era in Japan.

Foreword

The *Olomouc Asian Studies* (OLAS) book series is published by the Department of Asian Studies at Palacký University Olomouc to further expand its outreach initiative in the area of Asian Studies beyond its already well-established international conference, the Annual Conference on Asian Studies (ACAS). Rigorously peer-reviewed and available as open access e-books and print-on-demand books, the edited volumes published in the OLAS series address wide-ranging topics and issues in the field of Asian Studies, while bringing together contributors from around the world.

This is the third volume in the series. It shares key topics with the 16th ACAS, entitled “Bodies, Gender, Identities,” which was held in hybrid form in Olomouc, Czech Republic on November 25–26, 2022. The open call for chapters that we issued after the conference aroused considerable interest. The seventeen chapters that comprise this book were selected based on their subject matter and double-blind peer review. Six of them constitute expanded and revised versions of papers presented at the conference.

We would like to thank the authors for their generous collaboration and patience along the way. We would also like to express our gratitude to the many anonymous reviewers. Without their unselfish help and dedication to the integrity and excellence of research such a publication could not be produced. Finally, our appreciation is due to the Department of Asian Studies and the Sinophone Research Centre of Palacký University Olomouc whose financial support made the publication of this book possible.

The editors

Mapping Society onto the (Gendered) Body: An Introduction

Giorgio Strafella, Halina Zawiszová, and Martin Lavička

This chapter introduces the topics and issues addressed in this volume. It shows how the chapters weave together the themes of gender, identity, and the corporeal by examining a variety of lived experiences and cultural expressions in India, Indonesia, Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, and Thailand in historical contexts ranging from antiquity until today. It highlights the contribution of this volume to wider debates on issues such as the performance and construction of gender identities, misogyny and homophobia, biopolitics, and feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, and also how it relates to recent studies and collections on these subjects.

Keywords: gender norms, embodied identities, intersectionality, performativity, activism, violence, biopolitics

This volume brings together seventeen studies that explore societal, cultural, and political phenomena in Asia with a focus on the interrelated topics of the body, gender, and identity. While ambitious in its scope, its aim is not to trace a unitary narrative of these topics in Asian cultures and histories, but rather to cast a wide net on ideas, experiences, and social and cultural manifestations across eras and fields of research. As a result, the volume affords the reader insights into a variety of lived experiences and cultural expressions in India, Indonesia, Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, and Thailand.

Some topics that emerge repeatedly throughout the volume include gender norms and social expectations; the construction and representation of embodied identities; sexuality, morality, and social pressure; forms of defiance and resistance; and explorations of queer experience and intersectionality. Chapters that focus on today's Asia, in particular, confront issues such as inequality, violence, and discrimination while highlighting the struggle for dignity and fundamental rights that takes shape not only through activism and protest movements, such

as #MeToo, but also literature and art. Questions related to beauty, pleasure, desire, individual agency, and empowerment in this book foreground debates on embodied subjectivities and power relations as they interrogate the use of bodies and (de)construction of gender. The book approaches these issues from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, sociology, gender studies, history, literary studies, and art history.

There is increasing scholarly and societal interest in the themes addressed by the present volume. Issues that pertain to gender equality, queer identities, biopolitics, necropolitics, and sexual and gender-based violence are among the most urgently debated in today's world, and the studies in this volume confirm that Asia is no exception. Several books published in recent decades have contributed to the study of socio-political and cultural issues related to the human body and gendered identities in Asia across eras and fields of practice. Because of the layered nature of these issues, especially when different Asian societies and traditions are taken into consideration, the edited volume represents a congenial place to think about them in a pluralistic and interdisciplinary way while critically engaging with underlying concepts and theories. One pioneering work in this growing area of research to which the present volume contributes is *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (1995a), edited by anthropologists Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. While more specific in its geographical and disciplinary scope than this book, Ong and Peletz's volume also collects explorations of a wide range of topics that are often underpinned by issues of power and knowledge, while emphasizing alternative discourses on gender and the body. Drawing mainly on Foucault for their definition of "body politics," Ong and Peletz posit that "cross-referencing inscriptions of power—that is, the diverse ways society is mapped onto the body and the body is symbolized in society—are mutually dependent upon and entangled in each other" (Ong and Peletz 1995b, 6). In his more recent work, a short monograph titled *Gender, Sexuality, and Body Politics in Modern Asia* (2007), Peletz offers an ambitious overview of body politics and gender-related issues across the Asian continent, touching upon multiple issues, including gender pluralism, violence, agency, resistance, and transgression.

Recent research on Asian societies and cultures that addresses the intersection of gender and the corporeal has resulted in the publication of volumes that focus on more specific dimensions, such as migration and health. The studies in *Gender, Health, and History in Modern East Asia* (2017), edited by Angela Ki Che Leung and Izumi Nakayama, offer insights into topics such as fertility, pharmacology and health knowledge, sexual education, and sex change in Japan, Korea, mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The volume revolves around the concept of biopolitics in relation to gender and sex

during a key period of empire, modernization, and nation-building in the region. The contributions collected in the volume *The Asian Migrant's Body: Emotion, Gender and Sexuality* (2020), edited by Michiel Baas, focus on the figure of the Asian migrant in the world rather than Asia per se. They investigate migration as an embodied and gendered experience through case studies from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Oceania, and North America. In their introduction to the book, Baas and Peidong Yang conceptualize the body of the migrant as a material and physical anchor of their identity, as being socially constructed in discourses as well as in physical encounters, and finally as the site upon which institutions exercise their regulatory power (Baas and Yang 2020, 12).

South Asia is the focus of two recent collections of essays on gender and the corporeal entitled *Gender, Sexuality, Decolonization: South Asia in the World Perspective* (2021a) and *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle* (2024a). According to its editor Ahonaa Roy (2021b), the first volume aims to challenge the mapping of gender and sexuality theorizations from the Global North onto the Global South by centering gendered, racialized, and marginalized subjectivities in post-colonial and neo-colonial contexts. Studies included in this book explore queer and trans politics alongside broader dynamics of gender and sexuality in South Asia and its diasporas. The contributions in the latter volume, edited by Meenakshi Malhotra, Krishna Menon, and Rachana Johri, discuss everyday embodied experiences, resistance, and feminist activism of women in South Asia as well as their representation in literary and cultural expressions. "[T]he body—especially the woman's body," the editors point out, "is enmeshed in questions of identity (individual, social and national), citizenship and cultural location" (Malhotra, Menon, and Johri 2024b, 4).

Finally, numerous monographic works and edited volumes published in the last two decades deal with the topics of embodiment, gender, and identity, looking at specific Asian societies and cultural productions and practices using diverse disciplinary perspectives. These publications include, to mention only a few, *Bodies of Evidence: Women, Society, and Detective Fiction in 1990s Japan* (2004) by Amanda C. Seaman, *Women's Sexualities and Masculinities in a Globalizing Asia* (2007) edited by Saskia E. Wieringa, Evelyn Blackwood, and Abha Bhaiya, *Lost Bodies: Prostitution and Masculinity in Chinese Fiction* (2010) by Paola Zamperini, *Religion, Politics and Gender in Indonesia: Disputing the Muslim Body* (2010) by Sonja van Wichelen, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (2017) by Eunjung Kim, *Becoming a Malaysian Trans Man: Gender, Society, Body and Faith* (2020) by Joseph N. Goh, *Forms of the Body in Contemporary Japanese Society, Literature, and Culture* (2020) edited by Irina Holca and Carmen Săpunaru Tămaș, and most recently, *Gender, Islam and Sexuality in Contemporary Indonesia* (2024) edited by Monika Arnez and Melani

Budianta. This overview of recent studies points at the vitality of the area of research to which our volume contributes.

The seventeen studies included in this volume are organized into four parts. The following outline will show how multiple threads tie the chapters together.

Part I features four studies that explore the quotidian experience and performance of gendered identities and sexuality in Japan and Indonesia. In their chapter entitled "Virtual Fashion and Identity in Japan: Counterculture in an Age of Global Transparency," Liudmila Bredikhina and Agnès Giard examine fashion as part of the practice called *babiniku*, which typically involves male virtual YouTubers who incarnate a stereotypically feminine and cute, computer-generated avatar to create online content, as a form of countercultural action in Japan. Their study considers virtual bodies and fashion as resources that enable the content creators to explore and change themselves, their identity, and enjoy parallel lives, free from prescribed roles and obligations, and self-expression through artificiality in the face of contemporary dominant social expectations concerning sociability and self-presentation. The theme of embodied and negotiated performance of gender in this chapter constitutes one of the recurring themes in this volume.

The second chapter in the book also deals with the theme of construction of bodies as well as gendered social expectations, imagined selves, and empowerment. In her chapter, entitled "Constructing the Ideal Face: The Japanese High School Girls' Makeup," Keiko Aiba investigates makeup practices by female high school students in Japan. Situating her research in feminist discourse, Aiba presents and discusses findings from interviews she conducted with female high school students aimed at determining the reasons behind the students' use of makeup as well as their reasons for not engaging in the makeup practice, which, as the author points out, is largely regarded as a norm, that is, part of social etiquette for adult women in Japan.

The third chapter looks at the self-fashioning and negotiation of gendered identities in a different context of contemporary Asia, namely, present-day Indonesia. In her study entitled "Waria and Marriage in Malay Muslim Society in Indonesia," Novidayanti examines how the institution and experience of heterosexual marriage is viewed and lived by waria (male-to-female transgender individuals) in Jambi, Sumatra. Based on the author's interviews with waria and perspectives by Malay scholars on waria's lives, the chapter provides insights into how Islam and Malay customs and traditions relate to the ways in which waria live and understand heterosexual marriage. As a result, the study sheds new light on discourses and experiences of transgenderism and homosexuality in Malay Muslim society.

The experiences of LGBTQ+ people and the complex interaction between gender and other socio-cultural identities also represent the focus of the fourth chapter. In their study, entitled “Intersectionality in Japanese Schools: The Experiences and Struggles of LGBTQ+ JET Teachers in Rural Japan,” Kazuyoshi Kawasaki and Ami Kobayashi apply the concept of intersectionality to their analysis of the situation of LGBTQ+ college graduates from overseas who come to Japan to participate in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme as teaching assistants. Exploring the intersectional experiences linked to the participants’ nationality, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and regionality of their work placements, the authors disentangle the complexities of their everyday experiences, pointing out how different factors intertwine with one another and shape the everyday lives of participants as people with marginalized and minority backgrounds living in rural Japan.

Part II of this book focuses on issues such as gendered violence, activism, and rights in Japan, Taiwan, and Thailand. It opens with a chapter by Verita Sriratana entitled “‘Queering Misogyny’ in the Context of Marriage Equality: A Proposed Approach to Understanding and Resisting Necropolitics and Epistemic Violence against Women and LGBTQINA+ Persons in Thailand.” The chapter offers an examination of gender and marriage equality in Thailand through analyses of political, legal, and activist discourses. Sriratana’s findings help to dispel the myth that Thailand represents a “queer h(e)aven,” contrasting officially-endorsed rhetoric with how the legal foundations of gender equality have been eroded and feminist activism demonized. Drawing on the work of Achille Mbembe (2019), Sriratana argues that the 2021 verdict of Thailand’s Constitutional Court on marriage equality enacts the “hermeneutic death” of LGBTQINA+ persons and suggests combining feminist theories and activism with queer theories and activism to deconstruct misogynist discourses and resist epistemic violence against LGBTQINA+ individuals.

The exploration of queer activism advocating for gender and marriage equality continues in Chapter Six, entitled “Coming out as Everyday Life Activism: ‘Displaying’ Gay Father Families in Taiwan,” where Jung Chen explores the question of reproductive rights for Taiwan’s LGBTQ+ community. Even though Taiwan is a global leader in legal protections for LGBTQ+ rights, the community still faces challenges, particularly when it comes to forming families. Chen provides analysis based on participant observation and interviews with gay fathers and prospective fathers, showing how gay men are using their visibility and family formations to promote everyday activism and envision a better future for the gay father community. Not unlike the previous chapter, Chen’s analysis sheds new light onto the legal and social status of queer identities in what is often perceived as one of the most LGBTQ+-friendly countries in Asia.

The next chapter also pertains to the issue of how individuals have coped with gender inequality in Taiwan, this time, however, focusing on Taiwanese girls and women in the mid-twentieth century. Entitled "Nursery Rhymes, Rituals, and Cultural Trauma: A Connotation of the 'Chair Maiden' in Taiwan," the chapter by Yu-Yin Hsu and Kuan-Wei Wu explores the custom of Chair Maiden, a child psychic divination ritual practiced in rural Taiwan until the 1970s. Based on their analysis of collected rural stories, rhymes, and ritual practices, the authors argue that this tradition functioned as a way to collectively heal the traumatic encounters experienced by young girls growing up in a patriarchal society.

The second part of the book closes with another chapter that addresses the issue of gendered trauma from a perspective that centers the discourses and practices of women. This chapter, penned by Chiara Fusari and entitled "Body and Violence: Reshaping Narratives on Sexual Violence in Japan," examines stories of survivors of sexual violence, shedding light on the ways in which they challenge the dominant discourses around the issue of sexual violence in contemporary Japan. Fusari presents the results of her analysis of three case studies of sexual violence victims turned advocates and activists, discussing both the structural silencing of victims, sexual double standards, and rape myths, as well as the subversive potential of sexual violence survivors' testimonies and the empowerment that they can gain through speaking up and going public with their stories.

Part III and Part IV of this volume connect the societal issues explored in the first two parts with cases from literature, cinema, and visual art, examining cases of cultural engagements with bodies and gendered identities from mainland China, Japan, Taiwan, and India. Dedicated to literature, Part III begins with a study by Daniela Licandro. Her chapter, entitled "*Like Snow Like Mountain*: Narrating Gender Violence in the Era of #MeToo Activism," focuses on a collection of short stories by Zhang Tianyi. Closely aligned especially with the previous chapter by Fusari but also intimately connected to other chapters in the second part of the book that address the topic of gendered violence, Licandro's chapter shows how Zhang Tianyi explores the experiences of Chinese women who endure harassment and gender-based violence. Zhang's writings encourage a more nuanced understanding of women's issues and gendered identities in China and contribute to our understanding of contemporary Chinese literature and ongoing feminist discourse. According to Licandro, Zhang Tianyi's collection compels us to reconsider the mechanisms of gendered violence in a broader framework of interpretation, allowing for critiques of various forms of oppression.

The next chapter addresses a different type of "gendered" violence and embodied representation by discussing the media-constructed images of murderous women in Heisei-era Japan. In her study, entitled "Becoming-Simulacra: Textualizing Murderous Women in Heisei Japan (1989–2019)," Fengyuan Zhen

draws on Jean Baudrillard's theories to argue that such images represent "simulacra" detached from accessible reality. The author shows how both non-fictional works and novels generated and utilized the hyperrealities of female criminality as perspectival interpretations to engage with a variety of discourses on gender and social crises that concerned the public at the time. These included the gender division of labor, ideal femininity, the perceived loss of masculinity, consumer culture, and the monstrous potential of human beings.

Dunja Jelesijevic's chapter, "A Lady's Reckoning: Torture, Eroticism, and Salvation in the Noh Play *Shikimi Tengu*," discusses the religious and social underpinnings of the titular play, while exploring the suffering and potential redemption of Lady Rokujō, the infamous antagonist in *Genji monogatari*, a classic work of Japanese literature, placed within the context of a seemingly unrelated plot trope of stories about creatures called *tengu*. The main tensions are shown to arise from the character's female sensuality and corporeality, which unexpectedly elicit voyeuristic pleasure in her torture and pain. These, in turn, are not framed as part of a process for Rokujō to achieve enlightenment and salvation, but rather, her tortured body serves as an object for meditation for the mountain ascetic that watches her. To explore the relation between the concepts of "looking" and "observing" and the key themes of this volume, such as body, gender, and agency, Jelesijevic examines the male gaze and voyeurism in the play through the concept of *kaimami*, the important erotic trope in premodern Japanese literature that in its paradigmatic form involves a man peeking or secretly gazing at a woman through a gap.

The chapter by Li-wen Wang, "The Body as Lens and Testimony: The Bodily Experience and Cultural Identity in the Song Stories of Traveling to Foreign Lands (960–1279)," presents a critical reading of the representation of foreign peoples, lands, and customs in classical Chinese short stories from around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The chapter focuses on a story titled "Gao Yan" included in the Northern-Song collection, *Lofty Debates under the Green Window*. By exploring this under-researched territory, Wang shows how the representation of bodies and embodied experiences stages the interplay between the environment on the one hand, and views on morality, civilization, and spirituality on the other. Wang's analysis of these stories—which mix realist elements with fiction—foregrounds the negative portrayal of the effects enacted on the body of the traveler by foreign lands and people, suggesting that their sensuous descriptions convey a normative tale of elite cultivation in the Central Lands.

Part IV is dedicated to the representation of bodies and gender in visual art and cinema. The first chapter in this part, "Archeology and *Onmyōdō*: Human-Shaped Ritual Objects Associated with Purification Rites and Curses," is authored by Marianna Lázár. In the chapter, Lázár relies on historical records, archeological

findings, classical works of literature, and secondary sources to investigate how human-shaped effigies and ritual pottery decorated with human faces were used in ancient Japan in both state and private rituals. While the former are discussed as, for example, serving as substitute bodies as well as symbolic representations of individuals, the latter are revealed to have, for example, been used as vessels into which a person would breathe during a healing or purification ceremony as well as objects that played a role in the rites whose aim was the appeasement of *kami*.

Taking us back to the present time, Giorgio Strafella's chapter sheds light on the legacy of post-Mao avant-gardist trends in contemporary Chinese art by analyzing the artistic development and the themes of identity and the corporeal in Shen Jingdong's art. In this chapter, Strafella explores how Shen reflects on those themes throughout his artistic oeuvre, from his early conceptual and performance art projects to his later paintings. By doing so, the chapter shows that studying the experimental period of Chinese contemporary art—that is, the period from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s—is necessary to understand even the most popular art of the last twenty years. At the same time, the chapter points at the centrality of issues pertaining to the human body and social identity in postsocialist China, not only in visual art, but also in intellectual discourse and art criticism.

The topics of the male gaze, feminism, and gendered social roles return in another chapter on contemporary Chinese art, entitled "Yang Fudong: In Search of the Lost *Yin/Yang* Balance." In this chapter, Christine Vial Kayser examines photographic, video, and installation art by Yang Fudong to problematize the representation of women and the relation between genders in his oeuvre. Despite the importance and special status of women in his art, the author suggests that the gender dimension of Yang's work has been overlooked. Through a critique of several works of art by Yang Fudong that takes into account developments and expressions of feminism in twentieth-century China, Vial Kayser argues that Yang's taste for Chinese literati tradition is linked to his embrace of the New Confucian doctrine that has risen in popularity since the 1990s and assigns each gender specific social roles. According to her analysis, the representation of beautiful women in Yang's works is closely linked to a crisis of masculinity in contemporary China.

Taking us from China to late colonial India, the chapter by Sutanuka Banerjee and Lipika Kankaria offers an interesting parallel to the themes of the "modern woman" and the representation of femininity discussed also in the previous study. Entitled "Stylish and Bold: A Critical Analysis of the Trope of the Modern Girl in Indian Cinema in the Late Colonial Period," the chapter explores the portrayal of the Modern Girl in Indian cinematic works and film culture. As Banerjee and Kankaria show, the development of this trope is closely linked to negotiations of the (self-)fashioning of gendered bodies in the public sphere, as cultural and social

changes in India during the 1920s were redefining women's position in society. The authors' analysis of films, film posters, and other cinema-related sources focuses on the figures of two actresses, Sulochana and Nadia, to show how their celebrity challenged ideas of femininity and cultural identity while embodying "glocal" imaginations of modernity, emancipation, and consumerism.

In the final chapter of this book, titled "Labor, Marginalization, Taiwanization: Mapping the Embodiment of the Being-Woman in Post-Martial Taiwan through Wu Mali's *Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang*," Roberto Ricardo Alvau examines the experiences of marginalized women workers in Taiwan during the Taiwanization period of 1990s. Alvau analyzes Wu Mali's artistic project, *Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang*, to show how it challenges the Taiwanese patriarchal system and argues that the artist's strategy involves re-signifying the conditions imposed on women's bodies and actions. Such a change of perspective, the artist argues, would allow women to reclaim the spaces and realities that patriarchy has taken away from them and, as a result, modern Taiwanese identity could become more inclusive and diverse. Alvau shows how in Wu Mali's project, the themes of labor and national identity in Taiwan become intertwined with key issues addressed by multiple chapters in this volume, such as the gendering of social roles and identities, the intersectional oppression of bodies, and the struggle for empowerment.

This collective volume examines the dynamic and complex nature of corporeality, gender, and identity in several Asian societies. The authors discuss how historical legacies, sociopolitical structures, cultural narratives, and individual experiences shape these concepts. Although the themes discussed in this book focus on specific Asian contexts, they resonate far beyond regional boundaries. By showing the importance of interdisciplinary inquiry in capturing the complexities of embodied and gendered identities, this book will inspire further research into the ever-evolving landscapes of these issues in Asia and beyond.

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PART I

THE EMBODIED EXPERIENCE AND PERFORMANCE OF GENDERED IDENTITIES

VIRTUAL FASHION AND IDENTITY IN JAPAN: COUNTERCULTURE IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL TRANSPARENCY

Liudmila Bredikhina and Agnès Giard

This chapter investigates *babiniku* fashion practices in Japan as a kind of countercultural action. *Babiniku* are a group of virtual YouTubers (VTubers). VTubers are known to be entertainers using 3D or 2D computer-generated avatars to create online content without exposing their physical features to public scrutiny. *Babiniku* are typically male VTubers who “incarnate” feminine characters for online performance activities. The most popular ones adopt a “cute” (*kawaii*) appearance and wear girly outfits, seemingly conforming to stereotypical gender norms and expectations. Ambivalent as it may be, fashion plays a significant role in *babiniku* VTubers’ strategy. We hypothesize that animating and customizing feminine avatars enable certain men to reshape their identity and challenge social expectations related to self-presentation. Virtual bodies and fashion can be deployed as resources to play with gender norms and elude the contemporary imperatives of authentic self-modeling. This study is based on long-term participant observation and key-informant interviews since November 2019. A virtual fashion shop was opened on the Japanese website Booth to investigate fashion consumption and creation in May 2020. We also surveyed 24 Japanese VTubers using a feminine avatar for the purposes of this paper.

Keywords: virtual fashion, gender performance, VTuber, *babiniku*, Japan

1. Introduction

“It is not always easy to determine when and where the body begins and when its various components cease to be part of the human being” (Hoeyer 2010, 67). For example, to what extent is the avatar part of identity? What role do digital clothes play in the construction of self? In Japan, creating virtual clothes for virtual bodies

is part of a rising phenomenon known as virtual YouTubers (VTubers). Originating in 2016, VTubers are 2D or 3D computer-generated characters animated by motion capture and used for engaging in entertainment content, such as streaming, on video-sharing websites, and applications. Being a VTuber implies three elements: (1) using a virtual body in contrast to the physical one; (2) having a storyline set in the virtual space; (3) expressing one's personality through characters (Akatsuki 2018, 115).

At the end of 2017, a VTuber boom took place as technology became more accessible (Hirota 2018, 48–49), making it easier for individual (個人 *kojin*) VTubers—i.e., those not affiliated with a company—to engage in the activity. Currently, more than 20,000 VTubers are registered in Japan (User Local 2022).¹ When one looks at the most popular VTubers on YouTube, it is apparent that they look like attractive anime-like characters wearing enticing outfits. According to Hirota Minoru,² the managing director of the Panora news website that focuses on virtual reality, most VTubers have a “pretty” or “cute girl” character (美少女 *bishōjo*)³ appearance and target a predominantly male audience (Hirota 2018, 51). By just looking at a VTuber, one can never be sure who is behind the virtual character. Regardless of gender, age, education, marital status, occupation, sexual orientation, or health, they usually wrap themselves in mystery and hide their body behind a filter, some even changing their voice with a vocoder.

Among the anonymous VTubers, however, some are self-proclaimed *babiniku*. Although they have a “cute girl” appearance, the person behind the virtual character is often a man. The term *babiniku*, which derives from the Japanese phrase *bācharu bishōjo juniku* (バーチャル美少女受肉, “virtual pretty girl incarnation”), originated in 2018 and refers to VTubers (who are typically male, although the term is not gendered) incarnating a cute girl in the virtual world (Editorial Department 2018). VTubers who call themselves *babiniku* use the term in their social media descriptions and present themselves as such during live streams. Their audience refers to them by their VTuber username, but also calls them *babiniku*. As such, *babiniku* is a term that a particular community of VTubers use to distinguish themselves from other VTubers. However, their activities are similar to mainstream VTubers: they live-stream, upload videos, post on social media, interact with fans, etc. It may seem strange that these men may voluntarily expose their digital alter-ego to

¹ User Local is a technology venture company specializing in artificial intelligence and big data analysis. They provide reports of the estimated number of VTubers.

² In this chapter, we adopt the Japanese naming order (i.e., family name – given name).

³ According to Patrick W. Galbraith, *bishōjo* is a “pretty” or a “cute” girl although the literal translation is “beautiful girl” (Galbraith and Schodt 2014, 8).

the potential negative reactions associated with the term.⁴ But the very fact that they deliberately put themselves in this delicate situation, by hinting at the fact that the young feminine-looking avatar may very well be that of a male human, is far from innocent.

By creating a gap between what they look like and what they are, some *babiniku*, notably those this study deals with, trouble the binary understanding of gender. They act “as if” they are lovely heroines, but the way they showcase their true nature as performers and puppeteers draws attention to a discrepancy that they deliberately, or even conspicuously, emphasize. Virtual fashion appears to be one of the most efficient means to accentuate this disparity between the overly charming avatar and the “person inside” (中の人 *naka no hito*). As a matter of fact, *babiniku*’s strategy of presenting themselves as *bishōjo* to garner fans heavily relies on the gaudy and alluring display of cuteness achieved through customized digital clothes, accessories, jewels, hats, socks, wings, or shoes.

The fashion observed during live streams or video uploads may seem compliant with gender norms, but in this article, we highlight that those performances are a strategy put forward by *babiniku* on purpose. Building on long-term participant observation of the *babiniku* community and key-informant interviews, we hypothesize that becoming a cute character with a feminine body is a resource enabling certain men to reshape their identity and challenge social expectations related to self-presentation. We acknowledge that not all *babiniku* VTubers dress and behave cutely. This paper focuses, however, on those who indulge in such aesthetics, that is, the overwhelming majority of *babiniku*, as can be seen on the VTuber ranking website (User Local 2024). Both in July 2023, at the time of writing this chapter, and in June 2024, at the time of editing the manuscript, the top 10 of the most popular *babiniku* with most views and fans listed on the website confirms the fact that the ones with the highest number of followers share very similar characteristics: child-like face, neotenic features (big eyes, little nose), furry ears (cat or rabbit), fairy look, and princess attire. Exploring the reasons why *babiniku* turn themselves into entertaining clichés, we intend to provide insights into the motives and reasons underlying these gender performances.

This inquiry has been part of one of the author’s (L. Bredikhina) M.A. and Ph.D. ethnographic research projects on *babiniku* since November 2019. In the early stages of the research, she designed a 3D character and acquired the necessary hardware and software skills to actively participate in *babiniku* streams

⁴ At the time of writing this chapter, one of the suggestions that automatically pops up in the Google search bar, when one types the keyword *babiniku* in Japanese, is “disgusting” (気持ち悪い *kimochiwarui*). Since Google autocomplete predictions reflect real searches that have been done on Google, it can be said that currently among the most common searches related to *babiniku* involve the feeling of disgust.

both as a viewer (commenting in the chat, posting screenshots of the videos on Twitter, rebranded as X in June 2023, and sending virtual gifts and donations) and as a VTuber streamer (creating her own YouTube channel and participating in VTuber collaborations). To further understand the creation and acquisition of virtual bodies, she volunteered during Virtual Market (バーチャルマーケット *Bācharu Māketto*), where creators can sell, among other things, virtual bodies and fashion items. She also opened a virtual fashion shop on the Japanese website Booth⁵ in May 2020 to investigate fashion consumption and creation. She designed and sold clothes following fashion trends (according to trending outfits on Twitter) and consumer demands (VTubers commissioned outfits from the author). As part of the research process, the authors of this study further created a short film titled *Can't Stop 'Me' Anymore* and screened it during the digital conference *Desired Identities: New Technology-based Metamorphosis in Japan* in June 2020.⁶ The film presented a synthetic parade of people who changed into characters, reflecting the aspirations and creativity of those involved in social networks.

For this study, we also conducted a survey and questioned 24 Japanese *babiniku*. The informants were recruited on Twitter, where they stated in their profile bio and/or during live streams that they identify as *babiniku*. a Google Form open-ended and close-ended question survey was sent to those *babiniku* to which they replied anonymously. The chosen *babiniku* displayed interest in virtual fashion by uploading new outfit videos and photos to Twitter and YouTube. In addition, nine virtual fashion designers, one *babiniku* fashion influencer, and two critics who write about VTubers, virtual worlds, and virtual fashion, were interviewed on Twitter using direct messaging. Yamano Hiroki, a VTuber researcher, was also interviewed in the same manner. Finally, we also extensively reviewed original publications, such as Japanese VTubers' self-published novels and manifestos, as well as photos posted by *babiniku*. We also conducted participant observation while attending online fashion shows, immersing in virtual worlds, and watching *babiniku* live-streams. We analyzed public posts on Twitter that featured VTuber fashion outfits on two occasions. The first was from January 2020 until May 2021 during the author's (L. Bredikhina) MA thesis research. The second occasion was from mid-April to mid-May 2023 for this study. To do so, on both occasions, hashtags #VTuber, #VRoid, #バーチャルファッション ("virtual fashion"), and #VRoidのテクスチャ ("VRoid texture") were used to search for images and virtual fashion designers. We also analyzed the prices, styles, and types of outfits sold on Booth using hashtags #VTuber and #VRoid. This study is also informed by information

⁵ Booth is a Japanese website for selling various contents.

⁶ The conference was organized by the ERC-funded research project "Emotional Machines: The Technological Transformation of Intimacy in Japan" in cooperation with the Department of Research and Higher Education of the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

collected from 51 *babiniku* (using in-depth interviews, surveys, and participant observation) during one year and a half of immersive fieldwork for the author's (L. Bredikhina) M.A. thesis.

In this study, through long term ethnographic immersion, we provide "thick descriptions" and account "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures" (Geertz 2008, 314) of the *babiniku* fashion culture. Building on the above-presented data, our aim is to present *babiniku*'s virtual grooming, dressing, toileting, and luring activity as a collective strategy to disrupt patriarchal ideology in Japan. Previous research has demonstrated that through avatars, individuals support and subvert hegemonic gender norms (Hodson and Livingstone 2017), making the virtual realm a crucial space for gender and identity research. As is explained further in this study, our participants expressed that by becoming appealing anime-like characters and indulging in dressing up, they could question and temporarily free themselves from the breadwinner model of manhood which still prevails in contemporary Japanese society (Bredikhina and Giard 2022). Borrowing Deborah Cameron's words that cute fashion "is a rebellion with frills on" (Cameron 2006), we would like to demonstrate that the *babiniku* VTubers use virtual cuteness as a soft form of dissidence.

In this chapter, we will first address the theoretical dimensions related to the construction of identity through the use of a feminine-presenting avatar. The following question will be raised: When *babiniku* craft a stereotyped appearance and act feminine, to what extent do they play "fake"? As will be shown, their performances tend to subvert the traditional dichotomy between "real self" (the person operating the avatar) and "mediated self" (the role played via the avatar). We will subsequently delve into virtual clothes' production methods, handcrafting, and networking activities enabling VTubers to display new garb and, thus, get public attention. The marketing, sales channels, and the intricate culture of events, such as fashion shows and pop-up stores, will also be studied as part of an economy revolving around gender roles. In the ensuing part, we will describe virtual attires as a collective celebration and countercultural action site, enabling participants to assess one's own identity and get validated by others, while deconstructing the culturally approved notion of masculinity. Finally, we will put forward the idea that while virtual clothes seemingly reinforce gender stereotypes, it is a form of "camouflage" rather than the expression of a misogynistic view towards women. Exploring *babiniku*'s discourses, this chapter will reveal how they use digital design as a tool to make visible "real identities" while, at the same time, questioning the "be yourself" culture.

2. Mediated identity, a theoretical approach

To understand how *babiniku* engage and construct their identity, it is important to state first that their performance cannot be separated from the avatar they animate to attract and entertain their fans. Is this character the embodiment of a mediated identity, and if so, how do *babiniku* relate to it?

Before investigating, it is important to sum up the theories and conceptual tools surrounding the notion of mediated identity. In his seminal article "On Face-Work," Erving Goffman (1955, 213) noted, "Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants." According to Goffman, the performance of identity, dubbed "face-work," is grounded on the "image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes." In other words, we have to make a good showing and act appropriately (consistent with our face) to ensure that interactions with "other participants" can smoothly follow the standardized rituals. We take on a role, but we must also respect the roles played by others; otherwise, social relationships will be impossible.

Building on Goffman's theatrical metaphor, many scholars developed the performance paradigm in various directions, such as emotional labor studies (Hochschild 2003 [1983]), gender/queer studies (Butler 1990), or game studies (Triclot 2011). The idea that role-playing has the power to make visible some gaps, the gap between actor and role, for example, induced some scholars to highlight the potentially disruptive nature of performances. As noted by Jean Baudrillard in *Fatal Strategies* (1983, 155), "We could say of women that someone else is hidden inside and is mocking us." People enacting fictional characters (enacting women, for example) can dismantle or distort the codes (gender codes, in our case) through exaggeration or excess. Pushing the simulation to its limits is a very efficient way to resist norms since it brings to light the discrepancies between what is shown and what is hidden. In other words, it is not because a mediated identity complies with norms that it is not disruptive. On the contrary, the more it mimics norms, the more this "fatal game" (Baudrillard 1983) can express irony and effect transgression.

Many scholars working on digital technologies place an emphasis on the dynamic potential of the tactics used by avatar users. As shown by Matviyenko (2010), having a digital body and evolving in online environments has multiple implications on identity, enabling "gender-swapping" and avatar customization. Visual appearance is essential for digital spaces as users are judged based on their looks (Nowak 2004). This look can be an asset. For example, a male player could choose a feminine character because the avatar's appearance entails practical in-game benefits (Huh and Williams 2009; Martey et al. 2014). The virtual body can also be used to stage an "ideal identity" stirring its efficiency from the very fact that it is incarnated by a fictional character.

According to Suan (2021), VTubers express selfhood through anime-type codified movements and expressions which emphasize the artificiality of their performance. Many VTubers agree with this. According to one pioneer of the VTuber community, Todoki Uka, avatars “often act as our ‘ideal self,’ that is the ‘self we want to be,’ the ‘self we want to show,’ and the ‘real me’” (Todoki 2018, 61). Virtual Girl Nem, a *babniku* and self-proclaimed “metaverse evangelist,” shares the same opinion. Nem claims that digital bodies empower individuals to “become who you want to be,” “create the person you want to be,” “wear the person you want to be” (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 135–137). Becoming your ideal self is achieved through masquerade, cute attitudes, and girlish clothes. It may seem somehow contradictory to materialize the so-called “true self” using a stereotyped character, but, as Sone (2014, 203) explains in an article about performance, the dichotomy between a factitious, “false” outside and a personal, “authentic” inside is not relevant, especially in the field of contemporary Japanese subculture where people playfully alternate “faces” according to circumstances.

These notions of theatricality and distancing can also be found in Namba’s (2018) article. He analyses the VTuber practice through the lens of the “tree-layer theory” (三層理論 *sansō riron*). According to Namba, the viewer is communicating with the “media-person,” that is, not the “person” themselves, but the layering of the three elements: (1) the “person” (パーソン *pāson*), i.e., the human operating the character; (2) the “persona” (ペルソナ *perusona*) of the fictional character; and (3) the “fictional character” (キャラクター *kyarakutā*). These layers make it possible to introduce uncertainty and ambiguity in the staging of the self (Namba 2018, 121).

Higuchi (2023) pushes this analysis even further. Noting that “acting mistakes” (演じそこない *enji sokonai*), that is, engaging in behavior that contradicts the appearance or the “setting” of the character, occur during long live-streams or are made deliberately by VTubers, Higuchi (2023) proposes to incorporate the notion of “shadow” (シャドウ *shadou*) into the three-layer theory. “Shadow” accounts for those “manifestations of the inner surfaces” as shortcuts to gaining viewers’ affection (Higuchi 2023, 89). In response to Namba’s theory, Yamano Hiroki (2022), a philosophical researcher who has extensively written about VTubers, proposes “moderate independent theory” (穏健な独立説 *onken na dokuritsu setsu*)⁷ to account for the independent existence of the VTuber from an identity perspective, without having to juggle between the binary opposition of the “fictional character” (フィクショナルキャラクター *fikushonaru kyarakutā*) and the “human streamer” (生身の配信者 *namami no haishinsha*). In his later article, Yamano (2023b) further develops his theory and proposes approaching the

⁷ In his recent article, Yamano (2023a) changed the name of the theory to “moderate non-reductionist theory” (穏健な非還元説 *onken na hikangen setsu*).

VTuber existence as a multi-layered make-believe practice created within the fictional spaces of VTubers along with their viewers.

As can be seen from this brief review, many scholars involved in the research on the VTuber phenomenon argue that the main characteristic of VTubers' practices is the use of discrepancy as a resource to create mediated identities. Such identities enable VTubers to initiate encounters of a new kind, that is, encounters challenging the binary dichotomies between body and avatar or between the real person and the fictional character. Although the avatar may seem blatantly "fake," it can convey a sense of authentic presence because many things "leak" (voluntarily or not) through the gaps, hinting at hidden realities. As Umezawa (2023, 10–11) underlines, the more a VTuber conceal themselves behind a character, the more intensely viewers listen. What makes a VTubers identity more "personal" (私的な *shiteki na*) is their vocal style, their speech patterns, their ability to convey specific emotions or to deliver messages through breath, words, or movements, but also their presentation techniques, and the character background (Kirinuki Chan'neru 2023, 21). With new possibilities of the performance of self, VTubers are perceived as tools that enhance the individual by making them "virtual" (AO 2018, 37).

However, giving shape to the so-called "yourself" in the virtual realm is not a naïve activity detached from the physical world. Avatar practices in digital realms hint at pre-existing, offline cultural phenomenon (Miller and Slater 2001). Thus, according to Kondo (2022), it is essential to consider the virtual/digital and the space outside of it, given that existing gender roles and discourses influence the choice of the virtual identity and are specific to a time in history. In other words, the virtual "self" is not separated from the physical space "self" as the virtual identity is "a self-transformed from the real self" (Miyake 2022, 29).

A recent publication about Japanese virtual culture that mentions *babiniku* (Roquet 2022), conducted without ethnographic fieldwork, fails to understand the latent motivations and possibilities offered by virtual cross-dressing by focusing solely on presenting the "macho" and "masculine" side of the virtual practices in Japan. Similarly, most of the articles introduced above do not unravel existing socio-cultural contexts and influences negotiated within the virtual practice of creating items of fashion and bodies. Moreover, when it comes to research about *babiniku* or VTubers, almost none has been conducted from an ethnographic perspective. This study attempts to fill this knowledge gap by examining the relationship between virtual fashion and *babiniku* VTubers' maneuvering.

3. How to create virtual clothes: the fashion craftsmanship

We previously presented different theories related to mediated identities. Creating such identities online involves craftsmanship. Little is known concerning the

design, manufacturing, and marketing of virtual clothes. The *babiniku* this study focuses on are men who identify as *babiniku*, create their own virtual characters, and clothe them by making or purchasing outfits. When they craft their characters, they do not do so from scratch, rather, they often customize a dummy base provided by the app they are using. It is important here to note that the avatar's body resembles that of a schematic puppet (Hatanaka 2019, 73). Investing in an original and tailor-made body would be worthless since VTubers' avatars are not destined to be used naked as the VTubers work on platforms with strict rules prohibiting nudity. The virtual body being very similar to the one of a dress-dup doll, what makes an avatar stand-out are the fashion outfits and accessories.

Clothes and accessories—paramount to the virtual existence as they convey the VTuber's personality—require the utmost care. As informants explain, “the appeal of the *babiniku* relies heavily on the character's appearance,” and “having a *kawaii* look can be an advantage,” enabling the VTubers to “become famous,” but also to socialize, network, and create a community. Digital fashion opens up a world of possibilities. Given its importance, we must begin by investigating the creative process. We aim not to provide an exhaustive list of all VTuber-related fashion events or technologies but rather a general overview of existing practices to familiarize the reader with this culture.

To start with: virtual outfits can be created by the *babiniku* themselves, bought, commissioned, or given by fans. The conception stage entails deciding on the general outlines of the outfit. During the second phase of the design process, the articles of clothing have to be manufactured on a computer. a VTuber can take care of the whole process alone but it is quite complex and time-consuming. Regarding digital tools, it requires software skills that only a minority manages to master: out of our 24 *babiniku* informants, only 9 could engineer digital fashion pieces themselves. The common tools used to create clothes are, in increasing order of complexity: Photoshop, VRoid, Live2DCubism, Blender, and Unity. Photoshop is used to design clothes for 2D and 3D models, which are then imported into Live2D or VRoid.⁸ While Live2D allows animating 2D illustrations of the character, VRoid, a 3D modelling tool, proposes to the user a ready-made 3D model whose parameters can be adjusted and then dressed up using a blank clothing template (Ito 2020). Although such software are supposed to be beginners-friendly, the results are often disappointing when the user does not have an advanced level of experience. a solution that enables complete freedom of design is a mix between Blender, Unity, Maya, and Marvelous Design.⁹ These programs are, however, even

⁸ Simple character customization tools, such as VKatsu and CustomCast, are also popular as users can choose from a stock library, including hair, clothes, and accessories.

⁹ Blender and Maya are 3D computer graphics software tools, Unity is a game engine, and Marvelous Design is a program for making 3D clothes.

more challenging to master. Therefore, beginners have a “hard time” (苦勞 *kurō*), as some VTubers that we surveyed put it.

A simpler (but sometimes expensive) solution is to hire a fashion creator. Those who commission the outfit provide references or describe the general idea of what they want. The designer then creates a draft outfit, fits them onto the VTuber's model, and adjusts where necessary.¹⁰ The most sought-after fashion creators are those designing 3D models. To make themselves known, they mention on X that they design “VRoid texture” (VRoid のテクスチャ *VRoid no tekusucha*) and create dedicated pages to their art on the VRoid Hub service (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 140). According to the fashion designers we interviewed for this study, the workload of an outfit creation ranges from six hours (for a 2D dress) to one month (for a 3D outfit). Those who want a unique design can directly contact their favorite creator or look for one on websites such as Coconala¹¹ under the hashtag #VRoid in the category “VTuber Illustration & Modeling.” For a custom outfit (the clothes, shoes, accessories) made by a designer specifically for a VTuber as a commission, “the price varies between \$60 and \$300,” as virtual fashion designer Julico tells us. a simple custom-made dress (without shoes and accessories) can retail for around \$40. There is a high demand for virtual fashion designers. Four out of nine fashion designers we interviewed claim they are requested to make a new outfit every month, usually season-related costumes, or a fantasy game inspired accoutrement. Examples of virtual outfits designed by a virtual fashion designer are provided in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Virtual outfits designed by Julico, a virtual fashion designer
(Source: Julico)¹²

¹⁰ The technology behind VRoid makes it easier to purchase outfits online and try them on the virtual body. Live2D requires, in contrast, for clothes to be drawn for the character. That is why on Booth we find VRoid outfits and models, while items sold for Live2D are often original characters fully clothed or just clothed bodies without heads.

¹¹ Coconala is a skill marketplace website.

¹² Julico gave us permission to reproduce images of her virtual outfits. From left to right: gothic

According to Asada Kadura, a freelance writer and editor of news related to the VTubers and the metaverse, the most popular looks evolve over time, but as of 2023, they are a blouse with lots of ribbons and a flared knee-length skirt, oversized parkas or coats, loafers or boots. Those garment pieces are part of two clothing styles: the “landmine style” (地雷系 *jiraikei*) and the “mass-produced style” (量産型 *ryōsangata*) as Asada informs us. He further explains, “mass-produced style” is a slang term that refers to flirty and cute *prêt-à-porter* garments, while the “landmine style” has similar aesthetics but gives off a darker, cute, and poisonous feel. In an interview, Yamano tells us that Japan’s VTuber aesthetic is “particularly rooted in the pop culture of manga and video games. In many cases, illustrators who draw cute girls in the anime and manga industry create avatars for VTubers. These avatars often contain numerous elements associated with the ‘cute girl’ archetype, such as hairstyle, hair color, or eye color, easily recognizable as *kawaii*.” He further explains that high school students are often the protagonists of Japanese anime series. Sailor uniforms (navy blouse, pleated skirt, bow tie, and socks) are often worn by protagonists. Similarly, Yamano explains that the same outfits are popular among VTubers, as “Japan’s ‘VTuber culture’ is particularly rooted in the ‘2D culture’ of anime, manga, and gaming. The influence of how characters are depicted in anime and manga is significant.”

Those who do not dispose of the necessary income to hire a designer or do not have the required skill set to create their clothes buy them online. There is a huge demand and an economic space for virtual fashion (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 252). Booth is a popular website where many virtual clothing designers have launched their clothing lines at a relatively low price. As of June 2024, garments are usually sold between \$1 and \$30.¹³ Some VRoid texture makers open shops on Booth and promote them on their X accounts. Users can also scroll virtual fashion catalogues, such as VCODE. Those who have a 2D body and use Live2D can turn to VTern, a website for VTubers, where you can find Vmee, a VTuber clothing specialty shop, where many accessories and fashion items are sold. Specific streaming applications, such as REALITY, also provide users with in-app fashion catalogues, virtual bodies, and streaming services to “broadcast their virtual selves from anywhere” (Shirai 2019).

Due to the popularity of virtual fashion, a growing number of events are being held in virtual spaces, such as *Virtual Fashion Mall* (opened from August 20 to September 3, 2022) and *Carat Vmall* (open several times a year for a few hours since 2022), which enabled fashion designers to exhibit and sell their clothes to

rose, cross, and bat witch dress; dress in six colors inspired by *furisode* (a long-sleeved formal kimono); white lolita dress with frill lace lolita skirt.

¹³ The following are some price examples as of June 2024: satin dress: \$5, school uniform: \$4, princess attire: \$12, landmine-style outfit: \$7, bunny girl outfit: \$6, maid outfit: \$10.

visitors in VRChat.¹⁴ Fashion shows are also organized online to foster fashion creativity, allowing creators to present their new designs worn by famous VTubers or VRChat users. During *Virtual Collection VRoid Stage* in April 2020, designers presented their VCollections made for VRoid bodies. The event occurred in VRChat as a live show hosted by a commentator. On December 20, 2020, and on January 3, 2021, *VRoid Fashion Festa*, a live stream of a virtual fashion runway and sale event held by volunteers, took place with the goal of “connecting people who want to find clothes that fit them” (Yagiko 2020). In December 2021, Maruyama Keita (a fashion designer) and Sayumi Guji (who supervises fashion magazines and movies) were part of the jury of the virtual contest *Avatar Award 2021*.¹⁵ During the contest, Virtual Girl Nem walked the runway: “I was very nervous, but I used my *kawaii* moves,¹⁶ which I have trained by living a full life in the Metaverse, to show off my model walk” (Virtual Girl Nem 2022, 257). It is not uncommon for VTubers with a 3D body to model in fashion shows or do the opening acts of such shows.¹⁷ In 2023, the fourth edition of *Virtual Music Fashion SHOW*, a VRoid fashion show inspired by VTuber original songs that enabled VTubers and fans to get to know each other, took place (Yuteru 2023).

The craze for virtual fashion has spread into the physical world. Jumping on the popularity wagon, brands and fashion malls create digital items of their clothing (finalbeta 2019). The Japanese government has also taken an interest in the growing virtual fashion industry. In June 2023, the laws related to intellectual property were revised to include digital and virtual spaces and make it possible to fight against counterfeited goods such as digital copies of real clothes and accessories (Jiji Press 2023). With virtual fashion gaining attention and developing its own culture, we must investigate the identity deployment possibilities offered by virtual bodies. Having briefly presented a non-exhaustive list of the virtual, specifically VTuber fashion craftsmanship, we want to discuss the importance of clothing as a state of communal festivities and why it seemingly complies with gender norms.

¹⁴ VRChat is an online virtual world platform where users interact through 3D avatars in virtual worlds, designed primarily for virtual reality headsets but also accessible on PCs, gamepads, and Android devices.

¹⁵ This was the second edition, the first award took place in 2020 with Kizuna AI winning the first prize. The latest edition will take place in 2024.

¹⁶ “*Kawaii* moves” (かわいいムーブ *kawaii mūbu*) is a common term among Japanese users of the social virtual reality platform VRChat. It was originally used to describe the cute attitudes and poses of female characters from manga or anime (Bredikhina 2022).

¹⁷ For example, the VTuber and singer Elfa opened the *Virtual Fashion Collection ‘Voyage’ 2022 Winter* (Kanan 2023).

4. Virtual clothes as a site for collective celebration and action

Once the avatar has been created and clothed, it must be shared to exist. To continue the demonstration, we must now explore virtual celebrations and rituals surrounding the digital body. Such is the importance of the virtual look that when Shiro (a historical figure in the VTuber community) released her first photo essay in 2019, the main topic was fashion. The book featured portraits depicting Shiro's full costume, accompanied by personal comments on her different outfits, lifestyles, and philosophy. The book's overall message was: "When you are praised, you can feel that your existence, actions, and achievements are recognized. You can accept yourself and grow" (Shiro 2019, 13). As Shiro often points out in her interviews and publishing, virtual clothes are the best way to receive "compliments" or "praise" (褒めてもらう *homete morau*). Similarly, most of the *babiniku* VTubers adopt a so-called "lovable" appearance and emphasize its cuteness with girly outfits to become socially desirable. Their characters are also designed to suggest vulnerability: as our informants explain, they want to "be protected," "be cherished," "look fragile," and be "taken care of."

Consequently, many *babiniku* acquire an entire wardrobe. Out of the 24 surveyed *babiniku*, 14 informants (58.3%) have less than 10 outfits and 10 informants (41.7%) have more than 10 outfits. One *babiniku* has up to 42 different outfits for their virtual character. Some even pretend they cannot quantify the number of their outfits, briefly stating it is "a lot." Having a number of "cute" outfits, needless to say, perfectly matches the stereotypical belief that women love shopping. Since their goal is to get more viewers, and "more people to heart me," as one informant states poetically, strict compliance with gender roles is required. Their performance depends on their ability to appear as if they were a pretty girl, with all the correlated qualities—coquetry, frivolity, fragility, mischief, and whimsicality—which are conspicuously showcased during the live streams.

To deepen connectedness with their fans, *babiniku* also use clothes to create the illusion of proximity. It should be pointed out here that having a YouTube channel to upload content is insufficient: many *babiniku* create X accounts for their virtual characters to post daily news or simply talk with their audience. Many also communicate daily on YouTube, wearing clothes specifically designed to create a sense of emotional closeness. Hurutsuki (a writer, journalist, and VTuber information community manager) explained to us in an interview that when VTubers give a daily rendezvous, they "wear regular clothes to foster a feeling of familiarity with their audience." To make it look even more intimate, they sometimes wear pajamas (as if the viewers were sharing the same living space), swimsuits (by reference to the romantic trope of summer holidays with a girlfriend), or traditional clothing (strongly associated with the idea of a married couple). The different styles are variations around the same virtual body. Virtual Girl Nem

explains in an interview that one of the authors of this chapter (L. Bredikhina) moderated: "There is a childish me, a mature me, a strong me, a weak me. I use them separately in different situations" (Ben K 2020).

Another way of appealing to fans is the shared enjoyment of "unveiling" (披露 目 *hirome*) a new outfit. Staging each "change of clothes" (着せ替え *kisekae*) as an offering to their fans, VTubers (not only *babiniku*) announce the event in advance, posting teasers a couple of weeks prior to the unveiling on X, then sending out little hints and clues to create a buzz. One informant illustrates this by saying, "I have made a new costume, and I am going to show it off!" The VTuber then provides a time, date, and link for the audience to join the broadcast. A special stream is usually dedicated to showcasing the costume, usually designed following important events or seasons within the year's cycle. For instance, Halloween, Christmas, New Year, and Valentine's Day are planned as special events. Announcing a new model for the VTuber's birthday is also popular since it correlates the change of clothes with the positive idea of a fresh start. Launching a new outfit is even more important to celebrate milestone anniversaries, such as the "debut anniversary" to commemorate the first six months or the first year following the "birth" of the avatar. Along with their fans, VTubers take every opportunity to celebrate a new beginning. Achieving a certain number of subscribers is also a pretext for an exciting announcement. A typical online post is as follows: "I have got a new costume to show off! I finally got 1,000 subscribers on my YouTube channel, so I made an original costume to celebrate! Thanks to all the followers!" VTubers also update their outfits for romantic summer festivals, such as Tanabata (七夕, "Evening of the seventh"), with fireworks and parades originating in a legendary love story.

One might wonder if clothes are created to please the fans, thus following the fans' *kawaii* expectations and resulting in stereotypically cute and feminine garments. It is, however, nearly impossible to establish a clear separation between *babiniku* VTubers and their fans. Pleasure is shared, up to the point where fans can design virtual clothes as tokens of support or gifts to their favorite VTuber, working day and night on the dynamic behavior of virtual silk ribbons fluttering around a glossy virtual lace gown. Fans usually wait with anticipation for the release of a new garment: "I think they are happy to see me when I show off my new outfit. I am also happy to have a fresh new look," says one informant. Another one explains that "everyone likes to see new models." The change of clothes operates as a ritual, providing those who watch it with the feeling of a new departure in life. As Shiro (2019, 22) states in her book, clothes "make me feel like a different person," adding that she "noticed a new side of herself thanks to the various costumes." According to her, "every human should try reborn themselves into various 'selves' every day" (Shiro 2019, 22). As can be seen from the quotes, the fans and the *babiniku* collaborate to construct a fiction where all people can

become somebody else: the VTuber (who is a male adult) can turn into a flirtatious young girl and the viewer (who may feel alone) can make as if the character was a girlfriend, a confident, or a roommate.

The miniskirts, prominent breasts, or crop tops showcased by VTubers are sometimes perceived, however, as derogative to women. Since 2018, Japanese self-proclaimed feminists and academics regularly criticize the eroticized appearance of VTubers, arguing that their stereotyped display of cuteness is a form of sexism (Senda 2018; Potato 2020; Ito 2021). In September 2021, a video featuring VTuber Tojou Rinka was removed due to pressure from a women's rights group. Tojou is a VTuber working for a company known as VASE, which was granted permission by the police to develop public safety video content in the VTuber's home city of Matsudo. In August, Ito Toshiko (2021), a Chiba Prefectural Assembly member, wrote on her blog that the VTuber's appearance was disrespectful to women since the avatar had a short skirt and was showing belly and navel. Several days later, the Alliance of Feminist Representatives (全国フェミニスト議員連盟 Zenkoku Feminisuto Giin Renmei) (2021) sent an open letter to those concerned asking to remove the video due to its depiction of girls as sexual objects and promotion of prejudice based on stereotypical roles of women. It could be easily argued that the VTubers' appearance reinforces negative conceptions of femininity (restricting women to be vain, irresponsible, and lovesome). If we were to apply the same straightforward approach to *babiniku*, however, it would fail to capture the intricacies of their game plan.

To understand the ambivalent nature of their performance, we must now exploit the concept of identity deployment as a form of strategic action conducted by the VTubers and their fans to create a tight-knit community led by a strong taste for fiction and anonymity.

5. Negotiating identity by hiding behind the clichés

Playing on the conventional image of attractive maidens, *babiniku* VTubers do not challenge gender norms; not openly at least. Building on the idea that gender performance is often ambivalent (Butler 1996; MacNeal 1999; Van den Berg 2021), we argue that the stereotyped parade of cuteness is a kind of "camouflage" rather than the expression of misogyny. The camouflage of *babiniku* consists of exaggerating the traits of a stylized and codified girly figure borrowed from anime and manga culture. Their goal is not to change sex. As one informant highlights, "I do not want to become a woman, I want to become a virtual *bishōjo*." For *babiniku*, as we are told, the "*bishōjo* is the embodiment of *kawaii*" and relates to what they call an "ideal" (理想 *risō*), in complete contradiction to a "real female" (生身の女性 *namami no jousei*). We thus propose to think of those hyper-cute and feminine

representations as a “camouflage.” By using the *bishōjo* appearance, they blend in with the surroundings of a Japanese society where characters, notably cute girls, are ubiquitous (Galbraith 2019).

“I am learning every day how to move in a cute way,” tells us one informant, adding that this work is done to “show that the character exists and is alive.” *Babiniku* train their movements, but also their vocal cords, up to the point where their performance becomes spectacular. Displaying what Baudrillard (1983, 28) would call “a dizzying over-multiplication of formal qualities,” they conceal themselves behind the *clichés* and propel their audience in a world filled with parodic humor. Because their shows are openly based on simulation, and because they make it obvious that they are men “acting (excessively) cute,” as one informant says, the very theatrical nature of their activities engage viewers to see the parallels between fiction and reality. *Babiniku*’s performance is a *mise en abyme* of social scripts, demonstrating that such scripts are nothing but a laughable scenography.

Being “excessively pretty”, *babiniku* VTubers have been compared to Japanese transvestites known as *otoko no ko* (男の娘, literally “male-daughters”) (Bredikhina and Giard 2022). Although some *babiniku* oppose this comparison, they do share some enlightening similarities with *otoko no ko*, who also take inspiration from *bishōjo*: their goal is not to turn themselves into real women but into fictitious *kawaii* characters (Kinsella 2020a, 50). According to Kinsella (2020b, 449), by self-transforming into cuties, these men negotiate new ways of being in Japan. While *babiniku* and *otoko no ko* differ (virtual/physical world, digital anonymity and effacement/flesh and bone appearance with real face), both strive to become ideal icons and to subvert gender norms. As Miyazaki (2023, 124–125) notes, the male-to-female cross-dressing has become a prevalent theme in social and mainstream media, mirroring a growing dissent related to the conventional notion of masculinities. It appears that the social phenomenon of *otoko no ko*, just as the *babiniku* trend, reflects a more profound and broader tendency to believe that “in this difficult [economic] environment, society has no mercy for men” (Suzuki 2013).

Our *babiniku* informants confirm this. Since the 1990s bubble burst, in the context of the financial crisis affecting the labor market, men, expected to hang on and keep going, find an alternative to prescribed masculine codes by transforming themselves into anime-like characters. “Being a man in Japanese society carries significant responsibilities. While it may come with benefits, it cannot be said that most men in today’s society meet these requirements,” we are told. One informant points out, “There are pressures that men feel. For example, I think the fact that many women will not even look at you unless you work seriously, get promoted, and earn money is a severe issue (but nobody talks about it).” As others explain, “Old ideas are deeply rooted in Japan,” leading them to become *bishōjo* in order

"to escape from expectations" and "to release themselves from being a man." When they perform as girly characters, "men are not required to be masculine" and it enables some to "release stress." One informant even claims that he feels "oppressed by society." Another confirms: "I cannot feel liberated unless I become a *bishōjo*."

The premise of a *babiniku* is that men can temporarily turn into characters and enjoy life without having to comply with dominant standards. Those who engage in the *babiniku* activity often want to "acquire the body and clothing of a pretty girl, as a means to liberate their oppressed identity or explore gender swapping within their everyday lives," as Yamano tells us in an interview. The expression "oppressed identity" may sound hyperbolic, if not overly dramatic, but, as many of our *babiniku* informants put it, powerful pressure is exerted on Japanese men to meet standards that are now out of reach: men are expected to support a family but "the inability to find stable employment is a major obstacle to marriage" (Kawamura 2013, 39). Men whose annual income stays below 5 million yen (approximately \$35,000) are unlikely to marry (Meiji Yasuda Research Institute 2023).¹⁸ According to a 2019 Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare survey, only 9% of Japanese men in their twenties and 44% in their thirties can earn this amount (Doda 2022).¹⁹

The overall trend is that of marriages declining, reaching the lowest figures since the Second World War.²⁰ Insecure and underpaid contract work leaves the Japanese lonely: they remain single. "More than a quarter of people in their 30s, 25.4 % of women and 26.5 % of men, said in a survey that they have no wish to get married, according to the Cabinet Office's 2022 white paper on gender equality" (Matsuyama 2022). Japan's economic downturn was a severe blow for men who learned that if they studied hard and were loyal to a company, they would succeed in life and be able to marry. Now trapped in so-called dead-end jobs, with no career opportunity, unable to find a wife, and unable to build assets for retirement, they strive to maintain livelihoods. "A poor economy has led to the collapse of patriarchy" (Kawamura 2013, 38) and, indeed, it has also fostered an ecosystem where a phenomenon such as *babiniku* could emerge, whose culture relies on the effacement of self and corporate masculinity.

¹⁸ According to a survey conducted by Meiji Yasuda Research Institute (2023) on 7,453 people across Japan, aged 18 to 54, most women (61.8%) seek a marriage partner with an annual income of minimum 5 million yen (approx. \$35,000).

¹⁹ According to the latest edition of the "Average Annual Salary Ranking" published by Doda (2022), the average annual income is 3.6 million yen for men in their twenties and 4.7 million yen for men in their thirties.

²⁰ The last demographic statistics, published online in 2024 by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, show that, in 2023, the number of marriages fell by 6% (compared to the previous year) to 474,717, making it the first time in the postwar era the figure has fallen below 500,000.

In the alternative worlds where *babiniku* operate, interactions are based on certain unwritten guidelines preventing people from talking about personal details, such as their work, salary, achievements, home, or romantic status. Anonymity provides a safe space to the VTubers and their fans, a space which, just like the maid cafes, as described by Galbraith (2017, 31), enables participants to carefully avoid the “normative standards that would make them failures.” Social platforms offer a place “separate from the outside world, just as the roles that are played here are separate from gender roles,” as Galbraith (2017, 31) says. In these digital shelters, which are sometimes designed to look like cozy tea rooms, some *babiniku* VTubers dress up in maid uniforms and act as if they were welcoming clients, sometimes going as far as calling them “master” (like maids are supposed to do). Fans themselves use pseudonyms and enjoy a role-play centered around the unattainable figure of their cute idol. It is a game based on blurring the boundaries not between femininity and masculinity but between fiction and reality. To play this game, *babiniku* wear costumes designed to suggest fantasy. As the Japanese virtual designer Julico stated in our interview, a fluffy 3D princess dress should not be considered a marker of femininity but rather as a uniform: “It is not about the role of the girl; it is about her profession.” One informant confirms that “becoming a *babiniku* will likely change the concept of gender.” He further explains that, as of now, people are understood to be either man or woman. With virtual *bishōjo*, this binary is no longer evident (Matsu’ura 2022). According to him, this is possible because *babiniku* identify as a *bishōjo* and not a man or a woman online. Another tells us that *babiniku* “will be a revolution in the virtual world as it will serve as an entrance to providing another type of content that transcends gender barriers.”

Julico started designing virtual clothes in May 2020 and became famous for modeling extravagant ball gowns covered with ribbons. She states that such garments are self-concealment tools: “Some people may want to hide behind a dream or a fictional figure.” In her book, Shiro (2019, 22–27) devotes two chapters to her closet, conveying a similar message. Entitled “I love you! Clothes” and “I love it even more! Clothes,” these chapters invite the reader to turn themselves into a character and to experiment with what Shiro (2019) calls “reincarnation.” It would be easy to conclude here that the *babiniku* phenomenon is a way to “escape reality” through fake identities and virtual bodies. The cute esthetics so highly prized by the community means much more, however, than the need for a sweet and comfortable delusion: it also delivers a provocative statement against the “real” world seen as negative and stagnant. According to Winge (2008, 58), the cute esthetics is a form of “visual resistance” to the order and roots deep in the Japanese history of countercultures.

As Kinsella (1995, 250) points out: “The contemporary associations of social disaffection or social rebellion with childishness began during the students’

movement at the end of the 1960s.” Enacting immaturity and cuteness are part of a strategy similar to the ones already well investigated by researchers specialized in Japanese subcultures (Dale 2019), such as Lolita fashion (Kawamura 2013): behind the glitter is a very nihilistic element (Younker 2012, 100) and cute masquerade often hides a firm rejection of hegemonic gender and ideological models (Monden 2015, 126). One informant echoes this thought: “In modern society, no one can be an adult anymore. Everyone must accept that they are ‘immature’ forever [...]. In such a society, ‘immaturity has its own value.’”

According to Holographic (2020), a tandem of Japanese scholars deeply involved in the VTuber scene, male VTubers and fans want to withdraw from a performance-driven system designed to encourage competition: “Colloquial sentences such as ‘men must be strong’ and ‘the value of a woman is youth and beauty’ are hurting today’s Japanese youth.” Born after the bubble burst, Millennials and Zoomers cannot relate to the values of their parents and focus on having fun in the here and now, with little incentive to commit themselves to a romantic relationship (since they will not be financially able to maintain a married life) nor to a professional long-term goal (since the recession makes all effort futile). “Avatars are making it possible for them to design another figure,” says Holographic (2020).

6. Conclusion

In most modern societies, where each individual must ensure success through self-management and self-fulfillment (Ehrenberg 2010, 116), people share selfies online to display their authenticity (even if fabricated) and acquire visibility, thus contributing to privacy loss. By reaction, VTubers and their fans change themselves into fictitious beings, use pseudonyms, talk through voice changers, and act like videogame characters. In contrast to the dominant ideal of transparency and its corollary, global surveillance, this masquerading movement values not openness but secrecy, not reality but artificiality. To make this artificiality even more apparent, the term that *babiniku* VTubers use to describe their practice, i.e., *babiniku*, indirectly unfolds a backstage detail about their sex, preventing misunderstandings. It favors a mediatic spectacle where appearing in a stereotypical manner becomes part of an “ironical strategy” (Baudrillard 1983), a patently false decoy. Online “parallel lives,” as our informants put it, make it thus possible for them to get free from social masks. Namba (2021) notes that digital fashion is a “self-expression without a physical body.” With the spread of smartphones and the Internet, it has become easier to “wear” a 2D or 3D character on social networking websites, live as a “new” version of oneself, and satisfy one’s need for approval (Nyalra and Ohisashiburi 2020, 4). Fake as it may seem, their culture, like a mirror, reflects a society perceived as fallacious, unfair, and deceitful. Recession-stricken Japan

seems to offer nothing but a future filled with unattainable promises. Against the background of a society often presented as “precarious” (Allison 2013), the virtual realm appears to be the best place where to restart the system.

Amid the economic crisis affecting traditional values and norms, *babiniku* and their fans build a liminal world based on different rules. This phenomenon could be compared to a counterculture rooted in anonymity, secrecy, and opacity. Thanks to virtual characters, individuals can temporarily deviate from their prescribed gender roles and escape the obligation to singularize themselves. The staging of their digital “persona” enables them to build new forms of sociability based not on oneness and transparency but on simulation and concealment. As the French philosopher Annie Dufourmantelle (2015, 109) explains, “Transparency is not truth.” As such, it would be inaccurate to think that the virtual identities of VTubers are less genuine or less legitimate than the physical world ones. On the contrary, such ritualized embodiments are “an existence in themselves” (Yamano 2022, 263) and the only way to escape “the panoptic space of the social” (Dufourmantelle 2015, 101). Without parallel lives, without secrets, without clothes and disguises, nobody can fully explore themselves. As Virtual Girl Nem puts it in her song “Heart Cosplay” (ココロコスプレ *Kokoro Kosupure*): “Today I will be in the screen / a secret that I cannot tell about / [...] In the world of my dreams / My heart is aching maybe for real.”

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CONSTRUCTING THE IDEAL FACE: THE JAPANESE HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS' MAKEUP

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While at least half of Japanese high school girls wear makeup, the reasons why they do so have remained understudied. Having reviewed perspectives of feminist authors and other studies on makeup use, this study interviewed 32 female high school girls in a private co-ed high school in Japan to investigate why they engage in the practice. Many reasons mentioned by the students indicate that they feel pleasure in using makeup to move toward their “imagined self.” Some girls, however, engage in makeup because they accept the norm that makeup is a form of etiquette for adult women. This study, therefore, also considers this norm’s effects on those girls who cannot use makeup for physiological reasons and those who do not want to wear makeup at all.

Keywords: makeup, female high school students, body, grooming, beauty, Japan, Japanese society

1. Introduction¹

This research focuses on the makeup practices of Japanese high school girls. However, it first reviews several previous studies conducted in Anglophone countries because research on the adolescent female body began earlier there than in Japan.

Since the late 1990s, studies of women’s bodies in Anglophone countries have pointed out a variety of issues regarding adolescent girls’ body construction. For

¹ Some parts of this chapter have been previously published in Japanese as part of the article “Keshō jissen ni yoru joshikōsei no shintai kōchiku [Makeup usage in Japanese female high school students as a tactic for appearance alternation],” published in *Kokusaigaku kenkyū* 63 (October 2023). I appreciate that the Faculty of International Studies, Meiji Gakuin University, allows me to use the article’s contents. I also appreciate anonymous reviewers and Dr. Halina Zawiszová who gave me very important and valuable comments.

example, based on counseling adolescent girls, Pipher (1996) pointed out that compared with the early 1960s, when she went through puberty, in the late 1990s, American adolescent girls faced more substantial pressure to be beautiful. Brumberg (1998, xxi) also observed that "girls [in the 1990s were] concerned with the shape and appearance of their bodies as a primary expression of their identity" and that this preoccupation began soon after the onset of secondary sexual characteristics. This trend continued into the 2000s. Aapola et al. (2005, 4, 132), for example, stated that adolescent girls and young women in Australasia, Europe, and North America constantly struggled to gain social acceptance of their bodies.

Having reviewed many studies on body image and body dissatisfaction among people in Western societies, Grogan (2017, 173) notes that women's body dissatisfaction begins at age 8, with young girls considering a thin body similar to adult women's as ideal. Girlguiding (2016) conducted a survey that captured the perceptions and experiences of girls and young women in the United Kingdom regarding various issues, targeting 1,627 girls and young women aged 7 to 21. The author showed that the percentage of those who were satisfied with their appearance fell from 73% in 2011 to 61% in 2016 (Girlguiding 2016, 5). In addition, the percentage of those who felt embarrassed about their appearance increased with age, from 15% for those aged 7 to 10 to as high as 50% for those aged 17 to 21 (Girlguiding 2016, 6). These findings indicate that the older girls become less confident in their appearance.

With the rise of social media, many studies have investigated their various influences on adolescents' body image. Thompson and Loughheed (2012, 93–94), for example, surveyed 268 college students in the United States and found a correlation between exposure to pictures on Facebook and body image dissatisfaction for young women. Based on a survey of about 1,000 adolescents in Singapore, Ho et al. (2016, 6) found that social comparison with friends on social media was significantly associated with adolescent girls' body image dissatisfaction.

Previous research conducted by Japanese scholars on adolescent girls' bodies in Japan has focused primarily on body shape and has mostly not considered other forms of body construction. Alarming, researchers have suggested a strong tendency for female university students with a thin or normal body shape according to their body mass index (BMI) to perceive themselves as overweight (Mizumura and Hashimoto 2002; Handō and Kawashima 2009; Kōda 2014).

The desire to lose weight leads to dieting: 61% of Japanese female university students in a 2006 survey of 298 participants (Handō and Kawashima 2009, 57) and about 46% of Japanese female high school students in a 2010 survey of 515 participants (Japan Youth Research Institute 2011, 14) had experienced dieting. A 2017 survey of male and female high school students in Japan, the United States, China, and South Korea showed that 23% of Japanese girls were satisfied with

their body shape, which was the lowest of the eight groups surveyed (National Institution For Youth Education 2018, 22).² These findings indicate a trend toward body dissatisfaction among young Japanese women.

In addition, adolescent girls in Japan also frequently use social media. In 2022, for example, teenagers in Japan spent more than 60 minutes browsing and posting on social media on both weekdays and weekends, second only to people in their 20s (Institute for Information and Communications Policy 2023, 31). Although some studies (e.g., Katō 2013; Nakayama 2018) researched negative experiences of high school students caused by social media use, the relationship between social media use and body image among Japanese teenagers has not yet been investigated.

Several studies have pointed out increases in the number of female high school girls who wear makeup in Japan nowadays compared to several years ago. According to a survey of 150 girls in their late teens by the POLA Research Institute of Beauty & Culture (2018,1), between 2015 and 2018, the percentage of girls in their late teens applying makeup grew by about 17 percentage points within four years to reach about 71% in 2018. A survey conducted in 2020 by LINE Corporation (2020) found that of 317 high school girls, about 57% used makeup. These findings indicate that the body construction of makeup is widely carried out among Japanese high school girls.

Kawakami (2016) studied attitudes toward makeup among male and female students (i.e., what they thought about makeup in general). The article showed that regardless of gender, “the more the students feel self-acceptance, the more they expect that makeup will cause exhilarated conditions or feelings such as a ‘change in appearance’ or ‘impression management’” (Kawakami 2016, 60). However, Kawakami (2016) did not clarify why they did or did not wear it.

This research considers reasons why high school girls wear or do not wear makeup. Why high school girls? This is because nearly half of all adult women in Japan nowadays start using makeup after entering high school. A 2006 survey of 190 Japanese female university students found that their start of makeup use was concentrated between the first year of junior high school (i.e., when they were around 13 years old) and the first year of high school (i.e., when they were around 16 years old) (Ishida 2009, 49). According to the POLA Research Institute of Beauty & Culture (2019, 3), of 750 women aged 40–64, about 50% began doing their makeup when they were 18, i.e., after they graduated from high school. In

² The survey included 1,706 respondents from Japan, 1,519 from the United States, 3,240 from the People’s Republic of China, and 2,015 from South Korea. The group with the lowest percentage of satisfaction with their body shape was Japanese girls (23%), followed by Korean girls (31.6%). The group with the highest percentage of satisfaction with their body shape was American boys (74%), followed by Chinese boys (54.8%).

contrast, among 450 women aged 20–34, who participated in the survey, nearly half began using makeup by 17. This indicates that Japanese women have started wearing makeup at an earlier age. I, therefore, focus on their high school years to discover their reasons for starting wearing makeup or not doing so.

Why focus on wearing makeup? While at least half of Japanese high school girls wear makeup, questions such as why they do so, what kinds of cosmetics they use, and how they perceive the benefits of their makeup or its costs have remained understudied. The present study will address the first question, while I intend to tackle others in a separate article.

In this chapter, applying makeup to one's face is considered "makeup practice." This is because already the second-wave feminism in the 1970s identified actions women performed to beautify their bodies (e.g., dieting, removing body hair, applying makeup, etc.) as "beauty practices" (Jeffreys 2015, 1) and criticized them. The second reason is that, according to Widdows (2018, 2–3), the beauty ideal is becoming an ethical one globally, which means that beauty is what is desired for itself and the good. The beauty ideal is related to the creation of a moral framework. This framework provides shared standards for judging one as success/failure or good/bad by types of appearances (Widdows 2018, 26). These standards set goals for our efforts to fulfill and the direction of our habits and practices in daily life. In other words, based on the moral framework of the beauty ideal, many people practice bringing their bodies closer to that ideal. Because *jissen* (実践, "a practice") means "making a belief or theory a reality for oneself" (*Dejitaru daijisen* 2020a), bringing one's body closer to the beauty ideal can be called a "beauty practice." Consequently, of these practices, those related to makeup can be called "makeup practices" and the term will be used here when considering makeup in relation to beauty practices.

2. Previous studies

Previous research related to this study is examined from two directions: studies on the makeup of adult women and the makeup of high school girls.

2.1 Reasons why women engage in beauty practices

Even in Anglophone countries, few studies have examined why adult women engage in makeup (Jeffreys 2015, 101). Let us, therefore, first overview four feminist perspectives on women's beauty practices, including makeup.

Second-wave feminists argue that beauty practices, including makeup, are oppressive toward women (e.g., Bartky 1991; Wolf 2002; Jeffreys 2015).³ Adhering to

³ I start my discussion from the second wave feminism, because I consider it important to know how it tried to construct its arguments against beauty norms for women.

the second-wave feminist viewpoint, Jeffreys (2015, 28) argues that beauty practices, including makeup practices, are carried out by women to transform and adorn their bodies to show that they belong to a class subordinate to men. Moreover, in cultures where men have the power to coerce women to carry out beauty practices, women have no choice but to participate even though many beauty practices are harmful to them (Jeffreys 2015, 112). Jeffreys (2015, 115–116) points out, for example, that some makeup products include harmful synthetic chemicals that cause damage to women's physical health and encourages women to reject such harmful beauty practices and have the strength to oppose their negative effects (Jeffreys 2015, 163). I call this perspective "makeup as coercion."

Third-wave feminism, however, emerged in the 1990s with a different perspective. It promoted a variety of "girl" cultures (Takahashi 2020, 31). While items and practices that exhibit femininity (e.g., playing with Barbie dolls, applying makeup, wearing high heels, etc.) are considered by second-wave feminism as oppressive to women and taboo, they are affirmed by "girl" cultures (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 136–137). Third-wave feminists thus argue that femininity constructed by beauty and other practices is not opposed to but compatible with femininity (Tanaka 2012, 60).

Studies analyzing the situation called "postfeminism" appeared in the 2000s (Kikuchi 2019, 71). Postfeminism is not an evolution of feminism that has overtaken second or third-wave feminism but the endorsement of beauty practices to allow women to feel good about themselves and please themselves, which is conceptualized as a "sensibility" (Gill 2007, 147). Thus, like third-wave feminism, postfeminism does not critically examine the social and cultural influences on women's beauty practice choices or the consequences of beauty practices.

According to McCann (2018, 67–70), since the 2010s, Moran (2011) and Valenti (2014) presented alternative views toward beauty practices. On the one hand, unlike third-wave feminism, they criticized beauty norms that influence women to conduct beauty practices. On the other hand, unlike second-wave feminism, both affirmed women's pleasure attached to beauty practices—e.g., paying attention to fashion and wearing high heels (Moran 2011) and wearing high heels and makeup (Valenti 2014, 203–218)—and did not criticize individual women who engage in beauty practices. McCann (2018, 79) argues that both see beauty norms, not individual women, as something that should be changed.

Their arguments, however, have some weaknesses. Neither explains the mechanism of the structure that encourages women to engage in beauty practices. Moran (2011) does not explain it at all and Valenti (2014, 214) simply blames consumerism as the heart of beauty standards. In addition, the reason why they and some women enjoy certain beauty practices is not examined. In contrast, Widdows (2018)

explains it rather convincingly by introducing the concept of an "imagined self," which I will discuss later.

2.2 Reasons for wearing makeup among adult women

Several empirical studies from Anglophone countries analyze women's experiences to dispute the abovementioned idea of "makeup as coercion."⁴ Lakoff and Scherr (1984, 143) found that many of the female university students in North America⁵ they surveyed enjoyed makeup. On the one hand, they used it to enhance self-esteem and confidence and, on the other hand, to avoid being regarded as rude to those around them because they believed that no makeup indicated their carelessness in appearance. This finding suggests that some women wear makeup because they are conscious of the norm that women should wear makeup when presenting their appearance to others. According to Dellinger and Williams (1997), American women in the workplace wear makeup to be seen as healthy, heterosexual, and competent. They do so because the workplace implicitly demands these qualities from women, and fulfilling these qualities may lead to success at work. In her study of urban American women, Beausoleil (1994, 55) insists: "Women indeed use appearance to express who they are."

Widdows (2018) discussed beauty practices as a whole. Because makeup practices are a part of beauty practices, we can apply her arguments to examine makeup practices. Unlike Jeffreys (2015), Widdows (2018, 231–232) argues that women do not engage in beauty practices, such as using makeup, because of coercion from men. Widdows (2018, 234) finds that "men too are beautifying and becoming 'to be looked' at, and increasingly falling under the beauty ideal," therefore, she concludes that the view that beauty practices are methods by men to subordinate women is incorrect.

Based on the review of previous research, Widdows (2018, 39) points out that the main reason why women engage in beauty practices is because they believe that they can obtain certain benefits by following the beauty ideal as a moral framework. Widdows examines previous research and gives several examples of such benefits as being beautiful and increasing employability and pay. In addition, attractive individuals are regarded as having positive personality traits, such as friendliness, competence, or intelligence (Widdows 2018, 41). This reason is consistent with the explanation mentioned above by Dellinger and Williams (1997, 165) that some women wear makeup because they want to look competent.

Widdows (2018, 112) argues that another reason why women engage in beauty practices is to satisfy the minimum standards of the beauty ideal. Beauty practices

⁴ While these studies are not recent, I am not aware of any more current studies that would address the issue at hand.

⁵ The authors did not disclose the location. I presumed it from the contents.

tend to be first approved by society and then, in many cases, demanded as minimum standards of the beauty ideal. These practices thus become customary to satisfy the criteria. The author gives makeup as an example of these for many women. When minimum beauty standards spread and become almost entirely dominant, they become invisible (Widdows 2018, 120). They are no longer considered norms about beauty; they are considered the minimum grooming practices necessary for looking healthy and natural. Therefore, wearing makeup to appear healthy is interpreted as grooming, even as the beauty ideal requires it.

Widdows (2018, 120) further argues that when minimum standards of the beauty ideal become grooming practices, it becomes challenging for individuals to choose not to engage in those beauty practices, as not engaging in them would be considered abnormal. As mentioned above, Lakoff and Scherr (1984, 143) found that some female university students wore makeup to avoid being regarded as rude to those around them. Since the prime function of grooming is to benefit others (Ishida 2009, 31), it can be interpreted that these women considered wearing makeup to be a minimum form of grooming. In short, the second reason for doing makeup that I can propose based on Widdows (2018) is that it is carried out as a grooming practice.

The fourth reason why women engage in beauty practices is related to the “imagined self,” constructed to achieve the beauty ideal as a moral framework (Widdows 2018, 158). The “imagined self” is identified with a specific body. This body is not only one’s body in reality but also one that can or may be achieved in the future or has been achieved only through participation in beauty practices one engages in (Widdows 2018, 159). As Widdows (2018, 38–39, 189–191) argues, continuing the beauty practices to realize the “imagined self,” even if we know that we can never achieve it or that there are various costs (e.g., investment of time and effort) to be paid to continue the practices, gives us feelings of confidence, power, and pleasure. Beausoleil’s (1994) view of makeup as a means of self-expression and Lakoff and Scherr’s (1984) finding that some female university students use makeup to enhance self-esteem and confidence can be interpreted as an attempt to achieve the “imagined self.”

Regarding makeup in Japan, Ishida (2009, 20–25) argues that the idea of makeup as part of the personal grooming and etiquette of adult women was dominant from the late Edo era until the 1990s, because the guidebook for skincare and makeup *Joshi aiikyō miyako fūzoku kewai den* (女子愛嬌都風俗化粧伝, “Traditions of Fashion and Cosmetics in the Capital”) promoted the idea that it is the etiquette for adult women to wear makeup. This book was continuously published from 1813 until the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, but remained influential until the late 1990s. In this period, makeup was something that one did for other people, that is, for society. However, according to Ishida (2009, 25), this idea collapsed

in the late 1990s, and makeup became something that one did to achieve one's beautiful appearance and mental and physical health. Ishida (2009, 31) claims this was a shift towards makeup having a meaning as a practice undertaken for the user's own benefit. Applying Widdows's (2018) framework to Ishida's arguments results in the interpretation of makeup practices among Japanese women before the late 1990s as a form of grooming and after the late 1990s as a means to create the "imagined self."

Unlike Ishida (2009, 31), Suzuki (2006, 155) argues that although the idea is fading, women's makeup is still considered etiquette in Japan even today.⁶ Additionally, she posits that women engage in makeup mainly because they enjoy doing so rather than for any other reason. She states that "from the meaning of makeup as literally making one's face to its meaning as caring for one's skin to make it more beautiful, the makeup process is enjoyable while also bothersome in some respects" (Suzuki 2006, 17–18). She argues that when one can create a preferable face using makeup, one's mood improves (Suzuki 2006, 19). However, she also admits that she sometimes personally felt the pressure that it brings because there is "the belief that in modern Japanese society, pursuing beauty is a virtue" (Suzuki 2006, 43), which gives rise to what she calls the *kirei ideorogī* (きれいイデオロギー, "the ideology of beautiful") that states that women must always strive to achieve beauty (Suzuki 2006, 49).

In this way, Suzuki (2006) points out various reasons why women in Japan wear makeup. The perspective that makeup is a way of demonstrating etiquette by women implies that makeup is a form of grooming, and not engaging in makeup shows a lack of etiquette. This view is, therefore, consistent with Widdows's (2018) second reason: makeup as a form of grooming. The feeling that wearing makeup is enjoyable while also bothersome matches Widdows's (2018) third reason that while many women feel pleasure in striving to achieve their "imagined self" as constructed in the moral framework of the beauty ideal, they must pay a cost in doing so. Finally, the notion of the *kirei ideorogī* that women must always aim to achieve beauty coincides with Widdows's (2018) argument that the beauty ideal is the ethical ideal.

In summary, based on my review of previous studies, I identified four reasons why adult women wear makeup: (1) coercion by men, (2) the practical benefits obtained from makeup, (3) the idea that makeup is a form of grooming, and (4) the feelings of confidence, empowerment, and joy in achieving one's "imagined self" through makeup. I, however, will exclude the first reason from this study's analysis because some studies undermine the "makeup as coercion" perspective.

⁶ The author constructs her arguments based on her observations of other women's practices and her own experiences.

2.3 Makeup of *kogyaru*

In the 1990s, high school girls called *kogyaru* (コギャル), or *kogal* in English, made their appearance, and they stood out with their dyed brown hair, thin eyebrows, tanned skin, and heavy mascara emphasizing their eyes (Yonezawa 2008, 36). *Kogyaru* first appeared in printed media in 1993, in an article in the weekly magazine *SPA!*. The article describes *kogyaru* as young girls between the ages 14 and 18 with “wheat-colored” skin and brown-dyed hair who dress in clothes with “fluorescent tropical patterns” and spend time in nightclubs (*SPA!* 1993, 13).

Yonezawa (2008, 41) argues that *kogyaru* influenced non-*kogyaru* high school girls and made using makeup a common practice among them. However, an article titled “I’m a girl, so I love makeup!!” published in *Puchisebun* (プチセブン, *Petite Seven*), a magazine targeting high school girls, on April 1, 1990, reveals that that was not the case. The article states that their survey of 5,000 high school girls (who seemed to be their readers) found that the respondents often wear makeup when going out for fun, such as to discos and dates. In addition, it reveals that some high school girls also wore inconspicuous makeup to school. The findings published in that article, in other words, suggest that makeup among high school girls, regardless of whether they were *kogyaru* or not, was already rather widespread around at least 1990, that is, before *kogyaru* was recognized by the media in 1993.

While Yonezawa (2008) explicitly states that *kogyaru* are only a part of high school girls, Ishida (2009) describes them as if all high school girls were *kogyaru*. Ishida (2009, 29) further notes that *kogyaru*’s makeup style began influencing women of other generations, and mascara, false eyelashes, eyelid glue, lip gloss, and shimmer powder—cosmetic products initially used only by a few women in exceptional cases—were embraced for daily use by more women than ever before. These products have made women’s faces appear to be well made up to others.

3. Research

Do Japanese high school girls wear makeup for the same reasons as adult women? This study addresses this question while referencing three reasons mentioned above. Previous studies have also failed to consider why some women do not wear makeup.⁷ In this study, I ask high school girls who do not wear makeup to explain their reasons for not doing so, which allows me to examine the multifaceted nature of makeup a step further.

⁷ Dellinger and Williams (1997) also interviewed women who did not wear makeup but did not specify their reasons for not doing so.

3.1 Data collection

This study was conducted at Minamikaze High School (pseudonym), a private, coeducational high school in Kanagawa Prefecture, from 2018 to 2019.⁸ The school offers three tracks: Tracks A and B,⁹ which seek to prepare students for admittance to competitive four-year universities, and Track C for students intending to enter less competitive four-year universities. The female students interviewed for this study came from all three tracks. According to the school official, approximately 85% of this high school's 2017 academic year graduates advanced to higher education (including junior colleges and vocational schools).

At Minamikaze High School, besides a set uniform, there are no school rules regarding how students should dress and make the appropriate appearance. According to the simple statement in the section "Student Guidance" in the student handbook, students are to dress neatly and wear their hair appropriately; perming or dyeing hair is prohibited, as is wearing accessories. The handbook does not state that wearing makeup is prohibited. However, the teacher's student guidance manual states that "makeup must be removed immediately," indicating the school's ban on makeup. According to a female student I interviewed, when teachers discover a student wearing makeup, they bring makeup remover to the student and ask her to remove her makeup on the spot.

At the school, I conducted interviews with female students as well as participant observation in their classrooms. The purpose of participant observation was to help me understand the meaning of the interviewed students' narratives in the context of Minamikaze High School. Being in the classrooms also helped familiarize the students with my presence, encouraging their cooperation in the interviews.

Participant observation was carried out from April 2018, the beginning of the new school year, until the end of February 2019. Second-year students were divided into six Groups. First, I observed P.E. classes for a separate study on exercise practices. These classes were conducted with the joint participation of Groups 1 and 2 and Groups 5 and 6. I also observed these Groups' classes during which I believed interactions between students and teachers and speaking up by students would be frequent, namely periods that taught English, modern literature, and classical literature. One reason was that if thoughts about the body, appearance, and beauty practices were mentioned in conversations between students and

⁸ I chose this particular school because I knew the school official, who understood the importance of my research.

⁹ Students in Track A can receive a reduction of the admission fee and tuition if they meet specific academic performance standards. This is not the case for students in Track B. At the time of the data collection, in each school year, two tracks had one class each.

teachers, I could collect their contents as research data. In addition to classroom lessons, I also observed all school events, such as the sports festival, cultural festival, and choir competition.

Interviews were conducted as follows. From June 2018, I visited several classes and after-school clubs I had observed and distributed leaflets inviting male and female students to interviews on various topics, including exercises, uniforms, beauty work, and body image. After obtaining signed consent from their parents, I interviewed 32 first-year to third-year female students after school on campus. The breakdown of the students is as follows: four third-year students, 20 second-year students, and eight first-year students. Each interview took from about 40 minutes to about 1 hour and 20 minutes. If a pair of students wished to be interviewed together, an additional interview was conducted with the same students to allow a similar amount of time per person. Before the interview, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire about their gender identity, sexual orientation, favorite female celebrities and models, etc.

I conducted semi-structured interviews—the questions were predetermined, but their order changed to allow me to follow the flow of conversation with each student. The prime questions used for analysis in this study asked whether students wore makeup in and outside of school. The female students who wore makeup were further asked what led them to start using makeup. I asked those not using makeup for their reasons for not doing so. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by a third-party specialist. I listened to recordings to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions.

3.2 Data analysis

This study's data analysis adopts a method Kvale (1996, 193) calls "generating meaning through ad hoc methods." This approach is exemplified by Miles and Huberman (1994, 245–262) as a method for generating meaning from qualitative texts. In this study, I used a part of this method. I scrutinized interview contents and grouped significant patterns and themes. I also compared the content of individual statements. Specifically, I used repeated words and phrases in the interviews as clues for grouping meaning in the students' statements and understanding their perceptions of makeup. In many cases, categories extracted by this method are considered mutually exclusive. However, Hodson (1991, 52) shows that overlapping categories can exist. In this study, some extracted categories overlap because some female students gave multiple reasons for wearing makeup.

4. Results

According to Article 2(3) of the Act on Securing Quality, Efficacy, and Safety of Products Including Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices (医薬品、医療機器等の品質、有効性及び安全性の確保等に関する法律, *Iyakuhin, iryōkikitō no hinshitsu yūkōsei oyobi anzensei no kakuhotō ni kansuru hōritsu*, 1960), “cosmetic” refers to “items which are intended to be used on the human body by rubbing, sprinkling, or other similar means, aiming to clean, beautify, and increase the attractiveness, alter the appearance, or keep the skin or hair in good condition, and which have mild effects on the human body.” Makeup can be seen as a visible use of cosmetics. This is because applying skin care products is inconspicuous, whereas makeup adds color to the skin and hair, such as eyelashes, making its use easy to recognize. Accordingly, in interviews with female students at Minamikaze High School, the extent to which cosmetics were used as makeup was analyzed. However, there is a cosmetic product, sunscreen, that can be included in both the skincare category and the makeup category. Sunscreen is usually considered a skincare product, but there are also makeup foundations with sunscreen components, and such products are generally viewed as makeup instead of skincare. Considering this ambiguity, this study emphasized the perception of the interviewed students. If an interviewed student considered applying sunscreen or a makeup foundation with sunscreen as wearing makeup, it was recognized as such; otherwise, it was not.

I also considered the application of *aipuchi* (アイプチ, “eyelid glue,” i.e., the general term for products that make mono-lidded eyes appear to be double-lidded) and wearing contact lenses along with makeup by the interviewed students who usually wore glasses as part of makeup practice. The reason students shared was that they applied eyelid glue or wore contact lenses to enhance the effects of their makeup. Because one student also mentioned using an eyelash curler (without reference to an eye makeup product) as makeup, I respect her view and also count this activity as part of makeup practice.

As a result of applying the above criteria to consideration of wearing makeup, the students interviewed could be divided into four groups:

- Group A: those who wore makeup both inside and outside of school (11 students),
- Group B: those who wore makeup outside of school but not inside (15 students),
- Group C: those who wore makeup inside the school but not outside (one student),
- Group D: those who did not wear makeup at all (five students).

The following students mentioned by name below belonged to:

- Group A: Kanna, Mayu, Renka, Nana, Mirai, Nene, Yumi, Hana, Arisu, and Shoko,
- Group B: Rei, Mei, Seira, Yui, Hinako, Juri, Ai, Yuriko, Tsumugi, Shizuka, and Kaori,
- Group C: Satomi,
- Group D: Hitomi, Megumi, Natsumi, and Kie.¹⁰

4.1 Why do some female students wear makeup?

While my initial question was what led them to start using makeup, some students also told me what led them to continue to do so. Basow (1991) and Tiggemann and Kenyon (1998) differentiate between women's reasons for starting and continuing hair removal. I applied their framework to this study, revealing several reasons female students started and continued doing makeup.

4.1.1 Reasons for starting makeup

4.1.1.1 Seeing friends' and classmates' use of makeup

Yumi began wearing makeup in the second semester of her first year of high school after seeing other classmates wearing makeup. Hinako did not mention when she started wearing makeup but said she did so because her closest friend was using colored lip balm applied to her lip and she thought it would look good on her. Satomi said that at a camp for her afterschool club activity in her second year of high school, one of the camp members put makeup on her and she enjoyed it. Since then, she has worn lightly red lipstick at school occasionally. All three girls became interested in makeup after seeing their friends and classmates wearing it, tried it themselves, felt its utility, and began using it.

4.1.1.2 At the suggestion of their mothers

4.1.1.2.1 "High school girls should wear lip products"

Hana began wearing makeup because her mother bought her lipstick when she entered high school. Hana's mother did not encourage Hana to wear lipstick to school, but her mother's attitude conveyed that she did not prohibit Hana from doing so. Ai also started wearing makeup outside of school after entering high school. Her mother brought her a colored lip balm from a drugstore. Ai said, "I thought it was nice and I became interested and began wearing it." Yui said, "My mother often said to me, 'You're a high school student now, so you should at least

¹⁰ Note that all names are pseudonyms and any information that might identify a student has been altered to the extent that it does not affect the analysis.

wear a lip product' [laughs]." Yui used to wear it but soon found it a hassle despite her mother's encouragement and does not wear it anymore. Interestingly, it is not Yui, but her mother who thinks that high school girls should wear lip products.

4.1.1.2.2 "Even girls who are not pretty can change"

Yuriko had a negative view of makeup, but what her mother said changed her perspective. She recounted:

I wasn't interested in makeup for the longest time. I wondered why girls wore makeup. It would come off when we sweat, and it is hard to wipe it off [laughs]. My mother said makeup could somehow change you. She said any girl could be changed by makeup, no matter how unpretty they were.

After trying lipstick, she discovered she could transform her face with makeup. She was pleased with the change and began wearing lipstick presented by her junior classmate when she went out with her family.

4.1.1.3 Influence from friends, classmates, and mothers

This reason can be seen as an overlap of the categories "Seeing friends' and classmates' use of makeup" and "At the suggestion of their mothers." Tsugumi became interested in makeup in junior high school when her classmates and other girls started wearing makeup. Her mother encouraged her, saying, "You should enjoy it because you're a girl, after all." However, because her close friends did not wear makeup then, she did not wear it either. After entering high school, she started wearing lipstick outside of school because "my friends around me were wearing a little brighter lip products" and "they told me to try it." In Tsumugi's case, along with her friends' influence, her mother's explanation that makeup is a privilege that only girls can enjoy and that she should appreciate that privilege also shows her mother's invitation to wear makeup.

4.1.1.4 Interest in makeup

Arisu had been interested in makeup since she was a child.

My dream is to be a hair and makeup artist. It has always been my dream since kindergarten, so I've always worn makeup. I don't put on every kind of makeup like foundation, but I've been wearing lip products since I was small.

Among the interviewed students, Arisu, who belongs to Group A, became familiar with makeup at the youngest age. In contrast, none of the female high school students in Group B stated that they started wearing makeup because they had been interested in it since they were small.

4.1.1.5 Influenced by adults outside of school

Rei wore sunscreen at school, but she did not consider this to be wearing makeup. Outside of school, she wore makeup when she went to live concerts, as there were many older people there. She said, "I thought it would be okay to wear just enough makeup not to feel out of place among them. So, I probably began using makeup around junior high school's second or third year." Mei started wearing makeup in the second year of high school because she was performing on stage at a club outside of school to which she belonged. Because the adult women they saw or interacted with outside of school wore makeup, Rei and Mei also did to become a part of that community.

4.1.2 Reasons for continuing makeup

4.1.2.1 To make the skin appear fairer and smoother

Kanna had been aware since junior high school that her skin was "naturally dark," and she thought to whiten it with makeup. At the time of our interview, she had been trying out different foundation products through "trial and error," thinking, for example, "Do I like this color?", "Does it last long?", "Does it smudge?", and "Does it make my skin look fair?". Mayu started wearing sunscreen in junior high school because, she said, "I want my skin to appear fair and I don't want to get sunburned." After entering high school, besides sunscreen, she began wearing makeup base and colored lip balm. She said she noticed that many of her female classmates had fair skin and disclosed, "I wish I did too. I became a little concerned about my brown skin." As a result, she began using foundation. When I told her that I couldn't tell she was wearing makeup until she had told me, she said, "You can't tell, can you? I'm just doing it for myself [*laughs*]." These accounts by Kanna and Mayu show that they recognize that continuing makeup to achieve their "imagined self," in this case, a self with fair skin, satisfies them.

4.1.2.2 To have a face with a rosy complexion

Renka started wearing colored lip balm in the middle of her first year of high school because her lips lacked color, which, as she put it, gave her an appearance of poor health. Like Renka, Nana said, "I thought my face lacked color [*laughs*]. It really didn't have any color, and I thought, oh no." What Renka and Nana have in common is that they both recognized that their face lacked a rosy complexion and sought to improve this condition by applying colored lip balm. It can be interpreted that some female students carried out this practice as a form of grooming. This is because they considered wearing colored lip balm as the minimum standard necessary to turn a "pale face" (i.e., an unhealthy-looking face) into a "face with a rosy complexion" (i.e., a healthy-looking face). Even though a healthy-looking

face is a beauty-related standard (Widdows 2018, 120), the female students I interviewed did not consider it to be so.

4.1.2.3 To change the impression given by one's face

Mirai said that others have described her face as *usui kao* (薄い顔, "plain face") or *gyaru no suppingao* (ギャルのスッピン顔), that is, a face that emerges when a person who wears heavy makeup removes it, revealing thus a nondescript face. Because she accepted this view and thought her face without makeup was not striking enough, she sought to change that impression with makeup.

4.1.2.4 To create cute double-lidded eyes

Nene applied *aipuchi* only on her mono-lidded left eye to make it appear double-lidded. What led her to start this practice was her thinking when she looked at her face, "The eye with double lids looks cuter [laughs], and I prefer it. So, I thought, having double lids on the other eye would probably make my eyes appear larger and give them a better balance." Outside of school, she continued, she would use eyeshadow, because "makeup is easier to put on double-lidded eyes and the eyes appear cuter." While Nene thus regards making mono-lidded eyes double-lidded as makeup, transformed double-lidded eyes become the prerequisites for her further makeup. Satomi had a similar view. She occasionally wore only lightly red lipstick at school but did not wear other types of makeup outside of school. This is because she thought applying makeup, such as eyeshadow, would result in a more attractive appearance *after* turning her mono-lidded eyes to double-lidded. She thought applying makeup without double-lidded eyes was not appealing.

4.1.2.5 To look like their favorite models

Shizuka said that when she saw a model she liked in a magazine, "I would often draw pictures of her or put on makeup thinking, 'I want to look like her, too.'" Among the 32 students that I asked about their favorite female celebrities and models, 22 included appearance, such as what a celebrity's face or body looked like, among the reasons why they liked them. Of the 22 students, three said that they wanted to look like the celebrities they had admired; on the other hand, no interviewed students said that they wanted to look like the female model they liked. Shizuka was the only one who aspired to become like the famous person she admired as a reason for wearing makeup. The thoughts of the majority of the students about specific female celebrities and models, by contrast, can be represented by Shoko's view. She said, "It's just a kind of normal crush and I don't plan to do anything intense to admire them."

4.1.2.6 Because they like makeup

When Rei went out somewhere besides school, she would put on foundation, eyeliner or eyeshadow, and lipstick in a color that was not too showy. She wore makeup because, as she puts it, "I want to do what I like in my private life. [...] I want others around me to think I'm pretty. [...] But in the end, I want to do what I like." Rei's goal was to construct an "imagined self" that was pretty. However, even if such a goal was not achieved, she enjoyed just engaging in makeup. She said that she did not wear makeup often and had no problems caused by makeup, such as damaged skin. Her responses suggest that she felt the positive aspect and enjoyment of striving toward her "imagined self" without feeling the cost of it.

4.1.2.7 Because makeup is a form of etiquette for adult women

Mei said that she heard from a beautician that "basically wearing makeup is a form of etiquette for a woman." She also said, "I can use makeup as a way of dressing up to look fashionable, but I see makeup as one of the things you must learn when becoming a grown-up woman." Seira shared with me that she did not wear makeup at school but explained her reasons for wearing makeup outside of school as follows:

When you go to university and start your career, well, it's like, everyone says wearing makeup is a form of etiquette, and I figured it's not like I'd suddenly leave school and suddenly know how to use makeup, and the other girls around me are doing it and I wanted to give it a try. [...] So, I've been practicing, and trying it out.

Seira did not practice wearing makeup to fit the etiquette required in the future reluctantly but positively (i.e., "I wanted to give it a try"). While her narrative seems to overlap with the category "Because they like makeup," she did not clearly express her enjoyment related to makeup like Rei whose reason belongs to the category.

From Mei's and Seira's remarks, it becomes clear that, as Suzuki (2006, 155) points out, the idea that makeup is a form of etiquette for adult women still exists among Japanese female high school students, and some of them engage in makeup because they accept this idea.

4.1.3 Reasons for not engaging in makeup

Female students that I interviewed who do not engage in makeup can be divided into two groups: those interested in makeup and those not interested in makeup.

4.1.3.1 Reasons why high school girls interested in makeup do not wear it

The reason why Hitomi did not wear makeup was because her skin was sensitive. She disclosed, "If I'm not careful about the makeup I use, I'd get severe rashes."

At school, I don't mind not wearing makeup [...] but when I go to an event or a live concert, I want to wear makeup as much as possible. I want to fit in with the people there. There are many fashionable people there. [...] Many people come to the event well-made-up and I really want to become one of them.

If makeup is considered a form of grooming, women for whom wearing makeup is physiologically difficult, like Hitomi, may suffer. This is because considering makeup as a form of grooming assumes that all women can wear makeup. It is highly likely that women like Hitomi, who wish to wear makeup but cannot physiologically, would be treated as violators of etiquette.

4.1.3.2 Reasons of high school girls who are not interested in makeup

Three students, namely Megumi, Natsumi, and Kie, said they did not engage in makeup and were not interested in it. Like Hitomi, Megumi had sensitive skin, so she did not wear makeup except at the Shichi-Go-San (七五三) Festival.¹¹ She said that she did not wear makeup because "it's too much trouble [*laughs*]. Plus, I don't look good with makeup on... My face doesn't stand out even if I put on makeup, and my skin is so sensitive I can't put anything on it." Because she had not put on makeup since the Shichi-Go-San Festival, it can be inferred that she did not know whether she looked good with makeup, as she stated. Her comments suggest that she was physiologically unable to wear makeup, so she decided she did not look good with makeup and stopped thinking about using it.

Natsumi said, "Makeup is kind of disgusting." She was the only student with a direct, negative declaration about makeup. She described the time she got made up for her cousin's wedding:

Having proper makeup done, it was like, I was scared of myself. When I looked at my face [*laughs*], I was a bit surprised at how much of a difference it makes. And, like, I wondered whether maybe makeup doesn't suit my face [*laughs*]? The moment I got home and got it off, like, when all this stuff that had been painted on my face was taken off, it felt refreshing. So, I don't really like makeup.

At the same time, she also said, "When you're an adult, you have to do it [*laughs*] as good manners." When asked why she thought so, she explained that on television, "there were special features about companies where no one wore makeup, so I thought wearing makeup was a form of etiquette [*laughs*]. That's why I've come to think that way." In her view, wearing makeup constitutes good manners. Thus, companies become notable exceptions when their employees do otherwise.

¹¹ This event is held on November 15 for the third and fifth year of a boy's life and the third and seventh year of a girl's life to celebrate the child's growth. The children wear formal kimonos and visit a shrine with their families (*Dejitaru daijisen* 2020b).

About her reason for not using makeup, Kie said, "I don't use it, but my mom said, ah, basically to stop with all that stuff [because the skin gets damaged], and I don't like the idea of [my skin] getting damaged, so I don't use it." Several other students, including Arisu who belongs to Group A, also expressed their belief that makeup damages the skin. For example, Mei did not wear makeup in school because her cousin worked at a cosmetics company and told her that "[i]f you use it every day, it will be harmful, your skin will get damaged" and that "wearing makeup after you start going to university isn't too late." Yui said, "I often hear my friends talking about how your skin gets damaged [if you use makeup], so I'm, like, scared of makeup." When she went out with friends, she would put on colored lip balm, but that was the extent of her makeup. Yui said, "I don't put on makeup like foundation or eye makeup." Arisu noticed, "I don't wear foundation now, but when I grow up and go to work, if I wear foundation every day, my skin will probably get rough because I have sensitive skin." The difference between Mei and Yui, on the one hand, and Kie, on the other, is that while Mei and Yui were concerned about rough skin and limited the frequency and extent of makeup, Kie chose not to engage in makeup at all.

5. Discussion

Initially, I expected high school girls to begin using makeup primarily because of peer influence. Three students started to wear makeup because of it. On the other hand, four students started to wear makeup because of the influence of their mothers. Two students did so because of the influence of peers and mothers.¹² This study revealed that some students started to wear makeup because of the influence of their mothers. Additionally, there are two reasons. One student started makeup because she had been interested in it since she was a child, and two students did it because adults outside of school influenced them.

I also expected that high school girls' mothers would discourage them from wearing makeup. Except for Kaori, however, no students were prohibited from wearing makeup by their mothers. Kaori's mother, according to Kaori, "has always said, 'You shouldn't be flirtatious!'" by rolling up skirts to shorten them or wearing makeup. Although Kie's mother discouraged her from wearing makeup, she did not prohibit her from doing it.

Why did mothers encourage their daughters to wear makeup? Based on the students' year of birth and the average age of mothers at childbirth by birth order of children (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2010), I estimated the age of mothers who suggested makeup use for their daughters.

¹² I only introduced one student's case in this study.

Juri's mother is estimated to have been born in 1973 and to have been a second-year high school student in 1990. Ai's and Yui's mothers are estimated to have been born in 1974 and to have been first-year high school students in 1990. Because high school girls seemed to be wearing makeup around 1990, it is possible that Juri's, Ai's, and Yui's mothers encouraged their daughters to do the same based on their own experiences. As an exception, Hana's mother is estimated to have been born in 1970 and was not a high school student in the early 1990s. The reason why Hana's mother facilitated Hana's wearing makeup is not known.

Several reasons that the students give for continuing makeup—such as to make their skin appear lighter and cleaner, to change the impression given by their face, to create cute double-lidded eyes, to look like their favorite models, and because they like makeup—clarify that high school girls consider a face with fair skin, double-lidded eyes, and striking features to be a face embodying the beauty ideal. Those reasons are also interpreted by the fourth reason for beauty practices argued by Widdows (2018, 38–39, 189–191): feeling pleasure in using makeup to continue to move toward their “imagined self,” and the sense of empowerment and enjoyment in doing so. This finding may also be related to the frequent use of social media among high school girls because they may try to construct their “imagined selves” by makeup to take photos and present them on social media.

Some female students created a face with a “rosy complexion” by applying colored lip balm as a practice close to grooming. Applying colored lip balm, in this case, is considered the minimum standard necessary to transform an “unhealthy-looking pale face” to a “healthy-looking face with rosy complexion,” and thus is not considered a beauty-related norm because, as Widdows (2018) argued, looking healthy as the dominant beauty standard is no longer considered a beauty norm. However, because the use of makeup is prohibited at Minamikaze High School, it can be expected that there are female students, like Rei, who wish to use makeup when going to school to give their face a “rosy complexion,” but cannot because of the rules. Thus, it is not wholly a grooming practice, at least not at Minamikaze High School.

Mei's, Seira's, and Natsumi's accounts show that the view of makeup as a form of etiquette for women in Japan still exists and continues to influence younger generations. Mei and Seira engaged in makeup practices because of this belief. Natsumi, on the other hand, seemed to feel pressured and said that in the future, she would have to wear makeup to conform to society's expectations.

6. Conclusion

Ashikari (2003, 11) argues that wearing makeup is essential to an adult woman's appearance and grooming in Japan. The survey of 127 adult women in the late 1990s shows that about 99% wear lipstick and 94% wear foundation to construct the "right" complexion (Ashikari 2003, 12). If an adult woman does not wear makeup, she will likely be judged and criticized because of her improper grooming—that is, she will be viewed as someone lacking etiquette (Ashikari 2003, 13). Female high school girls who either cannot wear makeup for physiological reasons or who are not interested in it are thus likely to face similar criticism when they become adults. Therefore, people in Japanese society need to consider the negative consequences of this norm that wearing makeup is a part of adult women's appearance and grooming.

Finally, I wish to discuss the contribution of this study to gender studies in Japan. Gender studies scholars in Japan have shown little interest in the question of why women construct bodies that are considered ideal through various beauty practices. Tamaki (2014, 78), for example, points out that in Japan, there are few studies on problems caused by the construction of beauty through beauty practices, including wearing makeup. Therefore, studies that consider the effects of beauty practices on women are urgently needed.

This study has highlighted the importance of this issue by illuminating the makeup practices of female students in Minamikaze High School. Considering their reasons for engaging in makeup practices through the perspectives shown by the previous studies, I demonstrate the significance of considering makeup from the perspective of women's "imagined selves," as Widdows (2018) pointed out. In addition, by focusing on high school girls, my research reveals that the norm of considering makeup essential for Japanese adult women's appearance and grooming continues to influence teenage girls and their choice of beauty practices.

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WARIA AND MARRIAGE IN MALAY MUSLIM SOCIETY IN INDONESIA

Novidayanti

Islam and Malay customs and traditions (*Adat Melayu*) are significant components of Malay society in Indonesia, as "Malayness has widely been equated with Islam" (Long 2013, 143). The intertwining discourses of Islam and *Adat Melayu* are expressed through the society's philosophy of life, i.e., customs are based on shari'a, and shari'a is based on the Holy Quran. Although there is a premise that the local society is ideally committed to living in harmony with minority groups and maintaining good mutual relationships with male-to-female transgender individuals, or "waria," the discourse of transgenderism and sexuality in Jambi remains at the bottom of public discussions, especially in the context of Islam and *Adat*. "Incommensurability between religion and desire" (Boellstorff 2005, 575) exaggerates the position of waria in society when their sexual orientation is brought into public discussion. This chapter examines the legal institution of heterosexual marriage from the perspective of waria in Malay Muslim society in Jambi. It is based on field observations and in-depth interviews with waria interlocutors. The aim is to explore how waria articulate this form of relationship with the opposite sex while engaging in same-sex relationships.

Keywords: Islam, *Adat Melayu*, Indonesia, waria, homosexuality

1. Introduction

Jambi City is a multicultural community with a diverse population, including Malay, Javanese,¹ Bajau,² Minangkabau,³ Batak, and Chinese ethnic groups (Anderbeck 2008, 4). Most of the population is Malay. Islam and *Adat Melayu*⁴ are significant components of Jambi society, both culturally and politically, and are inseparable, as “Malayness has been widely equated with Islam” (Long 2013, 143). Societal customs are based on shari’a⁵ and shari’a is based on the Holy Quran (*Adat bersendikan Syara’, Syara’ bersendikan Kitabullah*; see Lindayanti and Witrianto 2014, 9; Mahmud 1978, 2). Jambi people commonly behave according to custom and religious values, which involve maintaining good manners, morals, and social relationships, and being courteous. There are those, however, who do not adhere to the philosophy and the societal values, and engage in social deviation, such as promiscuity, prostitution, immodest clothing, etc. Consequently, these individuals are viewed as immoral by society (Sagala 2012, 445). Moreover, it is an individual’s obligation to follow shari’a and Malay traditions and contribute in this way to the preservation of Malay-Islamic culture. This includes legal marriage when a man has reached maturity and is responsible for a woman’s financial and sexual aspects (physical and mental sustenance). Those who fulfill this obligation are commended, and those who do not are condemned.

Marriage is considered a sacred obligation in Islam, as stated in the Prophet’s hadith “one who marries has already guarded half of his religion, therefore he should fear Allah for the other half.” For most Muslims, heterosexual marriage is a means of ensuring one’s physical and financial security, establishing social connections, securing wealth or prestige, continuing the family lineage through procreation, and preserving family honor (Kugle 2010, 202). However, Kugle criticizes the formal nature of marriage in Islam, viewing it as a transaction between two individuals, their families, and their communities. According to Kugle (2010, 202), marriage is viewed as a contractual agreement in which the wife surrenders ownership or access to her sexual organs for a term considered permanent for

¹ The transmigration program of the New Order (*Orde Baru*) spread Javanese to other islands, such as Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Papua. Javanese transmigrated to Jambi from 1975 in Bungo Tebo Regency and from 1980 to 1985 in Sarolangun Bangko Regency (Lestari 2009, 15).

² The Bajau people are an Indonesian Sea nomad group (Ariando and Arunotai 2022, 261).

³ The Minangkabau are an Austronesian ethnic group native to West Sumatra-Indonesia. Minangkabau gold seekers migrated to the upstream areas of Jambi from the sixteenth century (Andaya 1993, 14) and by the eighteenth century, Jambi had received large numbers of such migrants (Znoj 2001, 69).

⁴ *Adat Melayu* are Malay customs and traditions. “Adat” refers to the traditional rules of conduct.

⁵ Shari’a refers to Islamic law (see, e.g., Murata 1992, 2).

as long as the contract holds. As a progressive Islamic scholar, Kugle (2010, 207) offers space for non-conforming gender and non-heterosexual individuals within the institution of marriage as legalized by Islam, to ensure in this way equality between men and women, regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation. It is important to note that Islam considers heterosexual marriage as "the central concept organizing sexuality" (Boellstorff 2005, 578).

Historically, Jambi was a powerful Malay kingdom in the seventh century (Anderbeck 2010, 2). Taking advantage of its geographical position in the middle of Sumatra Island, in Indonesia, Jambi people developed their civilization and connections to global communities through various ways, such as pilgrimages to Mecca (Anderbeck 2010, 2), intermarriage with Yemeni Arabs (Kerlogue 2002, 93) and Malay royalty in Malaysia (Anderbeck 2010, 2–7),⁶ and by engaging in international trade with Europeans in the seventeenth century (Andaya 1993, 80). Jambi Malays have, however, relatively little exposure and are "largely excluded from power centers" (Anderbeck 2010, 2) in contemporary Indonesia. Given the historical global connections of Jambi and the way the state and Islamic discourse shape gender subjectivities, one must recognize "particular genders and sexualities" within the local context which is shaped by a number of "processes implicated in globalization," such as "diasporic movement, capitalism, political economy of the state" (Blackwood 2005, 221).

Gender and sexuality in the context of Jambi society have received little attention from scholars. Local scholars and academics also still consider transgenderism and homosexuality taboo, and avoid discussing such topics within the public domain. Hence, research-based information on the social phenomena and issues of transgenderism and sexuality in Jambi is limited. Researching non-conforming gender and sexual orientation in the Jambi context is challenging, and it is difficult to source sex-related local literature and find scholars who are willing to be interviewed on the topic.

The ethnographic fieldwork for the research presented in this chapter focused on Malay society in Jambi, central Sumatra Island, from 2014 to 2016, as part of my research project on transgenderism in Malay Muslim Society in Indonesia. During this period, I conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen waria, two local government officials, and two religious and traditional leaders. I approached the main interlocutor of this research project, a waria, who was working for PKBI Daerah Jambi.⁷ During

⁶ According to Anderbeck (2010, 7), this is based on personal communication between Anderbeck and Fiona Kerlogue in 2002.

⁷ The PKBI Daerah Jambi, the Jambi regional chapter of the International Planned Parenthood Association, was established in the 1970s. This non-governmental organization actively provides sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, including for key populations of HIV/AIDS sufferers and for minority groups, such as LGBT, indigenous people,

my conversations with waria, I play two central roles as a participant-observer, as I can learn “the experiential world” where waria live “from within” and analyze it “from without” (Rock 2001, 32). As a Jambi local, I make a clear demarcation line between personal and academic perspectives towards waria in this research. When entering the waria world, I aim to feel, hear, and see socio-cultural dynamics and interactions of waria in their daily life. At the same time, as an observer, I am an outsider or stranger who might not quite understand waria. Hence, I spend “a very considerable time in the field” (Rock 2001, 32) engaging with my waria interlocutors.

I used the snowball sampling method to acquire new waria interlocutors for my next interviews. By leveraging my status as a local, I conducted in-depth conversations with waria interlocutors.⁸ They shared their personal stories, including details about their sexual relationships and family lives. I was surprised by their openness and honesty. Additionally, I organized two events for the screening of a waria film entitled *Mother from Jambi (Emak Dari Jambi)* at the Institute of Government Studies (Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Pemerintahan) Nurdin Hamzah, in Jambi, and for a Jambi NGO consortium working on HIV/AIDS prevention and elimination programs. One week later, and over the course of two weeks, I conducted a series of exclusive interviews with eight waria activists from the organizations Sanggar Swara and Yayasan Srikandi Sejati in Jakarta to gather more information regarding transnational flows of queer discourses and the impact of queer knowledge on waria social movements in contemporary Indonesia.

Narrative analysis is used to analyze all collected data during my ethnographic fieldwork to give access to “the textual interpretative world of the teller, which presumably [...] mediates or manages reality” (Cortazzi 2001, 385). The analysis relies on the experience and oral narrations of waria, as well as Malay scholar perspectives toward waria’s lives. The Islamic discourse on marriage and Malay culture and traditions that are tied to the waria’s lives are also analyzed to gain a fuller understanding of the construction of gender identity of waria in the Malay Muslim community in Jambi.

Gender and sexuality studies require sensitivity. In the Indonesian context, discussions about one’s private life are not always easy, especially if violating religious and social norms is involved. In line with Murphy and Digwall’s (2001, 341) recommendation to protect the anonymity of the interlocutors, my study adheres to ethical guidelines that aim to prevent any harm to waria interlocutors. Throughout this chapter, the waria interlocutors have been pseudonymized by themselves to protect their personal identities.

prostitutes, and so forth, and empowers rural women, waria, and homeless (“street”) children. The NGO joined the One Vision Alliance (Aliansi Satu Visi) and is actively engaged in campaigning for the mainstreaming of gender diversity and sexuality since 2012.

⁸ All conversations were conducted in Indonesian language (Bahasa Indonesia).

2. *Seloko Adat*: the quintessence of the intertwining discourses of Islam and *Adat*

Why Malay people? During an online discussion in 2020, Sharyn Graham Davies questioned the reason for choosing Malay people over those who just consider themselves Indonesians, especially in light of Milner's argument about "being Malay" in Indonesia:

[T]he vast majority of people in Indonesia would not consider being "Malay" to be a primary focus of identity and association. [...] At the local level [...] certain people claim 'Malay' identity in one situation and Javanese, Indian or Arab identity in another. (Milner 2008, 2)

One key issue in this research is the intertwining discourse of Islam and Malay customs, or *Adat*. It is therefore important to focus on Malay people. Two Muslim scholars, Tariq Ramadan and Al-Attas, offer opposing arguments to orientalist⁹ views on the Islamization process in Malay society in Indonesia. Orientalist scholars argue, in contrast, that Islamization in the Malay world has merely "scratched the surface" (Mansor and Al-Fijawi 2021, 44). However, these two Islamic scholars strongly contend that the universal values of Islam are deeply embedded in Malay culture as the moral foundation of the society. Unlike Hindu and Buddhist cultures, the influence of Islamic culture in everyday Malay life extends to "the very core of Malay religious beliefs" (Mansor and Al-Fijawi 2021, 48). As a result, Islam and Malay culture are strongly intertwined in terms of the philosophy of life and practical experience of Malay people. This research focuses on waria among the Malay people and aims to investigate how the intertwining relationship between Islam and *Adat* affects daily life for waria, particularly their marital experience. This research is a small part of my study on the construction of gender identity of Muslim waria in the Malay world of Indonesia. This study takes into account various relevant factors, such as the state ideology, Islamic discourse, culture, the salon industry, transnational flows of gender discourse and activism (Bennett 2005, 21; Blackwood 1999, 183; 2005, 227–233; Boellstorff 2007, 577; Davies 2001, 1; Davies 2010, 2–3), and social media (Webb and Temple 2015, 642).

The discourses of Islam and *Adat* are intertwined in various practices throughout the archipelago. For example, Islamic law is intertwined with *Adat* in the context of marriage in Jambi Malay society. Another example can be found in the context of *Seloko*¹⁰ *Adat*, or Malay traditional proverbs. Nurhasanah's article

⁹ In this context, Said (1979, 2) argues that an Orientalist is "anyone who teaches, writes, or researches the Orient (Eastern Asia) – and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist – either in its specific or its general aspect."

¹⁰ *Seloko* refers to the oral wisdom of traditions.

entitled “Symbolic Expression of Jambi’s *Seloko Adat*” (*Ekspresi Simbolik Seloko Adat Jambi*) discusses the personal experience of marriage in Malay Jambi society that was articulated in the forms of *Seloko Adat*. Nurhasanah argues that marriage is a crucial life cycle of human beings that involves human sexual behaviors, wherein sexual intercourse between men and women is legalized. *Seloko Adat* incorporates religious symbols based on symbolic activities in the traditional marriage ceremony in Jambi. These symbolic activities are derived from local traditions and customs that reflect the everyday life of Jambi people (Nurhasanah 2013, 49–50). Additionally, she asserts that the primary ideological message of marriage to Jambi people is that humans are social creatures. Legal marriage is considered a social contract that should be announced to society. This message is articulated and expressed by *Seloko Adat*.

Seloko Adat is perceived as a means of enforcing social norms. For example, the top four rules of customary laws (*Empat nan di atas of seloko pucuk undang delapan*) regulate and control sexual behavior in society.¹¹ Based on these four main rules, incest or engaging in sexual intercourse with a family member is prohibited.

1. *Menikam bumi* refers to engaging in sexual intercourse with one’s biological mother.
2. *Mencakar telur* refers to engaging in sexual activity with one’s biological child.
3. *Bersunting bungo setangkai* refers to engaging in sexual intercourse with one’s sister or brother-in-law.
4. *Mandi di pancuran gading* refers to engaging in sexual intercourse with the wife of a leader or king.

Jambi people believe that those who violate shari’a and customary laws¹² are not only cursed by society, but also, most crucially, by God (*Kutuk Kawi*, or “God’s Condemnation”) (Nurhasanah 2013, 66). In other words, marrying or having sexual intercourse with siblings or parents (i.e., incest) is banned by *Adat* as it violates Islamic law (Bujang et al. 1984, 32).

The development of information technology and globalization poses a challenge to the intertwining discourses of Islam and *Adat* as these developments have resulted in changes within the social life and character of the Malay people in contemporary Jambi. For instance, the selection of a marital partner is made by

¹¹ They are stated in “Oendang-Oendang Djambi,” or the Jambi Constitution (Mursalin 2012, 311).

¹² Since Malay custom is based on and tied by Islamic shari’a, all Islamic religious practices must not “contradict with Shari’a evidence” (Ibrahim et al. 2018, 385) and “avoid the main benefit for people and bring harm to the community” (Zaidan 1976, quoted in Ibrahim et al. 2018, 386). In other words, customs must not deviate from God’s law as stated in the Quran and the Prophetic Tradition, or *Sunah* (Muwangir 2021, 2999).

the parents and the respective elderly family member, or "*tuo tengganai*." Marriage is considered a critical point in the human life cycle, involving the parents and siblings of both parties, as well as their respective families (Rivaldo et al. 2021, 172). The selection of a partner is an important aspect of this stage of life. In a common marriage (*perkawinan normal*), there are two ways to select a mate: through parental or familial arrangement, or through self-selection. In many cases, families do not select brides or bridegrooms, but they instead choose their own partners. This self-selection process often involves young people building romantic, long-term relationships before getting married. While this process may take more time, it allows individuals to choose their partners freely. It is important, however, to note that some of these relationships may lead to "abnormal marriages."¹³ Freedom of choice of marital partners among young people in Jambi is still limited by religious and social norms and values. Although the family's control over the social relations of youth has loosened in recent years, future brides and grooms are still prohibited from going out without a companion from relatives before the marriage ceremony to avoid "adultery and other filthy actions" (Ibrahim et. al. 2018, 392). Addressing women's need for knowledge and building self-confidence and self-esteem in formal or informal educational institutions may lead to improved social relations with the opposite sex.

Factors such as information technology and the education level of young people, including the increased presence of women in public spaces, have contributed to these changes. Nowadays, the customary laws in place do not align with the social interactions between men and women in contemporary Seberang Kota.¹⁴ Although there are strict traditional rules governing the arrangement of men and women relations in the public sphere in Seberang Kota, young people are freer to interact and socialize with the opposite sex at schools or workplaces. (Interview: Jambi, Rizal)¹⁵

In this sense, young people have more opportunities to select their own partners without any assistance from parents and *tuo tengganai*. When selecting a partner

¹³ In the context of Jambi society, "abnormal" marriage means those who have had sexual intercourse out of marital institution (adultery) which causes the unwanted pregnancy of women. The two parties, man and woman, are consequently forced by family and/or society to marry although they have no plans to have such a marriage. In this case, there is not a strict selection process of bride or bridegroom by parents and *tuo tengganai*. The "abnormal" marriage is also called married by accident (*embea*); "accident" is a contemptuous term for pregnancy as a result of adultery.

¹⁴ The district stretches out along the north bank of the Batanghari River opposite the capital city of Jambi (Kerlogue 2003, 178).

¹⁵ Rizal, an official at the Jambi Malay Museum-Gentala Arasy' is a descendant of Seberang Kota. I interviewed him to collect empirical data of the history of Islam in Malay society in Jambi.

for marriage, young people consider not only social status, family background, age, and other external factors, but also how to build an intimate relationship based on love and mutual respect. It is important to pay attention to religious and social norms, especially with regard to interactions with the opposite sex during the process of selection. It is worth noting that the self-selection process is independently conducted by young people.

3. Who is waria?

The term “waria” was coined by the Indonesian government in 1978 (Boellstorff 2007, 83). It is a combination of the Indonesian words for woman (*wanita*) and man (*pria*). In some regions and within certain ethnic groups, there are local terms used to refer to male-to-female transgender individuals, such as the *calabai* in the Bugis society of South Sulawesi (Davies 2010). Hegarty (2022, 6) uses the term waria for those who have transitioned from male to female in Indonesia because of their “dynamic arrangement with the historical and cultural position in networks of global change.” Waria, also known as *bencong* or *banci*, is a term used to describe individuals with feminine characteristics and body language. It is important to note, however, that not all individuals who identify as *banci* are homosexual. The use of the terms *bencong* and *banci* to label gay men is considered contemptuous and should be avoided. During an interview with two gay men in Jambi on August 1, 2015, they strongly rejected these terms as they describe them in a less than respectful way.

In relation to gender performance, waria is defined as “Indonesian male-bodied and feminine identified subjects who usually claim to have the heart and soul of a woman” (Toomistu 2022, 73) and “dress and act in a manner similar to normatively gendered women and take men as lovers” (Blackwood 2011, 211). During one of Toomistu’s fieldwork sessions at Pondok Pesantren Al Fatah Waria in Yogyakarta, a religious teacher responded to a student’s question about *waria*-ness (i.e., gender representation of waria) by stating that waria individuals simply pretend to be women. The teacher claimed that waria individuals cannot spend their entire lives wearing women’s clothing and makeup. Moreover, being waria is not solely determined by biological or sexual characteristics, but rather by the need to express their gender identity (Putri et al. 2021).

As a minority group in Indonesian society, waria, like other LGBT groups such as gays and lesbians, deserve to live more openly and be better integrated into society. Unfortunately, they still face stigmatization and discrimination. It is important to recognize and accept waria as a part of society, rather than discriminating against them. In 2016, there was a massive wave of rejection from various elements of society, including government officials, which has exacerbated the

situation for the LGBT community. For instance, the Muhammadiyah Student Association (Ikatan Pemuda Muhammadiyah) rejected waria's participation in the HIV/AIDS elimination program of Bone Regency in South Sulawesi.

The presence of waria in the community, under the guise of HIV/AIDS Ambassador, may negatively impact young students. The content displayed on social media suggests that the waria community is being encouraged to flourish [with regard to their number and roles within society]. Their appearance in public as representative of the local government of Bone in combating HIV/AIDS program draws moral degradation in society. Hence, people reject their participation in such programs. (Hidayat 2023)

Since January 2016, the topic of anti-LGBT sentiment has been widely covered by the Indonesian media at both local and national levels. The issue has sparked discussions on social media regarding the intolerance and oppression faced by individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity (Davies 2016). It is important, however, to avoid reinforcing stereotypes of LGBT individuals. The oppression of the LGBT community in Indonesia is led by government officials, politicians, religious and civil society leaders, and social organizations. The LGBT movement and members of the LGBT community are supposedly incompatible with Indonesia's cultural tradition and religious norms. Therefore, negative statements were widely circulated in the Indonesian media in January-February 2016. For example, Muhammad Nasir, Minister of Research, Technology and Higher Education, declared that "a university is a moral safeguard" where "standard values and morals" must be upheld. In this sense, the presence of LGBT individuals in educational institutions poses a threat to the nation's morality (The Jakarta Post 2016).

Stigmatization and discrimination against waria are also perpetuated by the local government through regulatory measures. For instance, Jambi Municipal Ordinance Number 2/2014 on Prostitution and Immoral Practices Elimination¹⁶ and Bogor Municipal Ordinance Number 10/2021 on Prevention and Combating Sexual Deviation Behaviors¹⁷ classify waria as a form of sexual deviation. Although such regulations aim to provide protection and guarantee human rights for all, they fail to protect waria individuals, and these individuals remain marginalized. The Mayor of Bogor Municipality guarantees that the regulation will not intervene in the private lives of people. However, waria activists reject the mayor's guarantee, stating that the regulation lacks a clear definition of sexual orientation, which is a form of privacy right. Therefore, the state has no right to intervene in these

¹⁶ Source of the ordinance: <https://daerah.peraturanpedia.id/peraturan-daerah-kota-jambi-nomor-2-tahun-2014/>.

¹⁷ Source of the ordinance: <https://kolegal.id/perda-kota-bogor-no-10-tahun-2021>.

personal or private rights.¹⁸ In the digital era, the boundaries between private and public domains are becoming increasingly blurred. In most cases, when human activity in a private room is uploaded to social media, it may become public. To mitigate the issues that arise from this, it is arguably important to note that the state does not have the right to intervene in private matters. The state regulations should clearly define and distinguish between private and public spaces, avoiding any violation of human rights that may lead to stigmatization and discrimination against certain groups in society. It is also worth noting that Indonesia is not the only country that is “unfriendly” towards transgender groups. Intimidation, physical attacks, detention, and murder, as well as laws that eliminate transgender rights occur not only in Indonesia but also in other parts of the world, such as the US, Pakistan, South Korea, Turkey, and elsewhere (OHCHR, n.d.).

The stigmatization of waria can be financial, due to their involvement in low-paying job such as street prostitution (Boellstorff 2007, 229), but can also be social, as most waria are often forced to experience social exile in their home villages or towns from a young age. I argue that this social exclusion often leads waria to engage in heterosexual marriage, not as a personal decision, but as a way for their families to “heal” their perceived sexual deviation. In Indonesian societies, such as Jambi’s Malay community, waria are often viewed as “abnormal” and may be forced to undergo “treatment” by being pressured into marrying women. Additionally, in the context of Islam in Indonesia, marriage is not only a contract between two individuals, but also between families. As same-sex relationships practiced by waria are considered “abnormal,” this concept challenges waria’s gender identity and sexual orientation and relations, both in premarital and marital lives.

4. Do “real” waria marry women?

“What is your opinion on marriage?” is the question I asked waria interlocutors in order to find out their views on marriage. Some found this question challenging, however, due to its potential impact on their gender identity and sexual orientation. The term “marriage” is associated with legal and religious customs, making it a sensitive issue for some individuals.

Joya, a forty-four-year-old waria, has been married twice to women since identifying as waria.¹⁹ Hir²⁰ first marriage occurred when s/he was sixteen years

¹⁸ Meidina Rahmawati, Researcher of the Institute for Criminal Justice Reform (ICJR), responds to the Bogor Municipal Ordinance Number 10/2021.

¹⁹ The former spouse of Joya was aware of Joya’s gender identity as a waria and accepted it.

²⁰ Following Blackwood (2011, 27), I use “s/he” and “hir” for the “gender-neutral third person” to avoid “the insertion of gendered individuals into binary genders.”

old. Joya describes this marriage as an “accident,” as hir mother caught hir and hir girlfriend engaging in premarital sexual intercourse at home. Such behavior is prohibited in society and is considered a violation of religious and social norms, bringing shame to other members of the family and damaging the family’s reputation. In Jambi, this act is worthy of condemnation and the couple had to move out of the village. Eventually, Joya had to marry the girl and move to Palembang, the capital city of South Sumatra, hir family’s hometown. Joya entered into a second marriage at the age of thirty-four and has been a *waria dendong*,²¹ i.e., those who wear makeup and women’s clothes for almost twenty-four hours every day.

At that time, my mother was unwell. Her final wish was for all her children to marry and start a family. As the only unmarried child, I felt compelled to fulfill her request and agreed to an arranged marriage with a girl chosen by my family. Despite the arrangement, I developed genuine affection for both of my wives. (Interview: Jambi, Joya)

After being recognized as a *waria dendong* by hir neighbors, Joya and hir wife moved from hir village to a rural area, Kemingking-Muaro Jambi,²² which is located three hours away from Jambi City. Joya divorced from hir second wife after the wife gave birth to their daughter and returned to hir village for the second time. Having a daughter from hir second marriage had changed hir perspective on hir life as a *waria*. S/he stated that it is not fair for children in hir family to have a *waria* around. Although s/he does not live with hir daughter, s/he has a nephew at home who interacts with hir every day.

I live with my nephew, and I do not want my past experiences as a *waria* to negatively impact his life. It is important to me that he does not follow in my footsteps. (Interview: Jambi, Joya)

A similar dilemma related to marriage was also experienced by Jenny.²³ Although s/he was not yet married, the concept of heterosexual marriage had affected hir perspective on married life. For Jenny, the most challenging aspect of married life would not be hir gender identity or sexual orientation, but rather how to maintain fairness and respect within marriage.

Although a *waria* may marry a woman s/he loves, their gender identity and sexual desire may not change a hundred percent. For me, it is not

²¹ The term *dendong* is a *banci* slang language, which means *dandan* (“makeup”).

²² Muaro Jambi is a regency of Jambi Province.

²³ Jenny is the female *waria* name of my research interlocutor. S/he initially refused to share hir original name, or to be included it in my research report, but on my third visit s/he did mention hir original name. In line with research ethics and Jenny’s rights, I use hir pseudonym “Jenny” in this chapter.

easy to shift my sexual desire for a woman and focus on loving a wife. Indeed, it cannot be avoided that even though we are married, we still have sexual desire towards males. However, we should respect our wives by reducing the frequency and intensity of same-sex intercourse and makeup. When my wife is with me, I refrain from using social media or my phone, where I have saved male contacts. (Interview: Jambi, Jenny)

The experiences of the two waria mentioned here cannot be generalized with regard to their perspectives on heterosexual marriages. However, their story may lead us to think about how waria individuals can experience married life and how their identities can be acknowledged without becoming forgotten. Given the “the negative stigma associated with divorce and homosexuality” (Daly et al. 2018, 7), I argue that for some waria, marrying heterosexually is the sanctuary of their gender and sexual orientation in Indonesia, where the notion of non-conforming gender and sexual orientation is publicly invisible and incommensurate with state ideology, religion, and local culture.

Sitting on a chair in a three-by-four-meter salon room, Jenny confidently shared hir life story as a waria. S/he moved from Kerinci, in the western part of Jambi Province, to Jambi City at the age of nineteen, shortly after graduating from senior high school. Jenny started hir salon business after being forced to leave hir family home by hir father, who no longer considered hir a son. As a young waria living in Jambi City without any support from hir family, s/he works hard every day to make and save money in order to build hir own salon business. Upon achieving the goal of running hir own salon, s/he intends to offer help and support to other abandoned young waria who have had a similar experience.

On my second visit to Jenny’s salon, I met Devi,²⁴ a thirty-year-old waria who has been working as a hairstylist for Jenny in the salon for two years. Devi shared an experience similar to Jenny’s, having been evicted by hir family due to hir gender and sexual orientation. Jenny, Devi, and I sat in the salon room where Jenny and Devi provide their clients with make-up and haircuts. While Devi was preparing for the interview, three children were observing our activities in the room. Suddenly, the youngest among the children shouted, “*Kak Jenny ga dandan [juga]?*,” which means “Sister Jenny, are you not making up [too]?” I was surprised to learn that waria *dandan*—i.e., men who dress up and wear make-up as “women”—was a common sight for Jenny’s neighbors, even for the children. Jenny responded,

I will do it (*dandan*) [later]. My husband says that it is not good [for me] to *dandan* [while he is not here/at home]. When a husband returns from

²⁴ Similar to Jenny, Devi is the name of my second waria research interlocutor. Although s/he mentions hir original name, s/he prefers hir pseudonym, Devi, used in this chapter.

work, the wife must do 'good things.' If the wife does not [do good things while the husband is working], the wife can be a *lonte*²⁵ ("prostitute")... so, [to me] making up is only for my husband.

Jenny's response to the question obviously presents a gender binary and reinforces traditional gender roles within the household. This perspective suggests that husband and wife have distinct domains and roles that must be adhered to, particularly by the wife. Social judgment may follow if one of them breaks the rules. Indeed, Jenny's perspective on gender roles in the household is influenced by religious and socio-cultural factors in Jambi Malay society even though, in this case, Jenny describes her household as non-normative or same-sex. According to Jenny, both genders can perform traditionally feminine and masculine gender roles in both heterosexual and same-sex marriages. Jenny's conjugal relationship with her husband represents a connection between the waria subject position and the public, or "the normal world," without any subjective evaluations (Boellstorff 2004, 176).

The Malay community in Jambi strictly adheres to a gender binary system, recognizing only male and female genders. Although waria are acknowledged by the public, they are not recognized as a separate gender. As a result, waria can only enter heteronormative marriages. This suggests the gender binary system is deeply embedded in Jambi's society, including in its Malay cultures and traditions. The institutionalization of the gender binary system in Jambi's Malay cultures is exemplified by the motifs of Jambi's traditional Batik, including the *Angso Duo motif* (depicting two swans, male and female) and the *Merak Ngeram motif* (depicting a hatching peacock). These motifs describe the relationship between a man and woman in the harmony of a marriage (Sumardjo 2013, 115) and their roles both in the household and in public.

Junaidi T. Noor, a Jambi Malay scholar, argues that the *Adat* hierarchy in Jambi Malay society shows the influence of Islam on Malay *Adat*. These include the actual customs based on the Qur'an and the Hadith or "*Adat yang sebenarnya adat*," a set of customary values or "*Adat yang diadatkan*," general customs, or "*Adat yang teradatkan*," and customs and traditions or "*Adat istiadat*" (Noor n.d, 6–7). This *Adat* hierarchy was elaborated by another Jambi Malay scholar, Muchtar Agus Cholif²⁶ (*Adipati*

²⁵ The term *lonte* is considered offensive and should be avoided. In formal contexts, such as those involving the government, NGOs, or the media, the term *Pekerja Seks Komersil* or PSK ("Commercial Sex Worker") can be used instead. In the Indonesian language, *lonte* has several synonyms including *perempuan jalang* (which translates to "bitch"), *wanita tunasusila* (which translates to "slut" or "prostitute"), *pelacur* (which translates to "slut," "prostitute," or "bitch"), and *sundal* (which translates to "bitch") (KBBI, n.d.).

²⁶ Deputy Head of the Malay Cultural Board of Jambi Province (Lembaga Adat Melayu Provinsi Jambi).

Anggo Ganto Rajo)²⁷ in a seminar of the Association of Jambi's Malay Women (Himpunan Perempuan Melayu Jambi) on September 24, 2014. His seminar paper is entitled "The Implementation of Customary Law" (*Implementasi Hukum Adat*) and highlights the implementation of the Old-Malay customary law (the Constitution of the Kingdom of Jambi's Malay) since 1502 in Jambi (Cholif 2014, 3). He argues the second point of the constitution—*Adat yang Teradat*²⁸—implies that customary law has existed since humankind began and cannot be changed by anyone. Thus, the law must be followed by individuals in Jambi's Malay society. Muchtar presents the following as an example of the second point of the constitution: "Women marry men..., the performance of same-sex marriage is strongly forbidden [in this society]. This act is condemned – it is unlawful in Islam" ("*Betino kawin dengan jantan...*",²⁹ *maka terlarang kawin betino samo betino, jantan samo jantan. Perbuatan itu teruk-tuk, [dan] haram hukumnya*") (Cholif 2014, 10).

The claims presented by these two Jambi Malay scholars demonstrate the discourse of the intertwined connection between Islam and *Adat* in the social life of Jambi people. However, the discourse of gender non-conformity and non-heterosexual orientations within society is absent. It is argued that an emphasis on upholding norms in contemporary Jambi discourages open discussion of these sensitive social issues. Additionally, customary laws or *Hukum Adat* do not address the notion of non-conforming gender and non-heterosexuality as seen in *Adat* norms and *Adat* sanctions or, *Seloko Anak Undang nan-Duo Belas*. Although this *Seloko* regulates the social behavior of young people and the *Adat* sanctions of adultery among them, it does not address non-normative gender discourses and public sexual practices, such as sexual promiscuity among individuals in same-sex relationships.

During an interview with Junaedi T. Noor in Jambi, I asked for the perspective of the Malay Customs Board of Jambi Province (Lembaga Adat Melayu Propinsi Jambi) on the social phenomena of waria and homosexual practices in Jambi. The response was as follows:

Waria in contemporary Jambi are markedly different from their past counterparts. Nowadays, they are more visible in public, including at their designated meeting point [known as *pangkalan waria*] where they engage in sex work. However, it is worth noting that they are often

²⁷ A traditional title given by the Malay Cultural Board of Jambi Province to individuals concerned with the preservation of Jambi's Malay cultures and traditions.

²⁸ In the context of the second point of the constitution, the Malay custom only recognizes heterosexual marriage. Any other type of marriage is considered a deviation and an unlawful act. Although Jambi society strictly adheres to this *Adat*, there is no formal punishment for those who perform same-sex marriages.

²⁹ *Betino* and *jantan* are Malay terms in Jambi; *betino* refers to women and *jantan* refers to men.

stigmatized and viewed as social disruptors. As a result, many of them face eviction from their homes or families due to the embarrassment caused by their same-sex preferences and practices. Despite this, it is important to note that waria [also known as *bencong*] can be very helpful, particularly in the context of wedding customs. *Lembaga Adat Melayu* does not have, however, the authority to impose penalties on waria and other homosexuals, despite their deviation from social norms. Ultimately, waria individuals are punished by society through physical abuse and stigmatization. (Interview: Jambi, Junaedi T. Noor)

Regarding the issues and the perspective of Jambi Malay scholars towards waria and their existence in Jambi society, it can be argued that the hegemony of heteronormativity is perpetuated in various ways. This includes the institutionalization of the intertwining discourses between Islam and *Adat*, as well as the established and politicized *Lembaga Adat Melayu*. Although waria are more visible in contemporary Jambi, they are often perceived as “challenging the decencies of society” (Dayanti 2013, 2). This is particularly true in relation to how they themselves see their gender identity and sexual orientation, and how they view heterosexual marriage or legal marriage—known in Jambi as *nikah*. If Kugle (2010, 202) sees formal marriage (i.e., heterosexual marriage) as based on a “contract of sale,”³⁰ how do waria articulate *nikah* in their own language? Jenny offers hir thoughts on this question:

Although I am a waria, I have a female fiancé. She will graduate from high school next year. [I think] I will not be a waria forever... I have to get married. [As money does not guarantee my future] I want someone who will take care of me in the future, so I have to marry and have a wife and children... If there is a man who loves me, I am sure that my parents will not bless our relationship and, indeed, it is just temporary [sexual] pleasure. Moreover, there are many examples from my waria friends who live in Kerinci. They do not get married, they become poor and neglected, and no one takes care of them in their old age (they live alone in their old age). So, I have learned from their experience. (Interview: Jambi, Jenny)

Jenny believes that marrying a woman will provide hir a secure life in the future; s/he will be taken care of and protected by hir children. Learning from hir waria friends in Kerinci, hir home regency, where most waria spend their old age alone and abandoned by family and society, Jenny plans to adopt the institution of heterosexual marriage. I would argue that their eviction from home and their abandonment by society when they were young have affected their perspective on

³⁰ Kugle (2010, 202) asserts that formal marriage or *nikah* in Islam is built on the basis of “a contract of sale (buy),” which means that a husband has long-term legal access to his wife’s “sexual organs” and reproductive system.

marriage and family, viewed as quite distinct from practicing same-sex relations, which are seen as being violating religious and social norms. Such waria live far from their relatives and are further abandoned when they fail to negotiate their gender identity and sexual behaviors with social norms in their early age, such as when they consider entering heterosexual marriage.

In an informal meeting, thirteen gays, in addition to Anthony and I, were sitting in a circle around a long table in a small café in the center of Jambi city. It was the third week of Ramadhan and the *Macam Warna Gaya Jambi (MGWJ)*, a local gay and transgender NGO, assisted me in conducting a focus-group discussion (FGD) with gay individuals following a fast-breaking session. The main topic of the FGD was marriage, and specifically, how homosexuals view legal marriage (*nikah*) and same-sex marriage. From this FGD I gathered various perspectives on legal marriage and homosexual experiences towards such *nikah*.

Anthony, a thirty-seven-year-old waria, married a woman in 2015 and his wife delivered a son fifteen months after their marriage. S/he works as an outreach worker in a local NGO³¹ in the afternoon, and runs a small business, a Javanese depot of traditional medicine (*Depot Jamu*), at night. Anthony has experienced being waria for years. Before getting married and running his *Depot Jamu*, s/he worked as a traditional masseur for men and as a male-sex worker. Anthony has interesting thoughts on heterosexual marriage, as shown by the following quote:

Getting married is a choice. For example, if I choose to marry, I will have to live with my wife and have descendants. Consequently, I have to be responsible for this choice. Conversely, if my gay friends do not want to marry and still have same-sex relationships, they will be responsible for that choice. I decided to marry a woman as I think it is my time to have a family. For me, every single decision gives me responsibilities towards family and society. When I choose to marry (heterosexual marriage) and have a wife and children, it means that I will have more responsibility towards them: to take care of and protect them. (Interview: Jambi, Anthony)

Many scholars have conducted research on waria and their sexuality in Indonesia. One of them is American anthropologist Tom Boellstorff. In his important work, entitled *Playing Back the Nation: Waria, Indonesian Transvestite* (2004), Boellstorff focuses on two questions. Firstly, "how do waria emphasize a sense of belonging to (and exclusion from) national society and popular culture?" Secondly, he asks, "how does the concept of 'waria' operate within the orbit of male gendering?"

³¹ S/he works for MGWJ, a GWL (Gay, Waria, and *Lelaki suka Lelaki*, which translates to "men sex with men") organization in Jambi city. S/he also works for Kanti Sehati, a local NGO specializing in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Jambi Province.

(Boellstorf 2004, 161). He argues that waria are typically not expected to marry with women. Instead of heterosexual marriage, most waria seek romance in the form of a long-term boyfriend (*pacar*), or a non-formalised “husband” (*suami*). However, most waria in contemporary Jambi avoid such long-term relationships. Instead, they engage in marital lives with women or purchase sex services from male sex workers when they desire sexual activity. In this context, it should be kept in mind that there is a paradoxical situation in waria relationships. On the one hand, a number of my waria interlocutors engage in heterosexual marriage following religious and social norms. On the other hand, their sexual activities run against the traditional norms and values upheld by contemporary Jambi society.

There is a risk (in having a long-term relationship with a man); they play with the heart! (*main hati!*) To protect their relationships (and hir romantic love), waria have to support hir partners (husband) financially, such as in the fashion or transportation business, and so forth. Thus, there are two choices: playing with the heart (having a long-term relationship with a man) or paying with money/*main duit* (purchasing sex from male-sex workers). (Interview: Jambi, Bunda Awe)

Bunda Awe, a senior waria, does not participate in a heterosexual marriage. Instead, hir sexual desires are fulfilled through purchasing young male sex workers. In contemporary Jambi, it is common for senior waria, particularly wealthy ones, to engage in transactional sex with young male sex workers. Heterosexual marriage remains a significant aspect of the human life cycle for many waria. However, some waria, such as Bunda Awe, prefer temporary sexual relationships.

There are alternative ways for waria to gain acceptance within society besides entering heterosexual marriages. As Toomistu (2022, 85) explains in her ethnographic fieldwork article on Waria Pesantren Al Fatah in Yogyakarta, waria negotiate their gender and religious identity through daily participation in Islamic practices. This visibility as “a social subject” allows them to be seen as “ordinary Indonesians,” rather than simply as gender non-conforming individuals.

5. Conclusion

Marriage plays a quintessential role in understanding the discourses of the intertwined connection between Islam and *Adat*. Through this institution, the hegemony of religious and social control over individuals is perpetuated. Although gender non-conformity and sexuality are not openly discussed in public, waria still play a significant role in the intertwined connection between Islam and *Adat*, including traditional ceremonies. As a marginalized social group, waria are strongly challenged by this intertwined connection. Waria pursue their sexual desires and gender expression by engaging in homosexual relationships with men, which is

viewed by Jambi Malay society as a violation of religious and social norms. Social acceptance, including access to public spaces and social inclusion, remains a critical issue for waria in contemporary Indonesia.

Even though legal marriage may be a strategy for a male individual to gain acceptance in the community, few waria take the risk of marrying women for various reasons, such as responsibility toward one's family. Although many waria desire a physically and romantically intimate relationship with men, the experience of the waria I have interviewed suggests they would prefer to engage in non-legal long-term romantic relationships with men. Instead, they opt for temporary sexual encounters or legal marriage. In most cases, however, waria are forced to compromise their gender identity and sexual orientation due to the threat of social exclusion and the need for financial security in their old age, leading them to engage in heterosexual marriages.

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INTERSECTIONALITY IN JAPANESE SCHOOLS: THE EXPERIENCES AND STRUGGLES OF LGBTQ+ JET TEACHERS IN RURAL JAPAN

Kazuyoshi Kawasaki and Ami Kobayashi

The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme started in 1987 to promote grass-roots international exchanges and has accepted thousands of college graduates from overseas every year. For investigating LGBTQ+ JET teachers' experience in rural communities, this chapter will apply the concept of intersectionality. By doing so, we aim to shed light on minority groups that have hitherto been invisible in previous research. By applying the concept of intersectionality, we will explore the narratives of LGBTQ+ JET teachers and analyze intersectional experiences caused by a) nationality and working conditions; b) race, gender, and sexuality; and c) regional differences. This chapter presents how race, alongside the characteristics of Japanese rural areas, interacts with their sexualities and gender expressions, shaping their experiences and human relationships.

Keywords: Japanese education, Japanese rural area, JET Programme, LGBTQ+, intersectionality

1. Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) emphasizes the importance of learning to live together on the basis of respect for diversity in order to prevent the reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices in all societies. Along these lines, it suggests that the modes of representation within textbooks, curricula, and school activities should appropriately reflect the diversity of different groups of individual students including, among others, sexual minorities (UNESCO 2021). In Japan, however, sexual minorities have been underrepresented in topics in classrooms, and LGBTQ+ teachers and students face various difficulties in heteronormative school settings (e.g., Hidaka et al. 2008;

Mano 2020; Kawasaki and Kobayashi 2023). The same can be said for LGBTQ+ teachers from overseas who work as assistant language teachers (ALTs) as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme in Japan (Moore 2022).

Previous studies on JET teachers (e.g., McConnell 2000; Metzgar 2017; Otani 2007; Rosati 2005; Sonoda 2021) have created a research gap, since the heterogeneity and diverse experiences of JET teachers, including their gender and sexuality, have not yet been sufficiently investigated, particularly in regards to the issues that LGBTQ+ JET teachers face in rural communities. A number of publications have discussed the conflict between the “locals” and “foreigners” from a dichotomous perspective (e.g., McConnell 2000; Rosati 2005; Sonoda 2021), but they have not paid attention to the heterogeneity of the experiences, especially those caused by intersections of nationality, race, sexuality, and gender identities.

In this context, we conducted semi-structured interviews in 2021 and published our first outcome (Kawasaki and Kobayashi 2023). While our first publication investigates JET teachers’ experiences and tactics of negotiation with heteronormativity in everyday classrooms, this chapter adopts an intersectional perspective to investigate the experience of LGBTQ+ JET teachers in Japanese rural and regional (*chiho*) areas. By applying the concept of intersectionality, which was originally proposed by Black feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 and has been further developed in various disciplines, we aim to shed light on minority groups that have hitherto been underrepresented in previous research.

First, we will overview the situation of Japanese schools and teachers, including the visibility of Japanese LGBTQ+ teachers. Second, we will present our key concept of intersectionality and our research method. Third, we will analyze our interviews with former JET teachers from an intersectional perspective. In exploring the narratives of LGBTQ+ JET teachers, we analyze intersectional experiences caused by a) nationality and working conditions; b) race, gender, and sexuality; and c) regional differences.

2. Background of the study

LGBTQ+ people and issues are still marginalized and underrepresented in Japanese schools. This section first discusses the current situation of gender and sexual minorities in the Japanese educational environment. In the second part, it overviews the history of LGBTQ+ peer-support organizations in the JET Programme.

2.1 LGBTQ+ issues in Japanese education

Before discussing the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ JET teachers, the situation of Japanese LGBTQ+ teachers should be mentioned. First of all, only a handful of teachers are open about their sexuality (e.g., Chiba 2019; Okano 2016). Dohi

Itsuki is one of the few. During her career as a high school teacher, after getting married and having two children, she self-identified as a trans woman and has worked since 2004 as an openly trans teacher (Chiba 2019). She is also the vice president of the Sexual Minority Teachers Network (STN21; Sekushuaru Mainoriti Kyōshokuin Nettowāku), which was established in 2001.¹ Mano Yutaka (2020), an educational sociologist who worked as an openly gay public school teacher in the 2000s and 2010s, has also challenged the Japanese heteronormative school environment. Mano currently works, however, as an associate professor and is only occasionally a guest teacher at schools. Suzuki Shigeyoshi worked as a full-time elementary school teacher in the closet from 2002 to 2016. From 2016, he has worked as an openly gay part-time teacher at an elementary school, in charge of children with special needs. He is also committed to advocating for LGBTQ+ friendly education, especially for school teachers (Okano 2016). Kunimi Ryōsuke is a well-known LGBTQ+ activist and president of an LGBTQ+ organization in Hokkaido. He teaches at a public elementary school but is in the closet in his own workplace and uses a pseudonym when he appears as a gay activist in public (Maeda and Kawamura 2021).

As the above list shows, there are almost no openly LGBTQ+ school teachers in the field of compulsory education in Japan, and it is still risky for teachers to be openly LGBTQ+ (e.g., Okano 2016). There are three main reasons for this situation in Japan: the extremely hard working conditions of school teachers; the lack of legal protection from discrimination for LGBTQ+ individuals; and political campaigns against sexuality education by religious right groups and social conservative politicians.

Japanese elementary school teachers work an average of 54.4 hours per week and middle school (i.e., junior high school) teachers work about 56 hours per week, compared to the average of 38.3 working hours for junior high school teachers in other OECD countries (OECD 2019, 143). Their working conditions are extremely demanding partly because they spend three times more time on extracurricular activities and two times more on administrative work compared to the OECD member countries' averages (OECD 2019, 62–73). This situation indicates that Japanese teachers have practically no time for other activities, including LGBTQ+ activism. The above-mentioned STN21 had to, for example, cease its activities between 2010 and 2015 because its main members became too busy with their work commitments (Dohi 2018, 4).

In addition, the lack of legal protection renders openly LGBTQ+ teachers more vulnerable in school. As Japan has no human rights protection law or

¹ STN21 is not an activist network but, rather, focuses on the exchange of information and organization of learning groups (Dohi 2018, 3).

anti-discrimination law that protects sexual minorities from discrimination, it is understandable that most teachers stay in the closet instead of freely expressing their sexual identities in society, including the classroom. Without any legal protection, what happens to openly LGBTQ+ teachers will completely depend on the working environment and people around them, including colleagues, parents, and students. The United Nations (UN) Working Group on Business and Human Rights (2023) recently highlighted the need for comprehensive non-discrimination legislation to effectively safeguard the rights of LGBTQI+ people in Japan. While acknowledging encouraging developments, such as the Supreme Court's 2023 ruling on restroom access for trans individuals (Saikō Saibansho 2023) and an increasing number of local governments implementing partnership systems for same-sex couples, the UN report refers to multiple instances of discrimination against LGBTQI+ persons and expressed concerns that major challenges persist (UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights 2023, 6).

Political pressure from conservative politicians in recent decades has made it even more difficult for school teachers to talk about sexual diversity in the classroom. After the Basic Law for a Gender Equal Society (1999; hereafter "the Basic Law") was passed in the Diet in 1999, anti-gender movements, the so-called *bakkurasshu* ("backlash"), which were organized by religious right groups and social conservative politicians, rapidly grew.² The long-lasting repression of comprehensive sexuality education has been negatively affecting not only Japanese children but also teachers. In a survey of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals of 2095 participants aged between 15 and 24 in 2005, 65.9% of LGBTQ+ respondents had considered suicide at least once and 14% had attempted suicide (Hidaka et al. 2008, 752). According to a survey of more than 20,000 Japanese teachers in 2019, nearly 75% of teachers answered that homosexuality should be taught in school, but only 14% of respondents said they had done so in their classroom (Hidaka 2021, 2). The survey also revealed that Japanese teachers' knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues was not accurate: 46.9% responded that individuals can choose their sexual orientation of their own will; only 35% responded that at least one child in a classroom could be a sexual minority; only 9% of teachers had experience dealing with the same-sex sexuality issues of their students; and only 20% had experience with children's gender dysphoria (Hidaka 2021). The survey indicates that LGBTQ+ issues are largely invisible in Japanese classrooms and the teachers do not have proper experience or knowledge to deal with gender and sexuality issues. According to Mano (2020, 30–34, 52–57, 167–182), the heteronormative school environment makes the space of compulsory education unpleasant or even unbearable for

² For more on the historical developments of Japanese sex education, see Henninger and Kobayashi (2023). For Japanese backlash movements, see Kawasaki (2023) and Yamaguchi (2014).

gender and sexual minorities. While there are some positive developments in sex education (Hinninger and Kobayashi 2023), in general the second Abe administration (2012–2020) obstructed Japanese education from the inclusive education suggested by UNESCO, which embraces diversity and promotes the creation of an educational space where all students, including LGBTQ+ children, can participate in school activities as they are. This is also the time period in which most of our interviewees were working at Japanese schools.

2.2 The JET Programme and LGBTQ+ teachers

The JET Programme started in 1987 to cultivate grass-roots international exchanges in Japan and promote internationalization at the local level.³ It aims to help Japanese pupils and students learn English at school and change Japanese people's attitudes toward other cultures by encouraging grassroots international interactions (CLAIR 2023a). Prior to its launch, only 235 US advisors worked in the field of English-language education in the Japanese education system (Sonoda 2021, 53). Since its inception, however, the JET Programme has accepted thousands of college graduates from overseas, mostly from English-speaking countries, every year as ALTs, who enhance intercultural exchange at public elementary and secondary schools, as well as assistants for cultural exchanges in local government offices across the country (CLAIR 2023b). Japanese officials proclaimed it as "the greatest initiative undertaken since World War II related to the field of human and cultural relations" (cited in McConnell 2000, x).

Although the JET Programme is often regarded as an educational initiative for improving children's English-language skills (Naka 2006), several research studies show that its initiation stemmed from a political (diplomatic) decision rather than educational necessity (McConnell 2000; Tsuido 2007; Metzgar 2017). As a result, some Japanese teachers of English described it with the metaphor of US "Black Ships" (Otani 2007, 106), which refers to the historic arrival of the US Navy warships in Edo Bay (i.e., present-day Tokyo Bay) in 1853, that triggered the opening of Japan's ports in the nineteenth century. The Black Ships now symbolize the inevitable social changes triggered by Western pressures. Regardless of the relative importance of the objectives—be it the "internationalization" of local communities, foreign language education, or public diplomacy—the program has been designed on three premises, namely the homogeneity of local Japanese communities, the possibility of "internationalization" through personal interaction, and the position of JET teachers as "outsiders." In other words, JET participants have been expected to bring new "international" perspectives into seemingly homogeneous local

³ For more information about the JET Programme, such as organizational structures and involved ministries, see McConnell (2000) and Naka (2006).

communities. However, while previous research on the JET Programme (e.g., McConnell 2000; Rosati 2005; Metzgar 2017) aimed to investigate the social impact of the JET Programme and mainly focused on the differences between languages and cultures, the question of how individual attributes, such as gender, sexuality, race, disability, and personal appearance, can condition social interactions needs to be explored in more detail. According to Sonoda (2021), JET teachers' contracts can be renewed every year for up to five years, and it is impossible for them to settle permanently in Japan, no matter how skilled they are in teaching or how much they wish to settle into a local community, as the program is not designed to accept permanent settlers but to welcome temporary "guests/outside" (Sonoda 2021, 55). While this premise may fit many JET participants' needs, the conditions of the program indicate that the program itself is based on the Japanese-foreigner binary and does not intend to change the so-called homogeneity of Japanese society.

This simplified binary has also disguised the diverse backgrounds of the JET participants. Sexuality issues, for example, have been a cause of woe between Japanese officials and JET participants since the beginning of the program. In 1988, one year after the launch of the program, lesbian and gay participants established a peer-support organization ATAGO. In those pre-Internet times, the organization offered a newsletter, a couch-surfing directory, telephone counseling, and mentoring for LGBTQ+ participants (Stonewall Japan 2022). According to the support group GayJet, organized by LGBTQ+ JET participants in 1994, Japanese officials were censoring their activities, such as the public use of the group name GayJet in publication, and "discriminating against LGBT+ voices" (Stonewall Japan 2022). In 1995, after almost one year of negotiations, the facilitator organization of the JET Programme, the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), recognized them as a special interest group but forced them to change their name to "Stonewall Japan." This is because CLAIR itself was threatened that the government would "retract funding and benevolence, if the use of the word 'gay' was included in its associated publications" (Stonewall Japan 2022).

This historical background demonstrates that LGBTQ+ JET participants have been fighting for their existence since the program's inception, while Japanese officials have sought to repress and deny their voices and visibility. Stonewall Japan is one of the groundbreaking organizations for LGBTQ+ movements in Japan, as one of the earliest LGBTQ+ groups in the public sector/public education, which is still active today. The "repression" of gender and sexuality issues by Japanese officials have affected JET participants negatively. Those who work in rural areas face additional challenges, as they have limited access to LGBTQ+ communities and support in English. The following sections explore how the personal attributes of LGBTQ+ identifying JET teachers—especially gender, sexuality, and race—have

affected their experience and communications with students and teachers in rural Japan.

3. Intersectionality as a concept and research method

To investigate the heterogeneous experience of LGBTQ+ JET teachers, this paper applies the notion of intersectionality. Originally proposed by Black feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality indicates multi-axial oppressions, especially the complexity of social marginalization by gender, race, and class. Since then, intersectionality has been adopted in various disciplines and has contributed to the examination of the complexity of social oppressions that cause the different experiences of people in society (Carasthathis 2016). As the list of social factors of marginalization is long and human experience is very complex, it is difficult to construct a clear definition of intersectionality. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016, 25), Black feminist theorists and sociologists, simply define intersectionality as “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience” and note that the following theoretical frames can be relevant to the concept of intersectionality: inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice.

In the field of educational science, researchers are also calling for more studies from an intersectional perspective, since it helps us investigate people's everyday life experiences within and outside pedagogical institutions (e.g., Machold and Bak 2022). In Germany, for example, there have been several studies in the field of social work and social pedagogy (e.g., Riegel 2018). In special needs education and inclusive education (Walgenbach 2015), as well as intercultural education (Konz 2022), intersectional perspectives are adopted to investigate discrimination in educational practices, partially triggered by the increasing number of immigrants in Germany. Conversely, there are only a few examples of intersectional research on sexuality. In their study on sexual minorities in the German educational system, Hartmann, Busche, and Bayramoğlu (2021) criticized, for example, that immigrants are regarded by social workers as well as policymakers as a conservative, hetero-normative, and patriarchal group of people and that the voices of queer immigrants are routinely ignored. In Japan, thus far, very little educational research has been carried out focusing on intersectionality (e.g., Taga 2022).

It is also important to avoid oversimplifying intersectionality—presuming the integrity of categories of axes of social oppressions, such as race and gender, and treating them as additive factors—as one may fail to grasp the unique experiences of individuals and the complex mechanism of oppression behind them (Carasthathis 2016, 49–62). Instead, Carasthathis (2016, 59) proposed intersectionality as a research method that “may capture the irreducibility of experience to any

single category by using multiple categories of analysis, even if these are distinguished categorially from one another.” Therefore, for this study, we consider the complexity, irreducibility, and particularity of experience, rather than presuming the integrity and separable attribution of social categories. As the LGBTQ+ JET teachers that we interviewed moved across borders—between their home countries and Japan, as well as between urban and rural areas—the transformative natures of social categories are essential for understanding their experience.

Winkler and Degele (2009, 15) suggest the method of “intersectional multilevel analysis” (*intersektionale Mehrebenenanalyse*), which analyzes interview materials on three levels—social structure, social norms, and everyday practices—and investigates the interdependency between them. They also underline the importance of considering aspects of identity construction and symbolic representation in this analysis (Winkler and Degele 2011, 54). In this paper, we mainly focus on the Japanese social structures (working conditions, law, sexuality, race, and region) in which LGBTQ+ JET teachers are embedded, while also considering social norms and identity constructions.

4. Intersectionality and the experiences of LGBTQ+ JET teachers in Japan

In this section, we analyze LGBTQ+ JET teachers’ narratives and experience by focusing on three intersections. First, we will focus on the intersection between sexuality and nationality (Japanese/non-Japanese or “insider”/“outsider”) and contrast the experiences of LGBTQ+ JET teachers and those of Japanese teachers. We will consequently investigate the intersection between sexuality, gender, and race by highlighting the heterogeneity of experiences among LGBTQ+ JET teachers. Finally, we will discuss the intersection of nationality, sexuality, and regionality, since many JET teachers are sent to rural (*inaka*) and regional areas (*chihō*), far from the metropolitan areas where many LGBTQ+ and foreigners’ communities are accessible. By doing so, we aim to shed light on the processes by which intersections of social factors shape the experiences of LGBTQ+ JET teachers. It should also be mentioned here that the analytical category of “race” in this study is a result of our inductive coding. Our questionnaire did not include questions specifically related to race.

For this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews from March 2021 to July 2022 with five current and former JET teachers who self-identify as LGBTQ+ as well as one Japanese ex-teacher who has experience working as openly gay teacher in Japanese junior high schools. We approached our JET interviewees through Stonewall Japan, the peer support group for LGBTQ+ JET participants. Virtual interviews were used due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Before the

interview, the interviewees were informed of the research objectives, the questionnaire, and how the interview records would be used. Written consent was then obtained and the interview was audio-recorded with the interviewee's permission. All the interviews with the JET teachers were conducted in English, transcribed, and examined by qualitative content analysis.

The interviewees (with details of their JET Programme participation provided in the brackets) included:

- (A) a white gay man from the US (2001–2003, Tōhoku area);
- (B) a Black gay man from the US (2014–2016, Chūbu area);
- (C) a lesbian Hispanic woman who used to identify herself as a trans man from the US (2016–2018, Chūgoku area);
- (D) a nonbinary white person from Canada (2019–, Kinki area); and
- (E) a queer Japanese American woman from the US (2019–, Kantō area).

All of them work(ed) in the rural area outside Tokyo or Osaka. Interviewee (F) was a Japanese openly gay man who worked as a full-time teacher (2008–2014, Chūgoku and Kyūshū area). The interview with him was conducted in Japanese and all quotations from the interview have been translated by the authors.

4.1 The intersection between sexuality, gender, and “insider”/“outsider”

JET teachers are generally seen as “outsiders” and “temporary guests.” At the same time, they are given more freedom than Japanese teachers based on the expectation of “cultural differences.” Interviewee (A) described the different expectations as follows:

As foreigners, we're a little bit separate from that because there aren't, I think, as many rules or expectations for how the Japanese should react to the crazy things that foreigners say because we do crazy things all the time. And so, I suspect, there's a bit more freedom for a person. A Japanese person [would] perhaps have a bit more of a genuine reaction to a foreigner saying that they're gay rather than another Japanese person saying they're gay.

In general, there are more detailed expectations toward Japanese teachers, especially for providing good lessons and well-mannered behaviors based on Japanese social rules. Interviewee (F), a Japanese gay man who worked as a junior high school teacher, mentioned that he faced uncooperative behaviors from his colleagues when he tried to include LGBTQ+ topics in his teaching. He was told that he should only try something “new,” once he is able to give “good” lessons without clearly defining what that meant. He also recalled that when working at a school in the countryside he was prevented from coming out by the principal. The JET interviewees in our study did not experience similar interventions from

their colleagues. It should also be considered that gender norms are differently constructed in each culture. Thus, this section will first discuss how different expectations toward Japanese teachers, who usually have long-term contracts, compared to non-Japanese teachers who have temporary contracts, can influence LGBTQ+ identifying individuals' experience in schools. By doing so, we will explore how nationalities or "insider"/"outsider" distinctions interact with sexuality/gender and shape the experiences of JET teachers.

As mentioned earlier, there are no laws that specifically protect residents in Japan from discrimination based on sex, race, and sexuality. The latest guidance for JET participants also clearly warns them of the possibilities of discrimination caused by being openly LGBTQ+ in Japan (CLAIR 2023a, 145). As ALTs, JET teachers are expected to follow the Japanese teachers' guidance. All schools in Japan must follow the teaching guidelines issued by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT), and all Japanese schools, including private schools, may only use MEXT-approved textbooks whose content has been verified. In this context, ALTs are not authorized to create their own lessons either. The guidance for JET participants strongly encourages them to follow Japanese social rules and customs (CLAIR 2013, 8–11) and, quoting the comments of a former JET teacher, it underlines that their primary mission is not to "internationalize Japanese people," as the official objective claims, but rather to accustom themselves to the Japanese school system.

I thought the JET Programme was all about internationalization and I could not reconcile my school's underuse of me with my own lofty ideals of how to make Japan international. [...] Gradually, however, I came to a more realistic view of my work. I realized that I could not be a crusader for international understanding; that I had a lot to learn myself about foreign cultures before I was in any position to be teaching others. (CLAIR 2013, 35)

Interviewee (A) also affirmed that his JET Programme instructor told him that JET teachers were not expected to intervene in the curriculum and they should not try to "influence" children:

What he was saying was, we shouldn't be putting our expectations, our mindset, our culture into Japan. That's not our job. Our job is not to change Japan. Our job is not to make Japan more Western or more American or more anything. If anything, our job is to adapt to this country that we are in. And yes, of course we are expected to be cultural ambassadors and share things from our country but that's very different than trying to change people. [...] So, certainly at that time, for me to even think about "Hey, let's put a gay topic into a lesson," I would have

felt, that would come across as me imposing an American mindset into a Japanese educational system and that wasn't my job.

One study found that a common source of culture shock experienced by ALTs in Japan is the hierarchical structure of schools and formality (Otani 2007, 108–109). The inflexibility of the Japanese education system creates little room for JET teachers to express their identities, especially if they are from minority backgrounds. None of our JET interviewees openly revealed their gender and sexual identities in Japanese schools, although they had been openly LGBTQ+ before they arrived in Japan. Some of them had studied LGBTQ+ history at universities and even been involved in LGBTQ+ activism. They all told us, however, that they were in the closet or at least did not actively come out to their colleagues in Japanese schools in order to avoid additional problems that might result. They related that their colleagues and students did not usually ask about private details, and therefore they could be easily in the closet if they wanted. Nevertheless, some of them tried to tackle the existing gender and sexuality norms and made LGBTQ+ issues visible through their work. As a result, they created opportunities to raise the awareness of the staff and students of the dominant heteronormativity at school.⁴

Interviewee (C), who used to identify as a trans man before coming to Japan, did not, for example, openly show their gender identity in their school. They even changed their appearance to fit into the Japanese gender norm. They mentioned LGBTQ+ issues in their classes, however, and distributed English newspapers, in which LGBTQ+ related news was arranged alongside other topics, such as international economics and sports. Some of our interviewees also related that they intentionally avoided reproducing gender stereotypes in the classroom. As Japanese textbook studies show, Japanese schoolbooks, including English textbooks, contain numerous gender-biased sentences (Ishikawa 2020; Mizusawa 2022). Interviewee (D), who identifies as non-binary, did not verbally come out in the school, and did not include topics of sexual minorities in their classroom. Yet, they intentionally changed their worksheets to avoid gender stereotypes:

But when it comes to, like, making worksheets and stuff at, like, the elementary school level, when we start learning about he and she, like, he is a doctor, she is a nurse, I intentionally made worksheets that change what, like, the generic gender roles would be.

It is interesting to observe that Interviewee (D) did not try to “internationalize” or change the mindset of the Japanese teachers. They restrained from mentioning the idea of nonbinary and only mentioned what is possible for women in their country. At the same time, the changes to the worksheets seem to have confused

⁴ For details, see Kawasaki and Kobayashi (2023).

the Japanese teachers and might have created an opportunity for them to rethink their gender norms. Moreover, the fact that Interviewee (D) taught English wearing men's suits might have made their colleagues associate them with an LGBTQ+ identity. According to Interviewee (D), after a presentation about LGBTQ+ identity and sexuality provided by their Japanese colleague in their junior high school, they talked with a Japanese teacher. Although she did not have a good command of English, she tried to explain what was going on, and seems to have tried to show her support:

And after she was done talking, she, like, looked me in the eyes and she was like, "If you need someone to talk to, I'm here." So I was like, "OK."
laughs

These cases show that the LGBTQ+ JET teachers only reported what is/was going on in their country and, following the JET guidelines, tried not to change or "internationalize" Japanese people. At the same time, despite the fact that they were treated as an "outsider" or a "guest"—or perhaps precisely because of it—they carefully chose small spaces where they could talk about gender and sexuality issues without breaching the JET guidelines. In this sense, although the LGBTQ+ JET teachers faced difficulties, such as they may feel a pressure to change their appearance⁵ in Japanese schools, and officially possess less authority over school activities than Japanese teachers, they seem to find opportunities to challenge the existing gender and sexuality norms, perhaps more than Japanese LGBTQ+ teachers have.

4.2 The intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender

In the first section, we discussed how "insider"/"outsider" (nationality) and queerness shaped the experiences of LGBTQ+ JET teachers. In this section we will explore how race/ethnicity and sexuality interact in this field. Racism functions in different ways depending on social and historical contexts. A Japanese American or Japanese Brazilian might pass, for example, as a Japanese local in appearance, but this fact does not necessarily mean that they can be free from Japanese racism against other Asians or foreigners. Conversely, the LGBTQ+ teachers who embody non-conforming genders found it harder to stay in the closet in the conservative working environment. As a result, Interviewee (C) chose to change their outlook and followed the gender code for Japanese school teachers. JET participants are advised by the program to follow a conservative dress code to make a good impression in their workplaces. The following suggestion of the JET Programme indicates that the existence of LGBTQ+ teachers is neither expected nor respected:

⁵ For details, see Kawasaka and Kobayashi (2023).

Making a good first impression is very important in Japanese society. The best way to achieve this at your workplace is to be as conservative as possible for the first few weeks, no matter how hot and humid it is. (CLAIR 2013, 8)

Although there are no official rules forbidding JET teachers to express their gender and sexual identities, two of our interviewees who identified themselves as non-binary/trans when they were JET teachers, were forced to negotiate with social norms in school, including gender codes.

Interviewee (C) who had identified themselves as a trans man before they came to Japan, even changed their own gender perspective and identity since they did not want to add stress to the new situation by being a non-feminine “woman” in the countryside, as it was already tough enough for them to be non-white, single, and “woman”:

For women, right, like, I am a lot more feminine now than I was before I came to Japan. In part, because, like, so actually in college for a while, I identified as a trans man. And then, when I came to Japan, like, obviously I couldn't, you know, be like, “Hey, actually, I'm a dude.” *laughs* But I no longer identify as that but, you know, especially because I was in the countryside and, like, I didn't look white, I wasn't white, I wasn't married, there were all these things that, like, I was, that they weren't really wanting me to be and I didn't want to, like, further, I guess, add stress to the situation by being, like, a non-feminine woman.

To avoid unexpected trouble, Interviewee (C) tried to follow Japanese gender norms especially about their appearance, such as growing their hair longer and removing body hair after one student had pointed out their arm hair and said, “Oh, you have hair, that's weird.” Such everyday gender norms made Interviewee (C) think there was “something wrong” with them and it affected their mental health and self-image. This case shows how the Japanese school environment can be based on homogeneous body images and repress the non-conforming gender expressions of individuals. At the same time, we should also pay attention to Interviewee (C)'s remark “I didn't look white, I wasn't white” as another factor that contributed to why they started to change their gender expression to adjust to their environment, that is, not only their gender identity as a trans man but also the fact that they were not white. Their experience was not only caused by the (trans) gender issue alone, but rather by the intersection of race, gender, cultural norms on body images, and their working status as an ALT. Interviewee (C)'s gender identity conflicted with their students' internalization of the aesthetic of a female body. Although the teacher officially possessed more authority in the classroom, we would argue that the self-consciousness of Interviewee (C), being a non-white and trans person who would, they think, rather be unwelcome as a JET teacher

in the Japanese school, made the students' gaze more authoritative than theirs, reversing the common power dynamic between teachers and students.

The above narrative stands in contrast to the case of Interviewee (D), who identifies themselves as nonbinary, but neither changed their outlook nor felt less welcome due to their skin color:

I'm wearing like men's suits and men's dress shirts and it's just never been a problem [...]. Yeah, from the first day of coming to work, I've just kind of presented myself, who I am ... I am very white looking, white presenting. [...] I've never felt like anyone was like, "Oh, you're not white enough to be an ALT" or "You're not blue-eyed, blond-haired, English enough." I've never had that problem.

Although there is no official survey of JET participants relating to race, white participants have constituted the majority. The precondition of the JET Programme that candidates must have at least a bachelor's degree probably resulted in this racial imbalance, especially in the early stages of the program. As Japanese law does not prohibit discrimination based on race, JET participants of color can experience racism in Japan. The JET guidebook warns participants that those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds may experience discrimination, such as refusal of service and microaggressions of varying severities (CLAIR 2023a, 143). Interviewee (C) believed that race, for example, was a major factor that created a barrier between them and their colleagues in school as well as with people in their town.

The other JETs in the area were all, like, you know, blue-eyed blonde and everyone was very friendly with them. [...] But I would, like, go to a café with my friend who was Black and they would look at her like, "What, what is this?" You know... And that's, like, not something that I can talk to my coworkers about at all, but also wasn't something that I can talk about with my, like, JET peers, because they were all white.

The case of Interviewee (E), a queer Japanese American woman, shows that the factor of race not only triggers discrimination but also confusion, since many people in Japan are unaware of race issues or the heterogeneities within an ethnic group. While expecting that white teachers would come to their schools, they assumed that one who looks Japanese should be able to speak Japanese:

So, in terms of, like, race issues, I guess ... for, in my experience, people tend to be a little confused because I look like I fit in but then I don't speak Japanese very well and ... yeah, I, I'm not from here. [...] So ... for me, growing up in America, I'm very, very aware of race but then coming to Japan, I feel like people don't talk about it so much or they don't feel they have to talk about it. [...] I think that it is becoming more diverse than

before ... even, so there's always just that impression that if you're from America, you're going to be a white American, ... they don't really expect you to not be white maybe.

Interviewee (B), an African American gay man, also recalled "racism" in Japan. At the same time, however, he said it was difficult to distinguish whether it was simply xenophobia or racism. Although he was sometimes treated differently from his white coworkers in Japan, he thought the level of racism was not the same as that in the US. In most cases, Interviewee (B) perceived this behavior as due to his being a foreigner, rather than being Black:

Sometimes people just don't like foreigners, but, you know, there were some instances where I felt there was specifically because I was Black, you know, because I would be treated differently from, say, like, a white teacher, there was a difference, even among the Japanese community, so ... although I would sometimes be treated different from other, you know, white foreigners in Japan, ... I felt more racism from others in the United States than Japan. Because in Japan, it was mostly about being a foreigner, you know, it's not necessarily about being Black, so that's another major difference, I think.

It should also be mentioned here that race does not always cause a negative experience for LGBTQ+ teachers. For example, Interviewee (B), although he was in the closet in his schools, showed a picture of the Gay Pride parade and referred to gay rights movements when he was asked to offer a lesson about the history of racism and civil rights movements in the US for an English class. A Japanese teacher, who had not expected that he would refer to gay rights as part of the civil rights movement, seemed to have been "shocked" and "surprised" (Kawasaki and Kobayashi 2023, 155–156). This incident seems to have made LGBTQ+ rights, which had been completely invisible in the English class, visible, rather than causing discriminatory behaviors among his colleagues and students. Assuming that he was asked to talk about the civil rights movements because he is African American, we would argue that one should not overlook that the factor of race can also create a small space in which gay rights movements can be visualized in a classroom.

We also underline that race can be a factor that divides JET teachers of color from white JET teachers, even within the LGBTQ+ community. Interviewee (B) recalled that it was difficult for him to talk about intersectional problems for LGBTQ+ people of color with others in Stonewall Japan, even though Stonewall Japan was a peer support group for LGBTQ+ JET participants. According to him, many white LGBTQ+ JET participants in Stonewall Japan were not comfortable talking about racism, because they saw the LGBTQ+ peer support group as "a place to only talk about LGBT issues" and to talk about racism would cause "a lot of negative emotions":

At the time, my experience was a lot of the teachers were not familiar with talking about racism, so it made it kind of isolating, even though it was a group that, you know, I was able to connect with due to, you know, being queer.

Furthermore, Interviewee (B) observed that attitudes toward coming out in school were different between white people and others.

I think especially one thing I remember is that a lot of the white teachers felt very comfortable coming out at school in Japan. [...] Even though, you know, they may not accept it, this is how I live my life, and, you know, I want to be open with everyone, and I think part of that comes with a little bit of privilege, like, they kind of ... they don't feel as vulnerable, you know, they kind of feel like, [...] "Oh, I will be protected somehow if I come out, it's OK." But I think my experience with especially talking to other queer teachers of color in Japan was that we didn't feel the same way, we didn't feel like it was as easy to come out, and I think race had something to do with it.

This resonates with the narrative of Interviewee (C), who chose not to come out as a trans man as it was already tough enough for them to be non-white, single, and a "woman." As mentioned earlier, none of our JET interviewees openly showed their gender and sexual identities in Japanese schools, regardless of their skin color. We observed, however, small differences between white interviewees and those of color. For example, unlike the interviewees of color, Interviewee (D), who describes herself as non-binary and "very white looking" mentioned that they would have openly spoken about their relationship if somebody had asked.

What became noticeable after analyzing these narratives is that the interviewees of color often related their experiences with their race/ethnicity, which was not the case for white interviewees. These different narratives indicate how race interacts with their gender and sexualities and shape their experiences and relationships in Japan. In many cases, the intersection of being non-white and being a gender and sexual minority made their everyday life in Japan more complex and challenging.

4.3 The intersection of sexuality, "outsider," and regionality

The everyday life experience of LGBTQ+ people can be different between urban and rural areas even within the same country. Thus, in this section, we will discuss how space, especially the characteristics of rural and regional areas interacted with factors such as (trans)gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationality (being a foreigner/"outsider"), and how this intersectionality shaped their experiences as a JET teacher.

In the field of feminist geography, scholars have attempted to theoretically incorporate a concept of intersectionality for exploring the relationship between space and power (Valentine 2008; Yoshida, Murata, and Kageyama 2013; Hopkins 2019; Sircar 2021). With respect to space, queer gender, and sexuality, queer theorists have long criticized the rural/urban binary and metrocentric premises both in LGBTQ+ activism and queer studies. Jack Halberstam, a queer and trans theorist, confesses their own urban bias that mostly white, nonurban constituencies are essentially a racist or bigoted place. They propose the term “metronormativity,” which conveys the idea that queer identity is inseparable from an urban life (Halberstam 2005, 36). The term suggests that widely shared coming out narratives rely on the geographical transition from being in the closet in a rural area to an openly LGBTQ+ identifying person in an urban setting, which enables queer subjects to enjoy their full gender and sexual self. According to Halberstam (2005, 36–37), metronormativity indicates that queer visibility is tied to the urban setting and the rural is devalued as “backwards” in contrast with the “progressive” urban areas—in such a rural/urban binary framework, queer and non-normative subjects in rural areas remain unrecognizable and politically ignorable compared to urban lives and activism.

Japanese LGBTQ+ activism and studies have similar urban-centric premises, as Japan is culturally, politically, economically, and demographically centralized in metropolitan areas, such as Greater Tokyo (the center of eastern Japan) and Keihanshin (the center of western Japan). Challenging this rural/urban binary, Sugiura Ikuko and Maekawa Naoya (2022) studied LGBTQ+ activism in northeastern Japan (Tōhoku region) and examined the metronormative assumptions of LGBTQ+ lives, including the rural area’s “conservatism” and the celebration of LGBTQ+ visibility, as well as active movements in metropolis. Based on interviews with LGBTQ+ activists in northeastern Japan, they pose a new explanation about metrocentric LGBTQ+ visibility and activism in Japan, without devaluing rural areas. They claim that we should pay attention to LGBTQ+ activism in the countryside, which focuses on building a safe local community, rather than the visibility that has been associated with metrocentric, progressive narratives. As LGBTQ+ visibility and commitment to “progressive” movements are possible by moving out from their home and family, it is important to assess activities that create a safer space for local LGBTQ+ people in the closet who stay closer to their family.

Sugiura and Maekawa’s (2022) research on regionally diverse LGBTQ+ activism and criticisms of metro-centric LGBTQ+ visibility is groundbreaking, especially because they propose a new theoretical view for the relationship between human migration and LGBTQ+ activism in Japan rather than the rural/urban binary. From the viewpoint of our study, however, their research is still limited to

Japanese LGBTQ+ people in a nonmetropolitan setting and does not pay enough attention to the diversity of LGBTQ+ identifying people in the rural areas. Our JET interviewees experienced a need to change their gender expression and sexual lives in the rural areas where they worked. While a popular queer-liberating narrative shows the transition from being in the closet in a rural area to being openly LGBTQ+ identifying individuals in a metropolis, the narrative of the LGBTQ+ JET teachers show rather a reverse transition—from being an openly LGBTQ+ identifying young college student to being in the closet in a new place as an inexperienced school teacher. Furthermore, some of our interviewees are not the white people with whom Japanese in rural areas still stereotypically associate guests from the “West.” Such racial stereotypes and expectations in rural areas can also influence the experiences of JET participants. Our study indicates that factors of (trans)gender, sexuality, race, and being non-Japanese are uniquely intertwined with the regionalities of rural Japan.

The LGBTQ+ groups in Japanese rural areas carefully control information about their members and exclude undesirable members in order to protect the privacy of their local LGBTQ+ members in the closet. At the same time, this strategy makes it very difficult for LGBTQ+ newcomers and foreigners to access such safe spaces as they are deliberately designed so that straight locals cannot find them. Interviewee (A), a white gay male American, has long lived in the Tōhoku area, the site of Sugiura and Maekawa’s (2022) extensive study, since his participation in the JET Programme (2001–2003). From his experience, access to the local LGBTQ+ community has long been a challenge, especially when Internet communities and online information were not as common as they are now. Interviewee (A) recalled his struggles in the early 2000s to find a hidden gay (commercial) community in a local Japanese city and referred to “coming in”:

The challenges of being a foreigner. I spoke very little Japanese, had a little electronic dictionary that I could tap into and use to help communicate. But I, through persistence and stubbornness, I guess, I eventually found other bars and I found a bookstore in Sendai and connected to the bookstore [which] was a *hatten* [gay cruising] that I experienced and that was kind of how I got into that world. I’ve since read that in Japan, rather than the sense of coming out, there is the sense of coming in, meaning, you find this group that you can relate to and connect to whether it’s through a bar or sauna or something like that.

About 15 years later, Interviewee (C) also experienced a similar hardship in western Japan:

I think it wasn’t that there wasn’t community in [my prefecture], it’s just, it’s much harder to find or to enter, especially as a non-Japanese person.

Interviewee (C) related that they tried to build a safer community for LGBTQ+ people with whom they contacted online. It was impossible, however, to meet them in person as many local LGBTQ+ people were scared of the risk of outing. Interviewee (C) tried to meet them somewhere safer, but the distance from their hometown made it very difficult, since they did not own a car at the time, which is not uncommon for JET teachers:

Social community building kind of thing, you can, like, set up a group and say, "OK, we'll meet, like, once a month and we can discuss this or we'll go mountain climbing," things like that. And so, I tried to set up one for, like, LGBT in [my prefecture] and I actually got a few, like, interested responses. And people wanted to, like, kind of meet up, but it never happened, in part because, like, if we were trying to organize an actual date, it was, like, I think it's ... whoever contacted didn't actually, you know, want to, like, meet in person, just because it was a risk. I think that was one reason why, and I think also, like, for me, like, logistically, I couldn't go to the places where it might have been better for people to meet because I didn't have a car.

The study of Sugiura and Maekawa (2022) shows that local Japanese LGBTQ+ activists also face similar difficulties. However, while the majority of locals own a car, as it is an essential mean of transportation in rural areas, the majority of JET teachers, who only have temporary contracts, do not. As a result, Interviewee (C) began to travel frequently to the closest larger city at the weekend to access a LGBTQ+ community which was already established by LGBTQ+ foreigners. According to Interviewee (C), they spent most of the money they had earned traveling to the larger city and meeting LGBTQ+ friends there.

Race issues also appear differently in rural areas, which consist of small communities where rumors circulate quickly. As non-Japanese residents are rarer there, the gaze toward them, especially if they do not look stereotypically Asian, becomes an obstruction for them. As mentioned earlier, Interviewee (B) suggested that Japanese racism could be different from that observed in the US and sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between racism and xenophobia. Although it is arguable how far racism is rooted in Japanese society and its social effects, the gaze toward "outsiders" unequivocally exists and can affect foreigners and racial Others. Interviewee (C) related a story about going out to a café with their friend who was Black and the attention and gaze they received from other customers. Interviewee (C) added that such attention could be continuous and become a rumor in a small community:

Some of my Black coworkers got, like, horrible things done to them. [...] One of my friends drove a car, I think, just to go to the movie theater or

something. And then for, like, two weeks after, like, all the townspeople were like, "Oh my God, like, did you see that?"

This episode suggests that day-to-day othering gaze and microaggressions can affect the quality of life of JET participants, especially those of color in rural areas, since rumors circulate quickly and easily in small communities. Sugiura and Maekawa (2022) also argue that the anxiety over local rumors is one of the main obstacles for LGBTQ+ activism and community building in the countryside. If rumors in the countryside unsettle racial Others and Japanese LGBTQ+ people, it is plausible that such rumors also unsettle LGBTQ+ foreigners.

These narratives indicate that the fact of being in a rural area intertwines with other factors, such as nationality ("outsiders"), race, and sexuality, and shape the everyday experiences of individuals. The characteristics of rural areas are not limited to geographical features, such as distance from urban areas, smaller population, and a homogeneous demography, but also related to characteristics of human relations and communities, including factors such as the lack of visible LGBTQ+ and/or foreigners' communities, and the othering gaze and easily circulating rumors by local inhabitants. Thus, the regionality and community-based environment should be also considered if we investigate experiences of people caused by intersectionality.

5. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the experiences of LGBTQ+ JET teachers from intersectional perspectives. By investigating the intersections among nationality, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and regionality, the following points became clear. First, being from overseas with temporary contracts, officially JET teachers possess less authority over school activities. Compared to Japanese LGBTQ+ teachers, however, they seem to have more opportunities to tackle the existing gender and sexuality norms by carefully choosing small spaces where they can discuss this topic without explicitly opposing the existing school norms. Second, after analyzing the narratives of the interviewees of color, it became clear that race interacts with their sexualities and gender expressions, and shapes their experiences and relationships. In many cases, the intersection of being non-white and being a sexual minority made their everyday life in Japan more complex and challenging. Third, by contrasting Japanese LGBTQ+ activism in rural areas and the experiences of the LGBTQ+ JET teachers, it became clear that the characteristics of rural areas—such as limited means of transportation, lack of LGBTQ+ communities, the othering gaze, and rumors—also intertwines with other factors such as nationality, race, and sexuality, and shapes the everyday experience of individuals. These intersectional factors and LGBTQ+ JET teachers' experience were widely ignored in previous

studies although the JET Programme is an important component of Japanese education, especially for promoting internationalization and diversity policies in Japan. Thus, we call for more research from an intersectional perspective for understanding the diverse experiences of teachers with marginalized and minority backgrounds and the structural problems of Japanese schools.

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PART II

GENDERED
VIOLENCE, ACTIVISM,
AND RIGHTS

“QUEERING MISOGYNY” IN THE CONTEXT OF MARRIAGE EQUALITY: A PROPOSED APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING AND RESISTING NECROPOLITICS AND EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND LGBTQINA+ PERSONS IN THAILAND

Verita Sriratana

Thailand is not the “queer h(e)aven” imagined by many. Under Prayut Chan-o-cha’s regime, LGBTQINA+ rights activists were arrested for participating in peaceful protests under the Emergency Decree imposed on March 26, 2020, which was extended nineteen times until October 1, 2022. The 2021 Constitutional Court ruling against marriage equality reveals that misogyny is the backbone of discrimination, necropolitics, and epistemic violence against women and LGBTQINA+ persons. A queer feminist/feminist queer framework, this research contends, can demonstrate how misogyny is transposed to the realm of anti-LGBTQINA+ discourses. At the time when this chapter was revised (between August 2023 and March 2024), the parliament elected Srettha Thavisin of the Pheu Thai party as Thailand’s 30th Prime Minister, ending Prayut’s regime and three months of political deadlock where the Move Forward Party’s Prime Minister candidate was blocked by the junta-appointed senate. In December 2023, four draft bills on same-sex marriage were passed in their first reading, leading to the formation of a committee to merge and consolidate the four bills into one for further debate and votes during the year 2024. The parliament’s recent rejection of the Act on Gender Recognition, Title, and Protection of Gender Diversity, proposed by the Move Forward Party, can be seen as a setback to Thailand’s marriage equality prospects, which remain uncertain under the new coalition government formed with the junta allies.

Keywords: epistemic violence, marriage equality, misogyny, necropolitics, Thailand

1. Introduction: Go Thai. Be Unfree. (under Prayut Chan-o-cha's regime)¹

In January 2020, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) launched a website as part of the LGBTQINA+ travel marketing outreach called #GoThaiBeFree. TAT posted a series of five video clips on social media showcasing LGBTQINA+ couples enjoying the best that Thai tourism has to offer: exquisite food, elephant sanctuaries, beautiful temples, fancy hotels, exotic markets, pristine beaches, and luxurious rooftop pools. The majority of the LGBTQINA+ people depicted in the videos are non-Thais who are of a certain privileged class and wealth (Go Thai Be Free 2019). "Pink baht" is clearly the agenda, embraced by some and skeptically questioned by many like Shane Bhatla, who—as early as the start of the campaign—commented: "But I think they need to look internally: what are their own citizens struggling with?" (Howell 2019). Although the image of Thailand as queer h(e)aven for LGBTQINA+ persons may persist on the international scale, on the domestic scale, this image has been increasingly questioned and challenged.

On December 21, 2021, twenty activists were summoned to Lumpini Police Station and charged with a violation of Emergency Decree after participating in the marriage equality rally of November 28, 2021 (Prachatai English 2021). The Emergency Decree, which was imposed throughout the country on March 26, 2020, has—until October 1, 2022—been extended nineteen times (KomChadLuek 2022). It was perceived to have been hijacked and misused by Prayut Chan-o-cha's government to regulate and put public gatherings under surveillance as well as arrest protesters, many of whom are students. As a political tool, this law restricts freedom of speech and expression among those who show dissent against and engage in criticism of the government. Apart from the fact that the Emergency Decree has been dispensed like a "blank check," as law enforcement officials are exempted from civil, criminal, and disciplinary accountability, it has also been a hindrance to the fight for democracy, particularly the fight for LGBTQINA+ rights. The statement made by representatives of the twenty arrested activists comprises a defiant condemnation of the Tourism Authority of Thailand's shameless exploitation of same-sex love. It is an expression of shock and dismay at the fact that taking part in a peaceful rally for marriage equality in the very country which promotes itself as equivalent to "queer h(e)aven" can be considered a crime (Matichon Online 2021).

¹ This chapter is an updated and substantially extended version of an article entitled "Thailand—A Queer H(e)aven? & 'Queering Misogyny' in the Contexts of Thai Constitutional Court Ruling against Same-Sex Marriage and the Roe v. Wade Reversal," published in *Prachatai English* on July 19, 2022 (<https://prachataienglish.com/node/9916>).

For a country regarded as “queer h(e)aven,” especially as it is one of the only nine Asian signatories to the 2011 declaration of LGBTQ rights at the UN Human Rights Council, Thailand has not succeeded in laying strong legal groundworks for LGBTQINA+ rights. To give a brief overview of the country’s gender rights landmarks, Thailand has been signatory partner of the Convention on the Political Rights of Women since 1954. The first female judge in Thailand was appointed in 1965. In 1997, the Constitution guaranteed equality between women and men, granting equal rights and legal protection to all citizens without discrimination. This was two years after the Fourth World Conference of Women in 1995, where gender mainstreaming was adopted as the main strategy and policy for promoting gender equality. In 2005, the Individual Name Act was issued, allowing women to choose their maiden name or their spouse’s surname as their family name. In 2007, the Domestic Violence Victim Protection Act B.E. 2550 provided protection for victims of domestic violence and the Criminal Code Amendment Act (No. 19), B.E. 2550 criminalized marital rape. Prior to the year 2007, according to Section 276 of the Criminal Code, Thai law provided protection only to rape victims who belonged to the category of “a woman who is not his wife” (“หญิงซึ่งมิใช่ภรรยาตน”), which explicitly excluded marital rape (iLaw 2013). In 2011, Yingluck Shinawatra was elected the 28th Prime Minister and the first female Prime Minister in Thailand’s history before being ousted in the 2014 coup d’état. Thailand introduced the Gender Equality Act in 2015 but, thus far, it has been a disappointment. While the law prohibits discrimination based on gender, the second paragraph of Section 17 (under Chapter III: Examination of Unfair Gender Discrimination) provides a catch-all exception in which gender discrimination is allowed if it is “for protecting the welfare and safety of a person or for following religious rules, or for the security of the nation” (“เพื่อคุ้มครองสวัสดิภาพและความปลอดภัย หรือการปฏิบัติตามหลักการทางศาสนา หรือเพื่อความมั่นคงของประเทศ”) (Legal Division, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security 2015). Because the Gender Equality Act is without a mandatory function, governmental departments were simply recommended to implement the Gender Equality Act. In addition, the penalties only relate to specific infringements, rather than systematic failings. This means that many departments can easily turn a blind eye to discrimination, however blatantly it violates human rights.

The shaky legal foundation upon which gender equality in Thailand stands seemed to crumble with the Constitutional Court ruling on November 17, 2021, the wording of which reflects outrageously patriarchal, deeply misogynistic, and blatantly homophobic views. This will be analyzed in the next section.

2. The "queering misogyny" approach: People's Court versus Constitutional Court

Thailand's Constitutional Court ruled that section 1448 of the Civil and Commercial Code defining marriages as only between men and women was constitutional. The ruling was the outcome of a petition filed by Permsap Sae-Ung and her partner, Puangphet Hengkham, who—having lived together for eleven years—had made earlier attempts to register for marriage, but to no avail. Extracted from the Constitutional Court ruling and accompanied by an English translation, the passages that follow reflect not only the shameless dehumanization of LGBTQINA+ persons, but also discourses of misogyny where women's sole function as well as purpose in life, specifically marriage life, is to give birth:

The purpose of marriage is for a man and a woman to cohabit as husband and wife to form a family institution, to have children and maintain the race according to nature, to inherit property and estate, and to pass on the bonds between father, mother, siblings, uncle, and aunt. Marriage between people with gender diversity may not be able to create such a delicate bond. In case the science advances and there is discovery of more details that some kind of creatures has divergent behavior or biological characteristics, it should be categorized separately for further separate study. [...]

Implication of equality between men and women is not to prescribe a law designating that men shall be women or women shall be men, because sex is divided by nature (an act of God). Sex at birth cannot be chosen. If there are some exceptions, they must be protected separately and specifically. Thus, providing equality between men and women is not to deem them the same, but to treat them correctly in accordance with their gender. In this regard, the law must acknowledge and distinguish between males and females at first in order to provide equality. For instance, women menstruate; women can be pregnant; women have bodies weaker and more delicate than men's. In view thereof, what is not the same cannot be treated the same. The correct treatment in accordance with the way of nature will provide equality between men and women, not to include people whose gender cannot be determined with clearly separate males and females. (Constitutional Court of Thailand 2021, 13–15, my emphasis)^{2,3}

² All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

³ "วัตถุประสงค์ของการสมรส คือ การที่ชายและหญิงอยู่กินกันฉันสามีภริยาเพื่อสร้างสถาบันครอบครัว มีบุตร ดำรงเผ่าพันธุ์ตามธรรมชาติ และมีการสืบทอดทรัพย์สิน มรดก มีการส่งต่อความผูกพันกันระหว่างพ่อ แม่ พี่ น้อง ลูก ป้า น้า อา ซึ่งการสมรสในระหว่างบุคคลผู้มีความหลากหลายทางเพศอาจไม่สามารถสร้างความผูกพันอันละเอียดอ่อนดังกล่าวได้ ทั้งนี้ หากวิทยาการก้าวหน้า มีการค้นพบรายละเอียดเพิ่มขึ้นว่า สัตว์โลกบางประเภทมีพฤติกรรมหรือลักษณะ

The anti-LGBTQINA+ discourses reflected in the Constitutional Court ruling correspond with the misogynist discourses propagated by then-Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's administration and circulated in the press – one of which is an example taken from a speech given by Prayut himself on International Women's Day on March 8, 2022, at the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security:

As a man, and the Minister [of Social Development and Human Security] here is also a man, [I can say that] outside the house men are so capable but in the house we're at women's mercy. They said men are like the forelegs of an elephant and women the hind legs but don't forget that when elephants fall and get stuck in a mudhole, they all reverse on hind legs. I believe that women are meticulous in their work, and they are sensible. Men and women tugging at each other would bring the kind of balance which prevents the elephant from falling. Forelegs and hind legs stepping forward together. Sometimes men wander past where they need to go because they're so hot-headed. Women are there to make our society safe just like cold water cooling down boiling hot water to lukewarm. After all, whether you are forelegs or hind legs, you are equally important. I want everyone here to be proud of yourselves because we are important to our families. (Manager Online 2022)⁴

Similar to this sexist speech, the Thai Constitutional Court ruling outdatedly normalized patriarchy, gender binary, and the *doctrine of separate spheres*, in which women are deemed the weaker sex and “angels in the house.” The misogynist emphasis on the “delicate bond” between heterosexual couples, which is forged by and is burdened upon women's crucial role “to have children and maintain the race,” is further enhanced by the normative and imperative phrase, “according to nature.” The ruling may seem, at first glance, to suggest systematic dehumanization of women, reducing them to reproductive vessels. When read, however, in the context of anti-LGBTQINA+ ideology, misogyny here can be seen

ทางชีวภาพแปลกแยกออกไป ก็จัดให้เป็นกลุ่มต่างหากเพื่อแยกศึกษาต่อไป [...] นัยความหมายของความเสมอภาคระหว่างชายกับหญิงมิใช่การบัญญัติกฎหมายให้ชายเป็นหญิงหรือให้หญิงเป็นชาย เพราะเพศนั้นเป็นการแบ่งแยกมาโดยธรรมชาติ (an act of God) ซึ่งเพศที่ถือกำเนิดมานั้นเลือกไม่ได้ หากจะมีข้อยกเว้นบ้าง ก็ควรจะแยกออกไปคุ้มครองต่างหากเป็นการเฉพาะ การให้ความเสมอภาคระหว่างชายหญิงจึงมิใช่การให้ถือว่าเหมือนกัน แต่ต้องปฏิบัติให้ถูกต้องเหมาะสมกับเพศสภาพของบุคคลนั้น ๆ ในกรณี กฎหมายจะต้องรับรู้และแยกเพศชายและเพศหญิงเป็นหลักไว้ก่อน จึงจะให้ความเสมอภาคได้ เช่น หญิงมีประจำเดือน หญิงตั้งครรภ์ได้ หญิงมีสิทธิ์ที่อ่อนแออบบางกว่าชาย เห็นได้ว่า สิ่งที่ไม่เหมือนกันจะปฏิบัติให้เหมือนกันไม่ได้ การปฏิบัติให้ถูกต้องสอดคล้องกับวิถีของธรรมชาติจะสร้างความเสมอภาคระหว่างชายหญิงได้ มิใช่ถือเอาผู้ที่กำหนดเพศไม่ได้มารวมกับความเป็นหญิงชายที่แยกกันไว้อย่างชัดเจน”

- 4 “ผมในฐานะที่เป็นผู้ชาย รัฐมนตรีก็เป็นผู้ชาย นอกบ้านผู้ชายจะเก่ง แต่ในบ้านเสร็จผู้หญิงหมด เขาบอกว่าผู้ชายเปรียบเสมือนช้างเท้าหน้า ผู้หญิงเป็นช้างเท้าหลัง แต่อย่าลืมว่าเมื่อช้างตกหลุม ช้างก็ต้องคอยหลังขึ้นด้วยขาหลังทั้งนั้น ผมเชื่อมั่นว่า ผู้หญิงมีความละเอียดอ่อนในการทำงาน มีสติ ดังขึ้นไปดังก้นมา ก็ทำให้พอดีไม่ทำให้ช้างหกหลุม เดินไปข้างหน้าด้วยกัน บางทีผู้ชายก็ชอบเดินเลย เพราะใจร้อน ซึ่งผู้หญิงจะช่วยให้สังคมสงบปลอดภัย เปรียบเสมือนน้ำเย็นที่ทำให้น้ำร้อนกลายเป็นน้ำอุ่น ทั้งนี้ ไม่ว่าใครจะอยู่หน้าหรืออยู่หลังสำคัญทั้งนั้น ขอให้ทุกคนได้ภูมิใจ เพราะเราเป็นบุคคลสำคัญในครอบครัวของเรา”

as the foreground of more brutal dehumanization, reduction, and even erasure of LGBTQINA+ lives and dignity. Misogyny, according to Kate Manne (2019) in her seminal *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, does not always entail dehumanizing women. On the contrary, misogyny is based on the notion that women, like the tree in Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* (1964), are

positioned as human *givers* when it comes to the dominant men who look to them for various kinds of moral support, admiration, attention, and so on. She is not allowed to *be* in the same ways as he is. She will tend to *be* in trouble when she does not give enough, or to the right people, in the right way, or in the right spirit. And, if she errs on this score, or asks for something of the same support or attention on her own behalf, there is a risk of misogynist resentment, punishment, and indignation. (Manne 2019, xix)

The limitations of such a proposed notion by a thinker belonging to analytic feminist philosophy is clearly acknowledged in the same book: "There is also a risk of exempting individual agents from blame or responsibility for misogynistic behavior" (Manne 2019, xxi). What many find controversial in Manne's analysis can be remedied, however, when misogyny is "queered," or analyzed as an initial process leading to further discrimination against LGBTQINA+ and even to full annihilation of—especially in the case of Thailand—their legal as well as human existence. The status of the "giving tree" is not even conferred upon them by society. In the case of the Thai Constitutional Court ruling, the wording extracted for this chapter clearly reveals the devastating implications of misogyny on LGBTQINA+ persons, which leads to brutal dehumanization of those whose gender and sexuality do not conform to heteronormative values and ideology. The ruling puts those who do not identify as cisgender heterosexuals under erasure. This can be counted as *epistemic violence*, or violence exerted on the level of knowledge and discourses, e.g., the coinage of words and categorization of "good feminists" as opposed to "bad feminists" adopted to submit women who are deemed "too vocal and radical" to silence.

In the Thai context, such policing of "good feminists" versus "bad feminists" has culminated in the coinage of the term "femtwtit" ("เฟมทวิต"), a combination of "feminist" and "Twitter," which means a feminist who is vocal on Twitter (as well as other online platforms). The word can also mean the actual online post by someone who qualifies as a femtwtit. "Femtwtit" has been used as a disparaging label allocated to women perceived by anti-feminists to be intolerably loud on social media without causing any genuine change. This act of useless ranting was also given the newly coined verb "chawd" ("ฉาด"), used mostly with female netizens in order to demean and discredit their voices and opinions. Many of the online posts about gender-based violence, toxic masculinity, and discrimination

against women, shared and circulated on social media by women as an inseparable part of the current pro-democracy movement, have been undermined and condemned by anti-feminists as “femtwits.” Femtwit online posts, which often include hashtags like #MeToo and #MenAreTrash, tend to be instantly downplayed, dismissed, or cast aside as anti-feminists rush to the defense of men’s honor by including the phrase “Not All Men [are trash]” in their angry retorts instead of listening to the stories of women who have been subjected to violence. The deliberate classification of women into the binary opposition of “good feminists,” who are favored by patriarchal society for their placid non-militant ways, as opposed to “bad feminists,” or “femtwits,” who are scorned for their vocal militant campaigns, is nothing new. It reflects the divide et impera, or “divide and conquer,” strategy of maintaining power through language and discourses. The clearest example of the dichotomy between “bad” feminists as opposed to “good” feminists can be found in the British Suffrage Movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the term “suffragette” was coined by The Daily Mail in 1906 (Van Wingerden 1999, xiv) and allocated to the militant Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) founded in 1903 and led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia. The term “suffragette” was meant to be derogatory as opposed to the term “suffragist” allocated to the non-militant National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) founded in 1897 and led by Millicent Fawcett. Similarly, the coinage and labeling of the terms “femtwit” and “chawd” to women who are vocal online can be seen as part of both tone policing and language policing. According to Kyra Gillies (2017) in “Intersectional poetry: Spoken poetry as a platform for feminist thought free from tone policing,” the definitions of tone policing and language policing are as follows:

Language policing is about asserting rules or control over the word choice and terms that someone uses and using this as a reason to not listen to the vocal party. Tone policing is about insisting on not listening to someone based on them expressing their fear, anger, or frustration about something. Those who speak out against sexual assault and harassment are familiar with being told that people would listen to them if they did not sound so angry and like they hated men. (Gillies 2017, 88)

One does not need to look deep into the past or far into the future to see how the ideology of misogyny, reflected in the Constitutional Court’s decision, can lead not only to physical detriment, but also to *hermeneutic death*, or the annihilation of the self which takes place “when subjects are not simply mistreated as intelligible communicators, but prevented from developing and exercising a voice, that is, prevented from participating in meaning-making and meaning-sharing practices” (Medina 2017, 41). Hermeneutic death, this chapter contends, is part and parcel of necropolitics which, according to Achille Mbembe (2019), can be understood as:

the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*. (Mbembe 2019, 92)

In the case of Thailand, the Constitutional Court verdict created the apocalyptic "death-world" where marriage is defined in misogynistic terms and where LGBTQINA+ persons are cast as a subspecies, unworthy of equal rights to start a family in the eyes of law. Their living conditions are consigned by the necro-power of patriarchal values to the realm of the "living dead." If one should agree with Jenny Stümer and Felicitas Loest (2022, 5) that "apocalypses are transformative: They are about the creation of novel and emancipatory collective imaginaries that undo pervasive conceptions of the world and trouble established ontological and epistemological promises of the ways we may inhabit this planet," Thailand's fight for marriage equality, which is driven by feminist and queer rejection of the heteropatriarchal dystopia portrayed in the verdict, is an example of such a transformative and life-affirming force amidst crisis and catastrophe. A queer feminist/feminist queer framework is therefore needed for a better understanding of how queer and feminist issues and perspectives can complement each other and reveal the ways in which misogyny tends to be transposed to the realm of anti-LGBTQINA+ discourse. One can take inspiration from the views of Mimi Marinucci (2010) who, in *Feminism Is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory*, insightfully propounds the idea of linking queer and feminist perspectives when it comes to tackling sexist bias:

[Q]ueer theory, like feminist theory, also has a history of racism and classism. What this suggests is that bias is pervasive, and a theoretical orientation that promises or aims to address a particular form of bias is never immune from perpetuating it. Not every critique that aims to attend to oppression will do so equally successfully. (Marinucci 2010, 107)

Marinucci acknowledges that connecting feminism with queer theory may seem to produce a paradox or even an anomaly, as *queer post-gender ethics* can be seen as the opposite of feminist theories where *gender bias* against women can be seen played out in many fields and on many levels. She states:

One consequence of the radical critique of binary thinking that queer theory offers is that it seems to deny the reality of any categories, including not just categories of gender, such as feminine, but also categories of sex, such as female. If there are not really any females, if there is nothing that really is feminine, if there are no women, indeed not even any men, then there would seem to be little value in a theoretical perspective organized around sex and gender identity. (Marinucci 2010, 108)

The currents of queer and feminist activism conjoin in one's attempt to *queer* misogyny not only in the context of LGBTQINA+, particularly Thailand's Constitutional Court ruling of November 17, 2021, but also in the context of feminist pro-democracy movement in Thailand, particularly in the case of a notable dissident movement called the Feminist Liberation Front (FLF).

FLF has always been instrumental in advocating for marriage equality. The most remarkable of this group's many activities was an event held on International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOT) on May 17, 2022. The event featured a rally for LGBTQINA+ rights and marriage equality, where activists read out the version of the Constitutional Court ruling on marriage law which had been rewritten by the "People's Court" (Prachatai English 2022). The People's Court ruling was part of the "People's Judgment" project launched on International Women's Day (March 8, 2022), which comprised online panel discussions in which anyone could actively participate to brainstorm, analyze, criticize, deconstruct, and revise the wording of the Constitutional Court ruling against marriage equality.

In a feminist spirit similar to that reflected in the "Declaration of Sentiments," a brave rewriting of the United States Declaration of Independence signed in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, Thailand's FLF-led "People's Judgment" project served as a public platform for a brave and also democratic rewriting of the Constitutional Court ruling. The People's Court's attempt to critique and amend the misogynist and homophobic content of the verdict in question can be seen in the following extract:

Fifth, the People's Court wishes to reiterate that the failure to protect the rights and freedom of one person or one group of people in society is bad for everyone. The People's Court sees that not changing the law does not only impact the life of the petitioners or other couples, but creates inequality in society. It leads to negative speech, such as "loving someone of the same sex is a sin and against good morals" as we have long heard in Thai society. This is a patriarchal interpretation, but at present, we should not decide based on patriarchy or traditional customs. Oppressing people who are different is not good morals, no matter how one defines good morals. Neither sexual or gender bias should be a factor in deciding who can marry, nor should fears that extending the right to marry will increase the burden on the state or that people will be exploiting public benefit and impact state security. Equality in this country has never been a gift from the state but is the result of a long struggle.

The People's Court has examined the case and believes that the 2017 Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand guarantees human dignity and rights and liberties in Section 4, which stipulates that, "Human dignity, rights, liberties and equality of the people shall be protected. The

Thai people shall enjoy equal protection under this Constitution." (The People's Court 2022, my emphasis)⁵

By attacking the Constitutional Court's argument that equal rights for marriage for LGBTQINA+ is considered a mere "exceptional case" since it does not lead to "having children and maintaining the race," the wording in the "People's Judgment" ventures to *exorcize* the haunting specter of hermeneutic death of being excluded from the law and any other discursive platform imposed not only upon the LGBTQINA+ community, but also upon women. By battling head-on with "the patriarchal interpretation" of morality and marriage by means of civic politics, FLF challenged the legal exercise of necropower and exposed the necropolitics of the overarching patriarchal values to which women and LGBTQINA+ are unjustly subjected:

Marriage is a lynchpin of social organization: its laws, and customs interface with almost every sphere of social interaction. Its foundational role in defining the structures of social institution and citizenship means that definitional authority over what "counts" as marriage, and who is allowed access to it, has always been intensely political. Systematic exclusion of any group of people from the institution of marriage has been (and continues to be) a powerful way of oppressing that group in terms both of concrete rights and responsibilities and – more crucially still – in terms of the symbolic message that the group so discriminated against is unworthy of equality, and is less than "human." (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 2004, 132)

By appropriating and "usurping" legislative power, which traditionally belongs solely to the Constitutional Court, the People's Court retaliated against the epistemic violence perpetrated by the very institution which was supposed to uphold the Thai constitution by safeguarding people's "human dignity, rights, liberties and equality" regardless of sex. This is a tangible case where "a queering misogyny" approach can help build and strengthen solidarity among queer and feminist activists in the fight for marriage equality and democracy in Thailand.

⁵ "ถ้า คณะตุลาการประชาชนขออย่าว่าการไม่คุ้มครองสิทธิเสรีภาพของคนใดคนหนึ่ง กลุ่มใดกลุ่มหนึ่งในสังคมเป็นผลร้ายต่อทุกคนในสังคม เห็นว่าการไม่เปลี่ยนแปลงทางกฎหมายไม่ใช่ว่ามีผลกระทบต่อการใช้ชีวิตคู่เท่านั้น ทำให้เกิดความไม่เสมอภาคเท่าเทียมกันภายในสังคม ณ ปัจจุบันไม่ควรถูกเอารัด ประเพณีศีลธรรมที่ลิดรอนสิทธิมนุษยชนมากเกินไป ชุมชนความแตกต่างหลากหลายอันเป็นสิทธิและเสรีภาพของบุคคล หรือกังวลว่าจะเป็นภาระของทางภาครัฐ จะเห็นได้ว่าความเท่าเทียมของคนในประเทศไม่ใช่ของขวัญจากรัฐแต่มาจากการต่อสู้มาอย่างยาวนาน คณะตุลาการประชาชนพึงตระหนักแล้วเห็นว่า รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทยพ.ศ. 2560 คุ้มครองศักดิ์ศรีความเป็นมนุษย์ และรับรองสิทธิเสรีภาพไว้ มาตรา 4 บัญญัติว่า 'ศักดิ์ศรีความเป็นมนุษย์ สิทธิเสรีภาพ และความเสมอภาคของบุคคล ย่อมได้รับความคุ้มครอง ปวงชนชาวไทยย่อมได้รับความคุ้มครองตามรัฐธรรมนูญเสมอกัน'"

3. (In)conclusion: What's next for marriage equality in Thailand?

At the time this chapter was revised (between August 2023 and March 2024), the parliament elected Srettha Thavisin of the Pheu Thai party as Thailand's 30th Prime Minister, ending Prayut's regime and three months of political deadlock where Pita Limjaroenrat, Move Forward Party's Prime Minister candidate, was blocked by the junta-appointed senate. In December 2023, four draft bills on same-sex marriage were passed in their first reading, with all but eleven of 380 votes from the lower house (Reuters 2023). Apart from the same-sex marriage draft bill put forward by the cabinet, the versions proposed by the Move Forward Party, the Democrat Party and the civil sector, namely, the Rainbow Coalition for Marriage Equality, were also approved. According to Mookdapa Yangyuenpradorn, who is Human Rights Associate at Fortify Rights, "The one submitted by the cabinet and approved by the Prime Minister takes precedence over the rest" (Civicus 2024), despite the fact that the civil society bill is the most progressive in terms of LGBTQINA+ parental rights. The bill is also the most progressive in terms of the proposed transitional procedure where LGBTQINA+ couples can immediately register their marriages without having to wait for all the other relevant laws to be completely revised and amended. The subsequent stage is for the newly formed committee to merge and consolidate the four bills into one for submission to the lower house for a second reading (from a total of 3 readings), the senate (a total of 3 readings) and the Constitutional Court before being ratified by the King and published in the Royal Gazette. Although passing the first reading can be seen as a ray of hope on the horizon of such a long and winding journey, the parliament's recent rejection of the Act on Gender Recognition, Title, and Protection of Gender Diversity, which was proposed by the Move Forward Party, can be seen as a setback to Thailand's marriage equality prospects, which remain uncertain under the new coalition government formed with the junta allies.

The telling signs of uncertainty can be seen in the following facts. Firstly, ever since the Marriage Equality Bill passed its first reading under Prayut's regime on June 15, 2022, its fate has been precarious because of the following regulation: "Under Thai law, the Cabinet has 60 days from the opening of parliament to request parliament to reconsider any bill that lapsed after parliament was dissolved. Since parliament opened on July 3, the cabinet has until September 3 to restore the Marriage Equality Bill to parliament" (Prachatai English 2023). It was none other than the Move Forward Party that resubmitted the Marriage Equality Bill in early August 2023, prior to the parliamentary vote for the new Prime Minister. The Move Forward Party, despite having won 36.23 percent of the vote in the 2023 general election, hence winning the highest seats in parliament, was nevertheless consigned to the opposition. Pita Limjaroenrat's nomination was opposed in July 2023 by many senators and house representatives on the basis that the Move

Forward Party planned to amend Section 112 of the Criminal Code (Lèse-majesté law). *Bangkok Post* (2023) reports on one of the most controversial moments in parliament as follows:

Chada Thaiset, an opposition Bhumjaithai MP for Uthai Thani, said that any change to Section 112 would cause unrest. "If you let people insult the monarchy without any laws to keep them in check, our country will burn," he said. "How about I propose a law allowing people to shoot those insulting the monarchy?"

What should have been the candidate election for Prime Minister in the parliament, which is composed of 749 members, instead sounded like a premature and uncalled-for debate of no confidence. Although Pita Limjaroenrat ran unopposed in the vote, only 324 members supported him, including 13 senators, while 182 voted against and 199 abstained. Since the Marriage Equality Bill had originally been proposed and pushed forward by the Move Forward Party, it remains to be seen if the parliament, which is clearly not on the side of this party, will ultimately thwart the bill or vote for the kind of progressive law which will be beneficial to all in Thailand. Being cast as *enfant terrible* in the parliament, the Move Forward Party, on August 30, 2023, even failed to secure a majority of votes in their attempt to speed up the motion of charter reform (Khaosod Online 2023).

The rejection of the Act on Gender Recognition, Title, and Protection of Gender Diversity proposed by the Move Forward Party, with 154 votes in favor, 257 against, one abstention, and one vote not cast (iLaw 2024) in February 2024, can be regarded as a setback to Thailand's marriage equality prospects, which remain uncertain under the new coalition government formed with the junta allies.

The Thai studies scholar Peter A. Jackson has put on center stage the ruling elites' role in instilling heteronormativity in Thai laws and mainstream social values. In order to resist and counter the currents of colonialism from the West which had threatened Siam and cast Siam as uncivilized, King Vajiravudh (1881–1925), known as Rama VI of the Chakri dynasty, adopted Victorian gender norms, particularly the gendered domestic–public dichotomy. This was part of an ongoing project, the zenith of which can be seen in the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1853–1910), known as Rama V of the Chakri dynasty, to demonstrate that Siam was "civilized" and its people far from barbaric. Similarly, Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, who served as Prime Minister of Thailand from 1938 to 1944 and 1948 to 1957, further enhanced heteronormative hegemony via his mandate for strict demarcation of gender in each individual's name:

Under King Vajiravudh, the more formal gendered titles of *nai* [Mr] for men and *nang-sao* [Miss] and *nang* [Mrs] for women were introduced. However, Phibun regarded the lack of gender specificity of Thai names

as marking a lack of civilisation. He set up a "Committee for Establishing the Principles for Giving Personal Names", made up of language and culture experts, including the famous cultural historian *Phraya Anuman Ratchathon*, who were tasked with drawing up a list of names and assigning a masculine or feminine gender to each. (Jackson 2003)

It can therefore be inferred from these examples and from the ongoing debates in the Thai parliament regarding Marriage Equality and the Act on Gender Recognition, Title, and Protection of Gender Diversity that any proposed bill, aimed at breaking the mold of two-sex binary division, is deemed an attack on the legacy of the Thai ruling elites. It is not surprising that the reading of any proposed bill with content equivalent to that of the recent Act on Gender Recognition, Title, and Protection of Gender Diversity never even saw the light of day under the past Junta administration, which has always aligned itself with the ruling elites and the conservative ultraroyalist as well as ultranationalist forces.

Critical discourse analysis of the speeches given by a number of the cisgender heterosexual male Members of Parliament reveals outdated sexist views and heteronormative entitlement. Teerachai Saenkaew, Pheu Thai Party MP for Udon Thani province, cited, for example, concerns about false identities. He contended that the license to change gender titles *at will* could lead to scamming, harassment, and sexual assault (PostToday 2024). Teerachai's speech, reflecting sexism and deep-seated prejudice against LGBTQINA+ persons, proved stronger than the defensive argument put forward by Pantin Nuanjerm, Move Forward Party MP for Bangkok, that, instead of denying LGBTQINA+ persons their right to change their legal titles in order to prevent scamming and other crimes, one should understand that it is the task of crime suppression agencies to tackle the issue of individuals disguising their identity for criminal purposes (Watson 2024).

Apart from Teerachai Saenkaew, Pheu Thai Party MP Anusorn Iamsa-ard also rejected the Act on Gender Recognition, Title, and Protection of Gender Diversity on the basis that, in his opinion, LGBTQINA+ persons were dignified individuals who were perfectly capable of taking pride in themselves regardless of the self-determined gender titles: "We did say that we are proud of being an LGBTQ, didn't we? Then, why would we want to change from our LGBTQ status to Mr. or Miss? Does this mean, then, that we do not really take pride in our gender and the status that we're in?" (Panisā' Ēm'ōchā 2024).⁶ Anusorn illustrated his claim by singing a few lines extracted and adapted from a popular song called "Kathoe's Protest" ("กะเทยประท้วง")⁷ by the Thai folk singer Poyfai Malaiporn: "I'm proud, so proud to be

⁶ "ก็ไหนว่าเรากลุมใจในความเป็น LGBTQ แล้วเราจะไปเปลี่ยนจากสภาพ LGBTQ ไปเป็นนาย ไปเป็นนางสาว ก็เท่ากับเราไม่ได้ 'ไพรด์' ไม่ได้ภูมิใจกับเพศสภาพ กับสถานะที่เราเป็นหรือเปล่า"

⁷ The term "kathoe" in Thai, although popularly associated with a transgender woman or an

a kathoey. Though people make fun of me, I don't care. They are just big mouths" (Thairath 2024).⁸ One only has to examine the full lyrics of this iconic song to see that Anusorn's claim is flawed as he deliberately downplays LGBTQINA+ persons' wishes and dreams to define themselves on their own terms. The irony of his chosen example lies in the fact that "Kathoey's Protest" also contains the following lyrics: "If you force me to be a man, I would rather die. I would rather die than live" (Topline Digital Network YouTube Channel 2011).⁹

Fighting for marriage equality in Thailand means struggling not only for "the privilege that heterosexuals alone have heretofore had, namely the privilege of claiming that *despite their multiple deviations* from norms governing the family, their families are nevertheless *real* ones," but also for "the cultural authority to challenge existing familial norms, to redefine what constitutes a family, and to demand that the preferred definition of the family be reflected in cultural and legal practices. Centered within a liberatory lesbian and gay politics, the bid for access to the family is the bid for the right to exercise definitional authority with respect to the family" (Calhoun 2000, 156). To vehemently resist being reduced to mere "cases of exception" in law has also been part of the history of women's movements worldwide—e.g., from the obsolete legal doctrine of "coverture" in English common law, where women had no legal existence except when merged with their husbands, to the "María Clara doctrine," a legal doctrine applied by Philippine courts in cases concerning abuse against women, which still exists today.¹⁰ Feminist theories and activism can unite with queer theories and activism in "queering misogyny," or an approach through which one exposes and, by doing so, deconstructs misogynist discourses in the contexts of discrimination, necropolitics, and epistemic violence against LGBTQINA+ persons. The case of marriage equality in Thailand can therefore be regarded as a textbook example of the possibility of a queer feminist/feminist queer analytical framework. Given the current political uncertainty in Thailand, it can also be studied as a case study in the making.

effeminate gay male, is closest to the term "queer" in meaning and implication.

8 "ฉันภูมิใจ ภูมิใจที่เป็นกะเทย ไผ่ลิเวียเขาเขี่ย กะสร้างเกาะเวีย กะสร้างเกาะเวียปากคน"

9 "ฉันสืให้ฉันเป็นผู้ชาย ฉันขอยอมตาย สะยอมตายดีกว่า"

10 Named after María Clara, the fictional "ideal woman" character from José Rizal's novel *Noli Me Tángere* (1887), this legal doctrine, which became part of the Philippine jurisprudence since 1960, is based upon a presumption "that women, especially Filipinas, would not admit that they have been abused unless that abuse had actually happened" (Buban and Lardizabal Law Offices 2018). This means that the credibility of a victim's testimony depends upon whether she conforms to the mainstream patriarchal values and stereotypes of female purity, modesty, and righteousness. Testimony given by a woman who does not fit the mold of María Clara tends to be discredited, resulting in the unjust dismissal of many rape cases.

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COMING OUT AS EVERYDAY LIFE ACTIVISM: “DISPLAYING” GAY FATHER FAMILIES IN TAIWAN

Jung Chen

In 2019, Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. LGBTQ+ reproductive rights are still, however, yet to come. The only feasible way for gay men to have biologically related children is to travel abroad for transnational third-party reproduction. Gay fathers have encountered multiple obstacles when embarking on the journey towards fatherhood, including unfriendly attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities and misunderstandings concerning queer families. This chapter explores how gay fathers in Taiwan have navigated their coming-out strategies and made sense of their actions as “implicit activism.” The data came from in-depth interviews with 53 gay fathers and fathers-to-be, and participant observation. This study has two contributions. Firstly, it elucidates why and how gay fathers have been more willing to reveal their queer identity to families, compared to gay men without children, and delineates their coming-out experiences and strategies. Secondly, this study argues that the practices of “displaying gay-father families” in everyday life can be understood as activism that facilitates the visibility of gay-father families. This chapter examines gay fathers’ lived experiences from a non-Western perspective and re-conceptualizes the meaning of “coming out” in the Taiwan context through the approaches of “family display” and “everyday life activism.”

Keywords: coming out, gay fathers, everyday life activism, displaying families, Taiwan

1. Introduction

While Taiwanese society has been celebrating the achievement of becoming the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, the reproductive rights

of LGBTQ+ people¹ are still on hold. Assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) and donor gametes, including sperm and eggs, are only accessible to medically infertile, married heterosexual couples. In 2017, a ruling by Judicial Yuan declared that the Civil Code, which excluded same-sex marriage, was unconstitutional. Judicial Yuan, therefore, required the Legislative Yuan to amend the law within two years. Sequentially, a national referendum on the public's opinions of the legal amendment for granting legal recognition to same-sex couple unions was conducted in 2018. Conservatives in Taiwan are still holding back on marriage equality for all, and the result showed that the mainstream hoped to establish new laws instead of amending the Civil Code. As a result, in 2019, the Act for Implementation of Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 748 (748 Act) was enacted to legalize same-sex marriage. The decision to employ separate laws to grant marital rights to opposite-sex and same-sex marriage indicated the intense dynamics of the anti-LGBTQ+ conservatives and the LGBTQ+ movements. The 748 Act, unfortunately, cannot grant full rights to same-sex unions, such as reproductive rights. This legal transition indicated progressive democracy and blossoming LGBTQ+ rights in Taiwan, but also misunderstandings and discrimination against LGBTQ+, which caused significant uncertainty for the LGBTQ+ community when it comes to securing their full rights as a citizen in the country. The logistic of heteronormativity can also be identified in the legal regulations of reproduction and the social norms of family-making. The adoption law showed, for example, the ideology that the "ideal family" should consist of a father and a mother. Not until the amendment to Article 20, 748 Act on May 16, 2023, married same-sex couples cannot access joint adoption of non-biological related children (Table 1).²

¹ Terminologies: "Taiwan LGBT Family Right Advocacy" (TLFRA) addresses LGBTQ+ families as "tongzhi family" (同志家庭 *tongzhi jiating*). Tongzhi family initially referred to gay-father and lesbian-mother families. Tongzhi family also refers at present to families that consist of all LGBTQ+ individuals who have children. The English term "queer" was translated into *ku'er* (酷兒) and *tongzhi* (同志) in different historical contexts (Chi 2017). *Queer/ku'er* has been picked up by activists and applied as an umbrella term referring to all LGBTQ+ people and used interchangeably with the term *tongzhi*. I use *queer*, in both contexts of translating queer into *tongzhi* and *ku'er*, to refer to LGBTQ+ people as a collective term that contests heteronormativity. I therefore use *LGBTQ+ family* and *queer family* interchangeably in this chapter.

² Table 1 was also presented in a similar version in an article entitled "Queering Reproductive Justice: Framing Reproduction of Gay Men from a Transnational Perspective—Taiwan as a Case" (Chen 2023).

Table 1: Reproductive rights according to 748 Act

	Adoption			ARTs		Surro- gacy
	Single Adoption	Stepparent Adoption	Joint Adoption	Donated Gametes	IUI/IVF	
Married Dif- ferent-Sex Couples	No	Yes	Yes	Only one of the parents	Yes	No
Married Same- Sex Couples	Yes	Gestational/ge- netically related to the partner	No, until May 16, 2023	No	No	No
Single Indi- viduals	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	No	No

(Source: Act for Implementation of Judicial Yuan Interpretation No. 748, table by the author)

The unjust legal framework discouraged many prospective LGBTQ+ parents from envisioning a future with children. Before the legal change in 2023, if married same-sex couples considered adopting non-genetically related children, they had to “divorce” in order to access adoption as a single person. Even after the single-parent adoption was completed and the couple remarried, the other parent could not obtain the legal parental right to their children. Thus, the only option for LGBTQ+ couples to have children with legally secured parental rights was to seek third-party reproduction overseas. If the children are biologically related to one of the parents, the law allows the non-biological parent to “adopt” their partners’ biologically related children, which was termed “stepparent adoption” (繼親收養 *ji qin shou yang*).³ For gay men with reproductive intentions, given that any form of surrogacy remains illegal in Taiwan,⁴ the only accessible way for them to become parents to biogenetically related children is through transnational third-party reproduction, including ARTs, donor eggs, and surrogacy.

In everyday lives, gay fathers were often confronted with curiosity and sometimes misunderstanding from their extended families, neighbors, people at workplaces, and those working in governmental sectors. They encountered awkward moments of being questioned about their identities as gay fathers. They

³ The term “stepparent adoption” (繼親收養 *ji qin shou yang*) was translated according to Sara Friedman and Chen Chao-ju’s (2023) work on the legal amendment of same-sex marriage in Taiwan.

⁴ Either straight/traditional surrogacy, which means that the female who carries the baby is also the one who offers the ova, or gestational/host surrogacy, which means that there are two women involved in the reproductive process—one provides the ovum, and another carries the baby—is illegal in Taiwan. Commercial or altruistic surrogacy are illegal in Taiwan.

experienced situations where people would not "recognize them as a family" or as legitimate parents. Drawing on the concepts of "doing family" (Morgan 1996, 2011a, 2011b) and "displaying family" (Finch 2007), I depict gay fathers' strategic coming out and how they enacted "everyday life activism" (Fish, King, and Almack 2018) in order to envisage a friendly future. This chapter demonstrates how gay fathers in Taiwan employed their coming out strategies as a means to challenge heteronormativity and how they understood their fatherhood, dealt with the confrontations with their biological families, decided to come out, and "displayed" their families as everyday life activism.

2. Contextualizing gay fathers in Taiwan

2.1 The (in)visibility of LGBTQ+ parents

Despite their invisibility in public, queer people have been raising children in Taiwan for decades, far before the arrival of the blooming transnational reproductive travels. Huang Hui-Chen, a documentary director, documented her mother's life retrospectively in *Small Talk* (日常對話 *Richang duihua*). Huang's mother, who self-identified as "a woman who loved women," was married to a man and gave birth to Huang under social and familial pressure. Despite the fact that Huang's mother might not identify herself as "a lesbian mother," her figure as an "outcast" in heteronormative society indicated a lack of voices from queer people who were forced to enter into heterosexual marriage and become parents—with or without reproductive intentions.

In 2006, lesbians who had their children from previous heterosexual marriages established a private chat group, "Alliance of Lesbian Mothers" (女同志媽媽聯盟社群 *Nü tongzhi mama lianmeng shequn*) and issued an online publication *Lama News* (拉媽報 *La ma bao*). The online allies were the first community built by LGBTQ+ parents—at that time, there were only lesbian mothers. In 2007, the community reformed as "Taiwan LGBT Family Right Advocacy" (TLFRA) and expanded the service to all LGBTQ+ families nation-wide. It was officially registered as an NGO in 2011. Gay fathers were not to be seen at this time. The documentary *Small Talk* and the anecdote of the emerging lesbian mother alliance signify the difficulties non-heterosexual parents had coming out. It was the lesbian mothers—the pioneers—who came out collectively along with the development of the LGBTQ+ community. Gay men joined the queer parent club only later.

The first gay father who came out in public was Lance Chen-Hayes, who became a father with the help of his American husband's sister as their traditional surrogate. Lance and his husband wrote two autobiographies of their reproductive journeys and parenting experiences (Chen-Hayes and Chen-Hayes 2021;

Chen-Hayes 2019). Many gay fathers whom I interviewed mentioned Lance's family stories and viewed them as "pioneering gay dads" who came out in Taiwan. Despite the fact that Lance's story was an iconic figure, and many gay men hoped to pursue fatherhood, surrogacy was not accessible for most gay men due to the legal restrictions in Taiwan. Up until the early 2010s, the "first cohort" of gay fathers successfully brought their surrogacy-born children from the US and there has been a slightly increasing visibility of gay father families in Taiwan. The "first cohort" of gay fathers began to seek help from TLFRA and have participated in the LGBTQ+ family community ever since.

Despite the burgeoning visibility of LGBTQ+ parents in society, according to the latest national survey conducted by the Taiwan Equality Campaign,⁵ there has been decreasing support for some LGBTQ+ rights policies, including accessibility to ARTs for gay fathers. In the report, they argued that this is due to the lack of visibility of LGBTQ+ families with children in everyday life. Firstly, LGBTQ+ families are still a minority in Taiwanese society, particularly gay father families compared to lesbian mother families. Until the year when this research was conducted in 2022, TLFRA estimated that there were about 500 queer families in Taiwan. Among these queer-parents-with-children families, approximately one-third were gay-dad families (n=170). Secondly, there is still significant social and familial pressure on many LGBTQ+ people. They find it difficult to come out and acknowledge their desire to become parents. It is now time for Taiwanese society to reject traditional heteronormative family ideology and embrace diverse queer family-making. To achieve this goal, the visibility of queer families plays a crucial role in activism. This chapter delves into gay fathers' family practices and coming out experiences and elucidates the implications of their everyday life activism in order to transform Taiwan into a more inclusive and friendly society.

2.2 Constraints of coming out within and beyond families-of-origin

Although Taiwan has been praised as the most LGBTQ+-friendly country in Asia and public attitudes towards non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming people have changed in the past two decades (Cheng, Wu, and Adamczyk 2016), LGBTQ+ people still encounter coming-out dilemmas, particularly within their families-of-origin. The everyday life of LGBTQ+ people is intertwined with their relationships with their biological families and other interpersonal interactions, such as in schools and workplaces, acquaintances, and even strangers met on the street. Among all social relations, relationships with families matter the most to the majority of LGBTQ+ people in Taiwan. LGBTQ+ people consider their relationships with families-of-origin as crucial as their sexual/gender identities and

⁵ See <https://www.civilmedia.tw/archives/118592>.

sometimes even conceal their queer identities in exchange for familial harmony (Brainer 2019). When it comes to "coming out" for LGBTQ+ people in Western countries, this might refer to a range of situations. In Taiwan, "Have you already come out?" often implies the occasion of revealing their sexuality to their families. For perspective gay fathers, they experience two coming-out scenarios. The first is to come out as gay, while the second is to come out as prospective gay fathers or gay fathers.

In Taiwan, familial relations have transformed with the changing socio-economic climates, which experienced the dramatic success of the "Taiwan Economic Miracle" from the 1950s to the 2000s. Under the impact of Westernization, modernization, and globalization since the late twentieth century, gender social movements and feminist activism have gained awareness in Taiwan, leading society towards individualism. Taiwanese society is influenced, however, by Confucian culture which emphasizes "filial piety" (孝 *xiao*) and an ideology that treasures family values among other forms of relatedness (Farrell and Yi 2019). LGBTQ+ people often face a dilemma between expressing their queer identities and maintaining harmony in the family. As a result, LGBTQ+ people have developed strategies of identity management in order to keep the balance between revealing their queer selves and maintaining familial relationships.

Scholars researching LGBTQ+ people in Taiwan have contended with the Western model of identity politics and coming-out discourse and called for a more contextualized understanding of the coming-out experience (Brainer 2019; Chao 2000; Hu 2017). The prevalent discourse of "either coming out or closeted dichotomy" (Sedgwick 1990) in Western culture has been introduced to non-Western countries and reconstructed in the local context. Hu Yu-ying (2017) argued against, for example, the static Western/non-Western dichotomy of coming out discourse and suggested that Taiwanese lesbians developed an "interactional" instead of a "confrontational" strategy to sustain a harmonious relationship with their families. Hu (2017) described LGBTQ+ people's "situational coming out strategies" in between coming out and closeted that create a flexible space for both parties.

Most gay fathers I interviewed,⁶ however, considered coming out crucial for their journeys towards gay fatherhood. By coming out to their families, gay men not only embraced their new identity as gay fathers but also demonstrated a distinguished coming-out pattern in Taiwan, where many LGBTQ+ people and their families often chose the "don't ask, don't tell" strategy (Brainer 2019; Hu 2017). Gay fathers' lived experiences in this research indicated that coming out was applied to gain recognition and support for gay men to strengthen their motivations to become parents. Coming out also became a proactive gesture to "display" gay

⁶ Only 2 out of 53 held the opinion of not coming out.

father families to others, including their extended families and society. This study attempts to answer the question: How do Taiwanese gay fathers navigate their coming-out strategies and make sense of their actions as activism?

3. Framing gay fathers' family-making

3.1 A lack of Taiwanese gay father studies

There is relatively little scholarly literature on LGBTQ+ family building in Taiwan. Research on reproduction is mainly focused on lesbians' reproduction (Ho 2014) and lesbian mothers' parenthood (Pan 2019; Tseng 2013). Due to the regulation excluding same-sex couples from joint adoption before 2023, some master's theses in the field of law discussed legal debates around adoption laws (Chang 2015; Chen 2017).

Despite the lack of scholarly literature on gay father families, there are two articles on LGBTQ+ parents' experiences when interacting with other people in educational institutions (Wang 2022; Wu 2021). Research on LGBTQ+ people's single-parent adoption of non-biologically related children also sheds light on the importance of granting full reproductive rights to LGBTQ+ people, as the authors pointed out that they could only recruit two parents due to the low success rates for single-person adoptions (Chen and Yu 2021). There is a lack of literature on the experiences of gay men who became fathers through transnational surrogacy, with a significant exception—a master's thesis in education and counselling. This study drew on interviews with five gay fathers who had experiences using surrogacy to have children and analysed their experiences of microaggressions and stigmas (Wu 2023). The author of this chapter also observed that the experiences of LGBTQ+ prospective parents in Taiwan have been neglected for a long period, and that it required legal and social transitions in order to achieve reproductive justice for all, including gay men with reproductive intentions (Chen 2023).

3.2 Doing and "displaying" families

The definition of "family" in sociology has transitioned from static interpersonal relationships, that are based on biological kin ties as *de facto* "being family," to an emphasis on daily family practices and interactions as "doing families" (Morgan 1985, 1996, 2011a). Scholars have reconsidered and redefined what family means while entering the era of individualization in which relationships become more uncertain and fleeting (Bauman 2000, 2014; Giddens 1992; Stacey 1996). Along with the social changes, the definition of family has become flexible when it "appears as a context of fluid and changeable relationships, as well as a site of intimacy and emotional growth not only for children but also for the adults" (Silva and

Smart 1999, 6). Family life is, therefore, presented as a "home" to offer emotional support and as the reorganization of ways of living.

The re-conceptualization of the "family" also reflected diverse family formations and kinship-making. The increasing use of ARTs and the visibility of alternative ways of family making constantly redefine taken-for-granted kinship relations (Franklin 2001; Rapp and Ginsburg 2001; Strathern 1992, 2005). Studies also looked at the alternative family forms of non-heterosexual individuals that were not fitted into heteronormative patterns (Weeks 2007; Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001). Non-heterosexual individuals use the term "family" in their everyday life practices to demonstrate the subversive powers of challenging, changing, and transforming, making relatedness (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001). LGBTQ+ people had been "creating families" via "doing families" (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001) not only to build up a place of belongingness, but also to empower and gain social recognition through family and/or relational practices (Plummer 2003).

Building on the conceptualization of "doing families" (Morgan 1985, 1996, 2011a), Janet Finch (2007, 78) introduced the concept of "displaying families" as "an activity characteristic of contemporary families, and as an analytical concept" to understand family practices. This approach aims to complement what David H. G. Morgan (2011b) might have briefly mentioned, but not yet developed in-depth: the significance of the visibility of family-making in doing family. Finch proposed examining family practices not only within families but also in society. In other words, Finch argued that the focus on doing family inside families is far from enough. It is important to convey the message of doing family to those who are both inside and outside the family as a means to obtain recognition and secure the veracity of the family (Finch 2007). There are two crucial implications of applying "displaying families" to analyze LGBTQ+ families. Finch (2007) argued that the practice of "displaying" is a series of actions that have the audience watch, observe, and receive, which contains the function of conveying messages of "doing families" to society. In a study of lesbian-mother-families, Kathryn Almack (2008, 1184) applied Finch's notion of "displaying families" to analyze the coming out experiences of lesbian mothers by displaying "meanings of family and contributing to ways in which these meanings are conveyed, recognized, and understood as "family-like" relationships." Aaron Goodfellow's (2015, 30) ethnography on gay father families also asserted that gay fathers need to "negotiate an environment in which their relationships fall under constant suspicion" by showing their family interactions and activities to others.

In the case of as LGBTQ+ families, the displaying of families is a form of coming out. The practice of displaying LGBTQ+ families should be viewed as everyday life activism, because they convey the idea of embracing diverse family formations

to wider “audiences”—including their extended families and society. For non-heterosexual individuals, the creation of a family—either through cohabitation with a partner(s), chosen families with non-biologically related members, or family members with biological relations—is a powerful affirmation of a new sense of belonging and an essential part of asserting the validity of queer identities and ways of life (Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy 2001, 16). The implications of displaying LGBTQ+ families are also aligned with the empowerment of obtaining queer identities in the process of coming out. This consists of the power of being seen and recognized in society by claiming a queer identity for oneself and communicating the idea of “being queer” to others (Weston 1991). Susan Golombok (2020), who conducted research on LGBTQ+ families, coined the term “future families” to describe these “alternative” LGBTQ+ families and asserted that these LGBTQ+ families signified a potential and promising future in which all inventive and diverse family formations can be seen and recognized. Drawing on the theories of doing and displaying families, I scrutinized Taiwanese gay fathers’ family-making and displaying families to argue that their coming-out actions can be seen as implicit everyday life activism that destabilizes heteronormative human procreation and family formations in Taiwanese society.

3.3 Everyday life activism

The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) has encouraged us to turn personal troubles into public issues, thus the personal is always political. Collective coming-out facilitated the development of LGBTQ+ movements. Coming out in public should not be, however, the only solution to motivating social change. To increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ families, for example, can begin with the coming out practices that happen in everyday life, which, as scholars have asserted, can “disrupt the binary dualism of making history and making a life” and thus carry out activism to influence others in their everyday life (Fish, King, and Almack 2018, 1194).

To examine the relationship between daily life and activism, Sarah Pink (2012) considered it essential to think of our day-to-day life as a critical site for generating activism for future change. Therefore, small-scale actions in everyday life can be seen as “implicit activism” that encourage individuals to make change from scratch and from something small yet significant (Horton and Kraftl 2009). The “implicit activism” approach can become a crucial conceptual and practical tool to reconsider what can be “counted as activism.” When we think about activism, we might imagine a group of people getting together to exchange ideas and take actions collectively. Activism can be found, however, not only in collective actions but also in interpersonal interactions in both public and private spheres as well as with both family members and strangers. One can therefore argue that activism is also relational. In our everyday lives, we encounter people with different levels of

intimacy and familiarity, and from here, we can also consider these interpersonal interactions as a site for starting our implicit activism.

Human beings live not in a social vacuum but in complicated and intricate relationships with others. I have observed that gay fathers are aware of their social lives and relations with their families, friends, and other people in society. The main reason is that interactions with other people can influence how gay fathers-to-be think about reproduction and family building and cause either positive or negative impacts on their (future) children. As a result, gay fathers and prospective fathers have endeavored to create a better environment for their children and themselves. This is the motivation which has driven gay fathers in Taiwan to embark on their everyday life activism. They come out in order to secure a better future for their families.

4. Methods and data

This chapter stemmed from a research project on Taiwanese gay men's experiences of accessing transnational third-party reproduction to have children. The methodological approach adopted for this study is qualitative sociological research with ethnographic elements through in-depth semi-structured interviews and both onsite and online participant observations. This research was approved by the Ethical Committee at the Department of Sociology, the University of Cambridge. All participants were provided with sufficient information about the study, and consent forms were signed before the interviews.

I conducted approximately 40 in-person and online participant observations with TLFRA, which offers support for LGBTQ+ families in Taiwan, including reproductive seminars (usually co-hosted with fertility clinics), parenting workshops, and support groups. Before entering the fieldwork, I revealed my identity as both a researcher and a volunteer to the gatekeeper, TLFRA. I recruited my participants through multiple methods, including posting recruitment information on two online forums and my social media, snowballing from my informants, and reaching out to potential participants during the fieldwork.

I conducted in-depth interviews with gay fathers (n=21) and fathers-to-be (n=32). The interviews were in Mandarin Chinese since that was their native language, except when three of them preferred being interviewed in English. I transcribed and translated the recorded interviews myself, following the verbatim method to capture the detailed narratives. The duration of the interviews ranged from 73 to 161 minutes (with an average of 91 minutes). By listening to the recordings repeatedly to become familiar with the materials (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007), I immersed myself in the conversations. Transcribing was also part of the analytic process (Elliott 2005), and coding is a dynamic and inventive process for

researchers to “think with pens” (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, 26). The strategies I applied are initial and focused coding, followed by thematic analysis. Themes relevant to “coming out” appeared in different phases of the interviews, including their realization of reproductive motivations, their ambiguous feelings—hesitations and excitements—to tell others about their future children, and their sequential strategies to reveal their gay-father family to others after their children were born.

5. Gay fathers’ coming-out stories

Gay fathers came out by displaying their queer families and explaining third-party reproduction to others. There were various ways of displaying families (Finch 2007), and gay fathers often came out by sharing their reproductive journey with others. The “stories of reproduction,” as Marcia Inhorn (2015) proposed, can facilitate researchers in exploring reproductive practices by interpreting how people “tell their repro-stories.” Storytelling can be compelling not only for the researchers to grasp nuanced understandings of their informants’ lived experiences but also for the informants to have their voices. Through telling others the “new stories of intimate citizenship” (Plummer 2003), queer families can bring insight into the coming-out narratives that contribute to the LGBTQ+ movements at an individual level. Queer families’ coming-out experiences can be considered the proactive gestures of contesting heteronormativity. The everyday life of LGBTQ+ people should be considered a form of “implicit activism” (Horton and Kraftl 2009). I build upon the scholarly literature on displaying families and everyday life activism in order to explore the strategies gay fathers employed to tell their coming-out stories, seek recognition, and achieve activism (Figure 1).

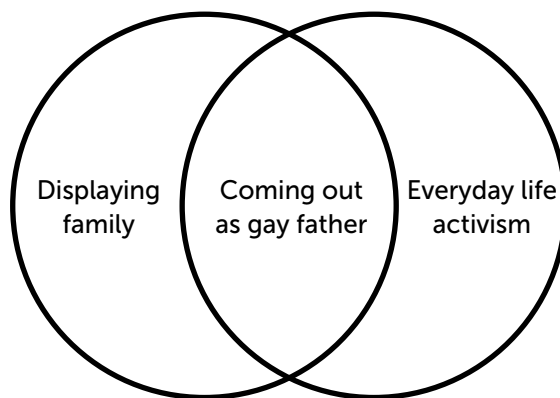


Figure 1: Displaying gay father families as everyday life activism

Some of my interlocutors' coming-out experiences followed a chronological trajectory—coming out in their young adulthood, then coming out when considering having children, and re-coming out as gay fathers after their children were born. Coming out was not necessarily, however, a chronological process or a necessary process for LGBTQ+ people. Hu Yu-Ying (2017) argues that Taiwanese LGBTQ+ people, compared to those in the Western contexts, prefer to stay "in-between coming out and closeted" and adopt an ambiguous strategy to maintain their familial relationships with others. This strategy did not amount to conforming to heteronormativity but in finding the possibilities of coming out in the future by sustaining harmony for now. A number of gay men I interviewed did not come out to their parents at their young adult age for the sake of a harmonious relationship, but might choose to come out by the time they are about to have children. Some only came out to their parents until their children were born. By illustrating gay fathers' coming-out stories, I discuss a variety of coming-out strategies employed by gay fathers to achieve everyday life activism.

5.1 Coming out with a grand gesture: "A newborn is a blessing for all"

Gay fathers sometimes planned a "special event" to come out, such as a grand ceremony, in order to signify how much prudence they had for the moment. This act differed from the "don't ask; don't tell" pattern that was often found in the LGBTQ+ people's experiences in Taiwan (Brainer 2019; Hu 2017).

We held a huge party—more than 100 people, my family and family friends—to celebrate our son's "full month party" (滿月酒 *manyue jiu*). My father and I arranged it together. I gave a long speech. I still recall the moment. I was so afraid that some of the relatives might get agitated when I came out. But it turned out to be a success. Everyone came forward and hugged me. I also posted the whole speech on my Facebook; I came out completely, even to those who were not at the party. (Ted, late 40s, married, father to a son)

At the party, Ted came out to the entire extended family and formally introduced his husband to all the family members who still recognized him as "a very close friend" at that time. He also talked about the journey of surrogacy and their baby's birth story. The queer family-making narrative Ted gave to his family was a way of displaying his gay-father identity and his gay-father family to others—which consisted of the details of how a gay couple became fathers through the medical procedure of third-party reproduction and their journey to the US.

Similarly, Tsou-Tsou came out to his family by bringing his husband to a family dinner and announcing that they were going to have a child:

We have stepped over that coming out thing. Now, we can live as who we really are in both of our families. My mom said she will take care of the baby for us. I think *we are just like normal families*. It has nothing to do with our sexuality. Take my siblings as an example. What they [my parents] are eager to do for my siblings, like childcare, they will very much want to do for us as well—all the same. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

After coming out to Tsou-Tsou and his husband's families, they visited each other's families-of-origin and felt treated just like other siblings in the family. For prospective gay fathers like Tsou-Tsou, coming out to families also indicated the "normalization" strategies they employed to "fit into" society, as Tsou-Tsou addressed his family as "normal" (Srnietana 2016).

In the theory of displaying families, Finch (2007) observed that family members displayed family by carrying out mundane daily tasks and housework as well as through family activities and interactions on special occasions, such as birthday celebrations and family trips. In the case of gay men, they came out on these special occasions in order to claim the veracity of their gay fatherhood. Some arranged family trips to the US to pick up their newborn babies together.

When we traveled to the US, my elder and younger sisters came together to help us take care of the child. It was a family trip for us. Because my partner could only be there for four days—he could not take too many days off from work. We [my sisters and I] spent four weeks there. Normally it takes around four weeks if you are not in a rush. Plus, we thought we could also have a nice vacation there. (Bruce, early 50s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Bruce's elder sister was an experienced child caretaker, and she traveled with Bruce to take care of his newborn baby. Bruce planned this journey as a family trip and hoped to create the memory of welcoming the baby as well as strengthen the family ties between Bruce and his family-of-origin. This family trip was a special event—a "display work" that Bruce employed to maintain the relationships with his family and create a "new kinship" via the practices of transnational reproduction. Bruce and his families were also able to later recount the trip in order to strengthen their bonds through the shared memory of this trip. The repetition of the family trip also became the display of the family to others, which showed gay men's alternative way of family making and how they sought familial support and recognition.

Similarly, some gay fathers came out to their families on a specific day, for example, their baby's one-month celebration—to gain familial recognition. They applied the "direct coming out strategy" to reveal their gay-father families. The gesture contained elements that could be traced back to the heteronormative way

of announcing a new family member in a gay version—they came out as a couple and shared their transnational reproductive journey of conceiving their children.

5.2 Coming out with reproductive aspirations: "I am gay, and I want to be a father"

Gay men gradually developed their aspirations of reproduction, which often took years as the information was difficult to access. As a result, many gay men lacked the "thinkability" of becoming parents (Smietana 2019, 2021).

When I found out I was gay, I was sad because I might not be able to have a child. After I saw other stories from the news coverage, I was so touched that I could have a child. I felt like this was something possible for a gay man. (Cohan, late 40s, married, father to two sons)

Cohan expressed his distress at imagining he could not have children when realizing his sexual identity. After years, Cohan, like many gay men I interviewed, acknowledged that there were possibilities to become fathers and gradually developed their "procreative consciousness" to envisage a future with children (Berkowitz, 2007: 185; Berkowitz and Marsiglio, 2007). Gay men still found, however, their sexuality contradicted by social reproductive expectations. In a study on UK non-heterosexual people's perception of reproduction, Pralat (2021) argued that non-heterosexual people required the coming out process to articulate their reproductive orientations when they encountered ambiguous procreative expectations from society and their families. Consequently, some gay men applied the strategy of "coming out with procreative aspirations":

When I was 30 years old—I was so afraid—I said to my father that perhaps I would adopt a child in the future. Then my father told me we had the financial resources and asked if I wanted to have a child that shared our family's blood ties. I did not dare to think about it until my father said so. It is not my money. (Justin, late 30s, in a stable relationship, father-to-be)

After Justin told his father that he wanted to have a child, his father suggested he consider surrogacy. Justin eventually told his father that he was gay. Justin's father hoped for a grandson to carry on their family line. For some gay men, like Justin, revealing their reproductive motivations before coming out as gay was a relatively tolerable way for their parents to accept their sexuality.

Derek did not reveal his sexual identity too enthusiastically either. Instead, he shared his reproductive plan with his parents first:

I did not say it out loud, but I sort of mentioned it several times. Like "dad, these dates with women are not going to work out. I am thinking about, maybe, giving birth to a child via a test-tube baby. Could I try to be together with a man?" (Derek, late 40s, single, father-to-be)

Derek did not come out to his father for years and attended obediently every “blind date” his father arranged for him. He said it was a conciliatory gesture to not “break his father’s heart.” When Derek started to think about having children, he realized that he had to come out to his father because “a fake story of a single heterosexual dad” just did not make any sense:

Is it even possible for a heterosexual single man who was so desperate to spend six million New Taiwan Dollars to have a surrogacy-born baby just because he could not find a woman to marry? (Derek, late 40s, single, father-to-be)

Interestingly, gay men’s reproductive intentionality oriented them towards the direction of coming out, which had not been considered a route to take for years or even decades. The hope of an upcoming grandchild becomes a potential way to connect gay men and their parents. Since some of the parents hoped for their sons to give birth to an heir to carry on their family name and were so desperate to be “upgraded as grandparents,” prospective gay fathers found it was easier to come out to their parents by implying the possibility of having children to soften their reactions toward their sexual identity.

Even for those who had already come out to their parents in their youth or before their self-realization of the desire for fatherhood, some of their parents still longed to become grandparents:

I came out when I was 35. They took it rather well, but they felt slightly sad that this thing—me being gay—would eventually lead to the end that they could not have grandchildren. I ultimately realized that my parents did not care so much about whether I would get married [to a woman] or not. The thing that bothers them the most is the assumption that if I am not going to marry someone, then I will never be able to have a child. Now I skipped the “marriage stage” and jumped right into the “childrearing stage,” I think this is a significant and vital decision for both me and my parents. (Luke, early 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

For Luke’s parents, the acceptance of having a gay son meant they had to accept their fate of not becoming grandparents in the future. Luke revealed his reproductive aspiration to his parents years later, however, and the future grandchild became a great joy and surprise for the exciting grandparents-to-be.

Howard also felt the same way that the coming of his son brought himself and his mother even closer than before:

I later realized that with two children joining our family, the relationship between my family and me improved. I eventually realized what it means when people say “the happiness of having grandchildren around.” This

is a great joy for my parents. (Howard, late 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Luke and Howard both came out somewhat chronologically—first, they came out as gay men and later, they came out with the reproductive aspiration. It still took time for them to realize that gay fatherhood is thinkable and feasible, and it also took some effort for them to come out once again to others with the new identity as gay fathers. With their families' support, these gay fathers shared the joys of becoming fathers, and their parents shared the joys of becoming grandparents. The displaying of gay father families, in these cases, has involved cooperation between the gay fathers and their families-of-origin.

5.3 Reasons to come out: "It is in the best interest of our children"

The main reason to come out as gay father was for the children's best interests. They believed that coming out to their families and the public was necessary since the familial and social recognition of their queer family was crucial to their children's wellbeing.

We cannot lie to others. This is for our children. We are coming out for our children. We cannot let our children feel like being in a queer family is a shame or a mistake. If we cannot be completely honest about our identity, then how can we teach our children in the future? We must be their model, their pioneer, to come out proudly. (Martin, late 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

The parents should come out for their children first. They should be the safeguard. (Richard, early 40s, married, father to two sons)

Most of my interlocutors shared similar viewpoints with Martin and Richard that coming out was necessary not for themselves but for their children. As queer parents, they were supposed to come out to others before their children were asked about their families. To come out and display their family proudly to others is a gesture to demonstrate the identity of queer families to their children.

The transition of the queer family—from a single (gay man) household or a co-habited (married) gay couple to gay dad(s) with child(ren) implied that it had become difficult for them to pass as "single-by-choice" or as "brothers/roommates" in heterosexual society.

Compared to heterosexuals, queer people encounter more significant social pressure; you have to face societal pressures and questions. Two of us can "hide in society," and we do not need to come out. Other people might ask, are you brothers or what? But we do not need to answer. But everything would be completely different if you had a child. Unless you instead hide everything all the time. But it is impossible. People would

say, why are you two men carrying a child? That sort of thing comes with more pressure. I heard from other queer parents; they consider this to be a re-coming-out. Although you have come out to most people around you, now you have to come out to the whole world. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Tsou-Tsou, a gay father-to-be, who was waiting for the surrogate candidates at the time of the interview, explained why gay men needed to come out if they considered having children. The dominant heteronormativity compelled many gay couples to face misrecognition of their relationship, like Tsou-Tsou—a scenario when others mistook him and his husband as brothers. He pointed out that this kind of misunderstanding was only acceptable if they did not have children.

Joe had similar feelings that he did not find it necessary to come out before he developed the reproductive aspiration:

Although I knew I was gay in college, I did not come out to others. Even now, I do not come out to others except those who are also queer. Not until recent years, when I thought about having a baby, did I consider coming out. I did not tell my parents directly, like, hey, I am gay, and I never took a boyfriend home. I never did that. I am not pushing them into accepting me as a gay son. They could tell others that I am single and unmarried. I am fine with this. Now the thing is, I am the one who tells them, I am going to find a surrogate and have a baby. (Joe, late 30s, single, father-to-be)

Once the gay couple have a child, they cannot hide from others. It was often termed “re-coming-out” to describe situations of gay men who were about to become fathers. It denotes how gay fathers came out for the second, third time, and more times. They felt like they had to come out “to the whole world” for their children.

After re-coming out to their families, gay fathers continued to encounter situations requiring them to come out repeatedly. Another milestone of coming out was when their child was about to enter the institutional education system:

Some gay fathers whose children are a bit older now—are about to enter elementary school. They are surveying schools and trying to understand the current situation. Many people joke that we need to compete to be elected as president of the Parent Association and become the one that has the power to influence others to protect our child. (Howard, late 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Howard joked about his conversation with other gay fathers on winning the presidential seat as means to protect their children from discrimination. Many gay fathers experienced anxiety when selecting a school for their children, for it would

be the first time that the children needed to interact with others without the presence of their parents. Most of the gay fathers, again, emphasized the importance of coming out openly as a strategy to avoid potential discrimination.

We went to the school for a visit before we made the decision. The teacher said something that impressed me. I asked the teacher, "We are a queer family, and we want to let our kids join this school. Is the school well prepared and ready for this?" Then the teacher said, "Oh, of course, you are like any other family." They were very welcoming. (Ben, late 30s, married, father to two daughters and a son)

My son is going to kindergarten now. I interviewed the principal of that kindergarten. I even tested them with a situation like, what if a kid asks my child, "Why don't you have a mother? Then, as the head of this kindergarten, what will you do?" Or ask them about gender education and all that. Like, "What will you do when celebrating Mother's Day?" (Luke, early 40s, married, father to a son and a daughter)

Ben and Luke shared their strategies of "interviewing" the kindergarten by coming out to the school directly on the opening day to test their attitudes towards queer families. Gay fathers often related that they were responsible for coming out for their children. The open display of gay father families in public is not only regarded as individuals' coming-out actions, but also as the representation of an emerging alternative family form in educational institutions and in wider Taiwanese society.

5.4 Relational coming-out: "It's for our children and our families-of-origin"

Some gay men did not come out to their families-of-origin until they gradually developed the concept of having children. Mike, who felt that he should come out before embarking on his reproductive journey, serves as an example:

My parents did not know [that I am gay]. They carry more pressure on their shoulders because they are in the traditional value system. My father is very traditional. That is the reason I have not come out to them. But now I am thinking about having a baby, and when I attended the event, they discussed what you should do after your child's birth. It is impossible to disguise. For example, when you and your partner bring your baby with you on the street, and then if someone comes up and asks about your baby, you cannot just lie. It is not good for your baby if you are not fully prepared to come out to others and explain your child's birth to others. There might be negative impacts on the child. Like, why are we cowering? Therefore, we should tell our families-of-origin the truth. (Mike, early 40s, in a stable relationship, father-to-be)

Mike was not alone in the difficult situation of staying in the closet. Many gay men chose not to talk about it with their families-of-origin, particularly their parents, who had grown up in a relatively conservative era. Mike realized, however, that “staying in the closet” would no longer be possible once he decided to have children. The initial reason he used to hide his sexuality from his parents was out of love, because he assumed his parents would be very distressed about his sexuality.

It was love for his future child that urged Mike to come out to his parents because he realized that it would be the best thing to do for his future children. The decision-making of coming out in the Taiwan context has been identified as “relational” and embedded within the complexity of family relationships (Hu 2017). Mike changed his mind from hiding to coming out when he transitioned from being a gay man to the role of becoming a gay father:

I have started to plan for coming out to my parents. I will tell them my plan to have a child. I am still planning how and when to come out. I am gradually giving them some information about my life. For example, they think that I am living by myself. But in fact, I am living with my partner. So, I told them that my partner was my “roommate.” From there, I want them to know that I have someone by my side, and then in the future, I can tell them what kind of relationship exists between my partner and me. (Mike, early 40s, in a stable relationship, father-to-be)

Mike planned to come out to his parents “step-by-step”—first coming out as a couple and then revealing his intention of becoming a father. Some parents of queer people did not necessarily hold hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people, but did not understand all that well what it was supposed to mean, and they manifested anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes out of misunderstandings and worries that their sons would be “abnormal.” To come out by saying, “I live with my roommate happily, and we can look after each other,” Mike reassured his parents that he was doing well with a loving partner. The message also implied that this couple was fully capable of taking care of themselves as well as their future children.

Gay men regarded coming out as a means of displaying a new family form—gay dad(s) with children—to their parents to reassure them that their “alternative ways of life” were content and fulfilled. Their coming-out-as-intended-gay-dad experiences also signified the repairing and sustaining relations with their parents that were once distanced because of their unspoken sexuality, yet now reconnected because of the upcoming children. Coming out to families-of-origin also intensified gay men’s aspirations to become parents:

I came out to my parents. This is a very important move. As I came out to my parents, the thought of having children became possible and thinkable. This made me start to plan to have children. I know it might

not apply to everyone, but coming out to my family of origin is crucial.
(Oliver, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Olive came out to his parents before started his reproductive journey. He felt like he might need support from his family while he was on the way toward parenthood. Families offered support to intended gay fathers emotionally, practically and financially.

We have spent a lot of money. I have already discussed this with my Mom, and we both agree that we will bring her with us to the US to pick up our baby in order to save money on hiring a nanny to go with us. Although now she is still running her business, she may retire in the coming years and be able to babysit my child. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Tsou-Tsou talked to his mother about childcare in the future, and his mother was willing to help. Tsou-Tsou and his husband, who had already spent a great deal of money on the ARTs and surrogacy, were grateful for what Tsou-Tsou's mother offered. For Tsou-Tsou's mother, it was also a blessing. She was happy to become a grandmother who could care for her grandchild. The coming-out practice in Tsou-Tsou's family united his families-of-origin with his new queer family.

The displaying of Tsou-Tsou and his husband's intimate relationship, as the coming out practices to their families-of-origin, also built up solidarity between their families-of-origin and their new-formed gay father family. This seeking of recognition could also be found in everyday life interactions with other family members:

Now I visit my younger sister, and she says, "Could you hold my baby for me for a while? My arms are sore." Although it is not helping all that much, I am willing to share some burden with her, even though it is just a tiny thing. I am sure my sister will do so once I have my child. Everyone can have a support system. (Tsou-Tsou, late 30s, married, father-to-be)

Tsou-Tsou felt that he was like his heterosexual siblings, who could receive help and support from this family unit. Finch (2007) has defined that the displaying of families can be found in trivial moments in everyday life to showcase the existence of a family. After coming out to their families, prospective gay fathers not only shared the intimate moments with their families, but also shared the expectations and joys of the upcoming children, which also signified the re-connection between gay fathers and their families-of-origin.

5.5 The empowerment of coming out: “We want the world to see our family”

In a heteronormative society, gay fathers always had to come out to display their queer families to others. By doing so, they not only protested for their rights and provided their children with an LGBTQ+-friendly environment to live in, but also empowered themselves, others, such as their families and educational institution staff, and their children.

We read them picture books about two dads when they were 4 or 5. One of their friends from the kindergarten asked my daughter—a little boy asked her, like, a hundred times, “Don’t you have a mother?!” Then my daughter answered, “I do not have a mom.” But the boy kept asking. My daughter came home and told me about this. She said to that boy, “I do not have a mother, and that is that.” My daughter is quite okay with this. They knew two healthy aunts [the surrogates] gave birth to them. They also tell others in the same way. (Ben, late 30s, married, father to two daughters and a son)

Ben’s daughter grew up immersed in the LGBTQ+ views provided by her two dads and found no difficulty coming out as a kid from a queer family. She naturally embodied the displaying of queer families by articulating her family formation to others who had doubts about it.

Our son started learning piano last year, and the teacher sometimes said, “You can go home and practice with your mom and dad.” And he said, “I don’t have a mother.” (Cohan, late 40s, married, father to two sons)

Cohan and Richard were quite relaxed when recounting the incident that their child’s piano teacher sometimes “forgot” they were a gay-father family. Their son’s reaction did not feel awkward, and he did not try to hide anything. From what his daddy and papa had taught him, it was natural to “come out” and tell others that “I do not have a mother” without having negative feelings. Most gay fathers developed their educational strategies of “giving them the tools” to deal with coming out rather than over-protecting them. Similarly, Bibby shared his viewpoint:

We cannot take care of everything for our children. As parents, we can teach them the courage to encounter difficulties and be there for them whenever they need us. It is my parenting strategy. I will build up their courage and let go of them to explore. But if they do need help, we will be there and support them. (Bibby, early 30s, married, father to two sons)

The gay fathers I interviewed shared similar ways of parenting. They came up with steps to fight against the heteronormative assumptive scripts of what a family

should look like. By doing so, they displayed their queer family in society with the hope of increasing the visibility of the diversity of family forms.

5.6 Diversities among gay father families: "Should I come out now if I am single?"

Among 53 interviewees, 10 of them were single. Others were either in a marriage or in a stable relationship, and were committed to child-raising. The two-dads-families tended to consider it necessary to come out. As for the single dads, most of them shared similar thoughts about coming out. A few of them were reluctant, however, to come out:

I do not think coming out to the family is necessary, even if I want to have a child, right? You can be single and have a child as a single parent. My parents are eighty-something, and I reckon this should not be all that hard for them to accept. I am single but want a child. That is that. I will tell them about surrogacy, but that is all they need to know. (Jim, early 40s, single, father-to-be)

Jim, a single father-to-be, felt that he did not need to come out to his parents since the family formation of a single dad and a child did not straightforwardly imply his sexual identity as gay. Jim applied the "semi-coming-out" strategy, meaning he only came out when necessary. Jim came out to the fertility clinics, for example, and the gay father community. Still, he did not feel comfortable coming out to his family at this point: "Perhaps it will change in the future because now I know people always say it is better for the child." The narrative from Jim demonstrated a different way of considering coming out as a gay father.

From Jim's story, however, it is apparent that coming out has become the mainstream pathway for Taiwanese gay fathers to follow. Consequently, Jim accepted the possibility of coming out in the future. He admitted that he was not in a hurry to come out for now, but he was still aware of the majority's viewpoint about coming out among the gay father community: it will be better for your child. The mainstream coming-out discourse showed that gay men considered it their responsibility to come out for themselves, their children, and the future generations of gay fathers-would-be.

Having said that, the stories of gay fathers presented in this study cannot represent all gay-father families and their coming-out experiences. This chapter, instead, provided a contextualized understanding of gay men's lived experiences of how they perceived their reproductive aspirations and transformed them into empowering coming-out strategies to gain recognition from their families and society. By doing so, gay fathers enacted everyday life activism by displaying their diverse queer families.

6. Conclusion

This chapter explored the coming-out experiences of Taiwanese gay men who decided to conceive their biologically related children with the help of third-party reproduction and build up queer families that were very different from the heterosexual majority in society. Some gay men came out to their parents at a relatively young age yet had difficulties coming out for the second time with their reproductive aspirations. Most of them found support from their families-of-origin after coming out with their procreative intentionality, and by doing so, reconfirmed their reproductive plans.

Gay fathers and fathers-would-be were determined to come out, which was a decision that was not often reached before they gradually developed their reproductive consciousness. They came out by presenting their multiple identities: gay men, gay men with procreative intentions, and gay fathers(-to-be). Gay fathers endeavored to create a transparent environment for their children to grow and to rebuild the connections with their families-of-origin to welcome their new family member together—their future children. Undergoing coming-out and displaying their queer families, gay fathers not only conducted everyday life activism, that changed other people's perspectives towards queer families, but also found a way to embrace their new identities as gay fathers.

For gay fathers, coming out is a form of displaying family to those who might have doubts or misunderstandings about LGBTQ+ families. "Displaying families" (Finch 2007) is the theoretical tool that I employed to analyze gay men's coming out strategies and the reasons behind their proactive decisions. Building on the rich empirical data and the theoretical framing of "doing and displaying families," I propose a new version of the concept: "displaying queer families." The idea of displaying families is aimed at presenting family practices, which are based on the concept of "doing families" (Morgan 2011b) to justify their familial relations and to be recognized by the others' witnesses. I, therefore, developed "displaying queer families" to demonstrate that Taiwanese gay fathers employed coming out strategies to carry out everyday life activism because they did not only come out to present their gay father families for themselves, but also for other people within and outside their queer families, including their children, their biological families, and future LGBTQ+ families. Despite the fact that gay fathers only joined the LGBTQ+ family community in the past two decades, they followed the pioneering lesbian mothers' activist spirits and developed it further by constantly voicing their gay father identities. Gay men's determination to envision and forge a better future, as well as their embodied actions of coming out to increase the visibility of their non-heterosexual family formations, denote the emerging "displaying queer families" as a pathway towards everyday activism among the gay father community.

Taiwanese gay fathers embraced their multiple identities—as gay men, as gay men with reproductive intentions, and as gay fathers—to construct diverse strategies of coming out—including “direct-coming-out,” “step-by-step-coming-out,” “semi-coming-out,” and constant “re-coming-out.” Gay fathers developed the discourse of coming out for the sake of their children and advocated for LGBTQ+ family’s rights. These gay fathers’ coming out actions echoed the blossoming LGBTQ+ rights movements in Taiwan, which made a huge achievement in 2019 to become the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. Along with the transitioning social atmosphere, gay fathers made it possible to come out more proactively in their personal lives. These gay fathers created queer families by having children and continued carrying out everyday life activism by displaying their queer families to wider society. The everyday life activism of “displaying gay father families” is gradually deconstructing the dominant heteronormative ideal family formations and embracing a promising, diverse, and inclusive future for all forms of family-making.

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NURSERY RHYMES, RITUALS, AND CULTURAL TRAUMA: A CONNOTATION OF “CHAIR MAIDEN” IN TAIWAN

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The purpose of this study is to analyze the custom of Chair Maiden, a child psychic divination ritual, through local records collected by folklorists in Taiwan since the 1930s. We suggest that the origin of this custom was to deal with collective traumas from similar experiences, mainly through rituals of warning and healing. To achieve self-healing, those participants who invoked the spirit of Chair Maiden also brought their personal traumatic experiences and confusions into the ritual activity, seeking recognition and answers. In Taiwan's rural towns, similar customs were practiced by young unmarried girls before the 1970s. There are five parts to the study. In the middle three parts, we conduct an inductive and qualitative analysis of the relevant rural stories, local nursery rhymes and ritual practices separately, using theories of cultural trauma. With a different attitude of resistance to power or abuse, the young participants were able to share their voices safely and have a friendly network for a reunion on certain days. Chair Maiden, not just a children's game or a folk psychic divination activity, represents collective traumatic injuries and hegemonic resistance among younger generations to release social pressure.

Keywords: Taiwan customs, nursery rhymes, divination activity, domestic violence, cultural trauma, cultural memory

1. Introduction

This paper explores the question of how a custom, Chair Maiden,¹ preserved and reflected a heartbreaking incident of child abuse in early Chinese society. It was

¹ In this study, we use the term “Chair Maiden” (椅仔姑 *yizigu*), which follows David Jordan's research in Taiwan during the 1960s. He mentioned that the more literary and more precise

performed on the fifteenth day of the first month (Shang Yuan Festival) or the eighth month (Mid-Autumn Festival),² which is an important full-moon night in spring and fall. Chair Maiden has its origins in a sad story about a three-year-old girl who finally died on a bamboo stool after a long period of domestic violence at the hands of her sister-in-law. The girl's spirit was tied to the stool with no other options. This story gradually became part of local rhymes and evolved into a way for children and unmarried people to divine after inviting the spirit of this legendary girl to be embedded in a bamboo chair. Chair Maiden was a popular ritual for psychic divination in Taiwan up until the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among young girls. According to the current collection of nursery rhymes in Minnan dialect, before formal divination, unmarried young participants in the ritual performed unique ritual practices to call "maiden" with these specific rhymes. Chair Maiden is also named differently as 關三姑 (*guansangu*) or 三歲姑 (*sansuigu*) to identify a girl's age of three.

Using local records collected by folklorists in Taiwan since the 1930s, we interpret the cultural trauma in multiple retrospective accounts from rural stories, local nursery rhymes, and ritual practices. Previous research suggests that Chair Maiden originated from the belief in the ancient toilet deity Zigu (紫姑) in China (Ikeda 1944, 227; Wu 1943a, 26–29). As we have observed, the belief in Zigu developed into two networks: one was the literary ritual of the gentry class, the so-called "spiritual writing,"³ and the other was the divination of the illiterate class, to which the Chair Maiden belongs. The earliest historical record about the goddess Zigu is from a novel *A Garden of Marvels* (異苑 *Yi yuan*) by Liu Jingshu (劉敬叔, ?–468). It is said that Zigu was a vice-wife/concubine of a family. She was despised by the head wife who used to abuse her and made her clean the toilet. Eventually, Zigu died of abuse on the fifteenth day of the first month, and since then people have been calling her spirit in the toilets or pigsties by making a doll of her on that day. After the Song Dynasty, the image of Zigu was transformed into at least three images such as a goddess of the underworld, a talented woman, and a female immortal (Chao 2008, 94; Chiu 2016, 82; Tao 2016, 54–55). No matter how much her identity changed, Zigu was still described as having a feminine appearance.

term is "lonely maiden" (孤娘 *guniang*), pronounced the same as the term for "young maiden" (姑娘 *guniang*), which refers to a girl who has died in childhood without being married. Having a deceased, maiden daughter is a disgrace to a family in Taiwanese custom. For further details, see chapter 8 in Jordan (1999).

² This custom in Tainan normally took place at the Shang Yuan Festival, according to "Events Calendar of Tainan I" (台南年中行事記 (上) *Tainan nenjū gyōjiki* (jō)) published in 1942. The event was usually held at the Shang Yuan Festival in Taichung and at the Mid-Autumn Festival in Changhua. See Liu (2011, 82).

³ About spiritual writings, see Jordan and Overmyer (1986, 36–88).

This type of female-driven divination is a model for vulnerable women seeking psychological comfort through the ritual process in a society of gender inequality (Xu 2006, 47; Lin 2011, 99).

With an obvious difference, the religious identity of Zigu was localized interestingly in Taiwan. According to the Japanese *Journal of Taiwan Customs* (台灣風俗誌 *Taiwan fuzokushi*), published in 1921, the process of Chair Maiden, namely *guansangu*, is briefly introduced without any information about ritual participants (Kataoka 1921, 845). During the 1930s and 1940s, several folklorists investigated the origins of Chair Maiden and its practicing status in different areas of the Taiwan island (Suzuki 1934; Ikeda 1941; Wu 1943b, 34). Suzuki gives us more details of the history, ritual procedure, and rhyming text of "Chair Maiden" (Suzuki 1934, 301–303). By likening it to a ritual function, Ikeda Toshio demonstrates that Chair Maiden not only came from Zigu, but was also similar to the divination game *kokkuri* (狐狗狸) in Japan (Ikeda 1941, 38).

The narrative context of Chair Maiden demonstrates a common tragedy with the lower social classes in the rural suburbs of Taiwan by presenting three disadvantaged groups: women, minors, and chronically abused individuals. Chair Maiden, in the form of a little girl, even became the patron saint of children. Some scholars also suggest that Chair Maiden is a remnant of a ritual in which under-age women were sacrificed for a good harvest (Chen 2004; Yang 2010). Even Liu (2016, 121) explores the idea that paying tribute to the unfortunate three-year-old sister-in-law is a kind of poignant legend that has been passed down through folklore and beliefs, made up by people to explain its origin. Therefore, whether Chair Maiden is an imitation of Zigu's beliefs or an inheritance of sacrificial rites, we believe that the ritual purpose of this case needs to be further explored.

We propose that Chair Maiden, not just a game for children or a folk activity of psychic divination, represents collective traumatic injuries and a kind of hegemonic resistance among younger generations to release social pressure. As with the mythic traditions in the case of Chair Maiden, we can see a similar linear development carrying voices from the ancient past to the present even across the strait between mainland China and Taiwan. In the following sections of this paper, we consider the ways in which tales and nursery rhymes carry and transport traumatic memories. By re-examining these narratives, which have been collected on Chair Maiden in previous studies, we first attempt to generalize the main appeal or commonality. This cultural phenomenon can be better understood in terms of social psychology. Drawing primarily on theories of cultural trauma, we therefore interpret nursery rhymes and rituals relevant to the theme of Chair Maiden.

Due to the limitations of the current literature and fieldwork, we have collected only Minnan texts for nursery rhymes without other dialectal versions in Taiwan, despite the fact that Hakka and Cantonese versions were also practiced in other

communities in China.⁴ This study hopes to show more memories of women's disadvantaged existence in oral literature. As one scholar reminds us, the exclusion of the lived experience of Taiwanese civil society outside of modernization, especially the lives of uneducated women, has been one of the shortcomings of colonial studies in Taiwan (Hong 2020, 179). Beyond the official records, we need to see more of the daily activities of women and children that have been less well documented and noticed. Traditional customs and songs as a supplement can provide more insight into the will to survive of these underprivileged. In the following parts, the custom of Chair Maiden will be analyzed through stories, nursery rhymes and the ritual itself, these three main aspects.

2. Who is "Chair Maiden": the story and its cautionary character

Japanese folklorists have collected many folk tales in various regions in Taiwan (Kataoka 1921; Suzuki 1941). Despite incomplete information, like an unknown place or the names of the characters in those stories, we see the basic plot of Chair Maiden in Taiwan, a three-year-old girl who suffered chronic abuse at the hands of her sister-in-law. Compared with the story of Zigu, it is the same domestic violence scenario, but the victims have changed from concubines in Zigu to more vulnerable children here. Eventually, it presents the historically disadvantaged position of Chinese women, particularly young girls in families. Even in the story of Zigu and Chair Maiden, both about women, age and power differentials can lead to the re-oppression of younger women by older women who have been oppressed in the past, not just patriarchal oppression of women.

Although there is no obvious difference in the stories of Chair Maiden from area to area, there are still a few points worth noting in the description. According to the folk tales collected by Chen Ching-hao and Wang Chiu-kui in Taiwan (1989), this little girl had a tragic experience before her death:

Chair Maiden, who lost her parents at the age of three, was raised by her brother but was always abused by her sister-in-law. She often ate cold food and had to do housework. Because the stove door was too high and she was small, she always had to squat on a stool to add wood to the fire. Her sister-in-law also insisted that the fire in the stove not be put out, so Chair Maiden had to stay by the stove all day. One night during the Shang Yuan Festival, her sister-in-law went out to watch the lantern festival. Chair Maiden was not allowed to leave the house. She stayed

⁴ Folklore surveys have shown that Chair Maiden was prevalent in the towns of Fujian and Guangdong, as well as in the Chinese communities of Malaysia and Taiwan. In Hakka villages, this custom is known as "Basket Maiden" (籃仔姑 *lan zigu*), and the ritual is to use a bamboo basket as a divination tool. See Shen and Shao (2007).

in front of the stove, facing the fire, and fell asleep, leaving the world in a beautiful dream with her mother.⁵

Another story about Chair Maiden has a similar plot, but has more details about the evil behavior and judgment of her sister-in-law:

After Chair Maiden was born, her parents died shortly after. She was abused by her sister-in-law. When she was only three years old, she had endless chores to do all day long. Once her sister-in-law branded her with fire for breaking a bowl. She died on the stool the next day. Her sister-in-law buried her body under the pig trough where the pigs ate food for fear of her being discovered missing. Later, her sister-in-law often saw the ghost of Chair Maiden sitting in front of the cooker or under the eaves and shaking. Soon after, she died of illness.⁶

From the above two examples, we see a powerless girl, without any dependable persons in her family, silently suffering domestic abuse. Such stories also indirectly illustrate the social status of girls before the middle of the twentieth century in Taiwan. In addition, folktales related to adopted girls or daughters-in-law often have the impression of abuse, reflecting people's collective sympathy and psychological compensation (Chen 2012). Modern experiments have confirmed that prolonged domestic violence at an early age affects physiological development. A smaller hippocampal volume in adult women with major depressive disorders was observed only in those who had a history of severe and prolonged physical and/or sexual abuse in childhood (Vythilingam et al. 2002). When these experiences of suffering were brought into the public discourse of storytelling, they provided collective and inherited memories, carrying what should be remembered as well as becoming a warning.

The story of Chair Maiden is therefore part of the social reality of an agrarian society that favored men over women. Family violence, a crisis of survival for minors, also has a long but obscure history. It forms a collective image of a disadvantaged group of girls in early Taiwan. Such a narrative of abuse told of an unchanging and deep cultural trauma through folk tales, nursery rhymes or

⁵ The original story in Chinese: "椅子姑，三歲喪父母，由哥哥撫養，卻受盡嫂嫂的虐待。她常吃冷飯殘羹，並得擔負全家勞動。燒火時，因灶門高，人矮小，不得不蹲在椅子上往灶裡添柴。嫂嫂又規定，灶裡的火苗不能熄滅，椅子姑只好終日守在灶邊。元宵節晚上，嫂嫂出去看熱鬧，卻不准她離家一步。椅子姑只好仍坐在灶前，面對著火苗，在灶前睡著了，並在夢見媽媽的美夢中離開了人間。" From Chen and Wang (1989, 68–69), cited in Liu (2011, 88–89).

⁶ The original story in Chinese: "椅仔姑生下不久便父母雙亡。兄嫂進門後被兄嫂虐待。她才三歲，成天便有做不完的家務。有一次因打破碗，嫂嫂用火燒烙她。隔天她就死在椅子上了。嫂嫂為了怕人發現她的罪行，就把小姑的屍體埋在豬吃食物的豬槽下方。後來嫂嫂就常看到，椅子姑的鬼魂坐在爐灶前或屋簷下搖晃著。不久，嫂嫂也就因病而死了。" From Hu and Chen (2001, 84–95), cited in Liu (2011, 88–89).

ritual ways. This is also the case for those who accumulate resentment from oppressed groups because of events such as genocide and catastrophic tragedies, as they develop their own collective consciousness and identity. Over the last two decades, cultural sociologists have elaborated on cultural trauma in terms of collective memory and identity, starting from the suffering experiences of oppressed and oppressed African-American individuals and their communities (Alexander 2004; Caruth 1996; Eyerman 2019). Since cultural trauma comes from a variety of sources, more than one way of interpreting what trauma looks like can be observed. In the case of Chair Maiden, it became a process of trauma healing and of vigilance when a traumatic story is told.

3. "Chair Maiden" in local nursery rhymes

During the Chair Maiden ritual process, the singing of nursery rhymes is an essential moment for participants to bond and then make a connection between the real world and the spiritual world. The content of the nursery rhymes, an important basis of the ritual, conveys the state of mind and the wishes of participants. We abridge two nursery rhyme texts from the collection of Minnan language songs in Yunlin, a central part of Taiwan. The lyrics in translation are as follows:

Three-year-old maiden and four-year-old sister.
Lotus flower embroidered words.
You're three years old, Maiden.
You're wearing a white shirt and a black collar.
I'll share good food with you.
It's better to share with you.
Kissing and kissing vines.
The vines are white and white.
A path leads to Nai-Ho
to the bridge of Nai-Ho
My feet and hands are shaking now.⁷

⁷ The original rhyme in the Chinese and Minnan language is:

三歲姑四歲姐 *Sann-hoe ko, si-hoe ji*
金蓮花繡言語 *Kim-lian-hoe, siu-gian-gu*
言語過 姑仔今年你三歲 *Gian-gu koe, ko-a kin-ni li sann-hoe*
穿白衫 烏領腔 *Chheng peh-sa, o-nia khng*
好食分你食 *Ho-chiah pun li chiah*
分你姑仔較是親 *Pun li ko-a khah-si chhin*
親啊親親茗藤 *Chhin-a-chhin, chhin eng-tin*
著藤白波波 *Chhioh-tin peh-pho-pho*
一條小路過奈何 *Chit-tiau sio-lo kue Nai-ho*

The sky is clear and the earth is so bright.
 Please come out, three-year-old Maiden.
 There are flowers and powder in front of you.
 There's also betel nut heart, Ganoderma leaves, and vines.
 It doesn't matter if it's you or me.
 Sharing with our three-year-old Maiden is because we are closer.⁸

One has to recite simple prayers when greeting Zigu (Tao 2017, 59–60). Chen (2004, 143) also called these rhymes “spell songs” (訣術歌謠 *jueshu geyao*), meaning songs with mnemonic and magical power. Nursery rhymes can be used as a subtle form of communication when combined with games or simple rhythms. In contrast to written communication, nursery rhymes gather more knowledge from the bottom up through oral communication. More specifically, these nursery rhymes convey ideas and even sympathy for those children who have also experienced abuse in simple words, while preserving the underlying clues. Nursery rhymes are not only the most traditional form of preschool education but also an important link in the transmission of values and virtues between generations. In addition, children's rhymes often preserve references to cultural entities that have disappeared from contemporary life (Arleo 1997, 399). In other words, rhymes provide transitions to “teachable moments” in children's daily environments (Mullen 2017, 46).

Another kind of resonance is realized through the lyrics of nursery rhymes. From the above two parts of the rhyme lyrics, the most important concept is to make a family out of a three-year-old Maiden by sharing food. In the process of singing, there is an emphasis on the fact that the participants are not separate from each other. This functions as a gathering power, they accompany the three-year-old Maiden during singing in order to focus the main will of the participants. Language play contributes to children's emotional development. Nursery rhymes can serve as a tool to teach children about feelings. Children who have strong, positive relationships with their primary caregivers also experience a world in

行到奈何橋 *Kiann kau Nai-ho-kiau*

腳亦搖手亦搖 *Khak-ia-io chhiu-ia-io*

The rhyme is collected in Hu and Chen (2001, 56).

- ⁸ The original rhyme in the Chinese and Minnan language is:
 天清地靈靈 *Thian-chheng-chheng, te-leng-leng*
 請您三歲姑出頭前 *Chhia lin Sann-hoe-ko chhut-thau-cheng*
 頭前亦有花亦有粉 *Thau-cheng ia-u hoe ia-u hun*
 亦有檳榔心芝葉藤 *La-u pin-nng-sim chi-hiooh-tin*
 毋分他 毋分您 *Bo-hun, bo-hun lin*
 分阮三姑有較親 *Hun gun Sann-ko u-khah chhin*
 The rhyme is collected in Hu (1996, 118).

which their needs are valued, so they can become equipped to show empathy to others (Mullen 2017, 51–52). This kind of sympathy is strengthened by the annual group singing. Reading through the nursery rhymes of Chair Maiden, there is no obvious expression of resistance to power. Instead, these lyrics show the power of acceptance in sharing food together.

Following Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, the speech act is a crucial method for reconstructing traumatic experiences. He focuses on the ways in which trauma becomes and remains public through the mediation and interpretation of trauma by political actors and the mass media (Alexander 2004, 11–12). In this sense, such narratives of suffering in the name of trauma should be neither personal nor individual, but instead shared, collective and communicative. Eyerman (2019, 25) defines cultural trauma as "the memories of a shared past that are passed on through ongoing processes of commemoration." He points out that cultural trauma is a symbolic narrative that reflects the collective consciousness of society, which may include factors such as (1) timing, (2) the political context, (3) how authority is exercised, (4) the content of mass-mediated representations, and (5) the presence and performance of carrier groups (Eyerman 2019, 6).

Nursery rhymes are symbolic narratives with a satirical function, so through rhyming and singing, ceremonies and rituals, narratives, and storytelling about what and how such a violent event in history had happened and how it had affected their communities. Memories can be deeply social in the sense that they are shaped by our interactions with the people, objects, and institutions that make up society, without necessarily being widely shared (Sutton 2008, 158). However, cultural trauma as a collective memory was to be evoked and conjured in the service of formulating an identity. As a result, a set of fixed rituals becomes an outlet for collective cultural trauma.

This kind of cultural trauma was often characterized not only through folklore rhyming and chanting as rituals, but also in literature. Lucy Brisley (2015) elaborates on the Francophone postcolonial experience, arguing that while the rituals of mourning and invoking suffering spirits were meant for the absent narratives of the oppressed in history, the victims were able to speak for themselves in the emergence of folk songs and rhymes. James Mellis (2019) points out how fictive literature could also narrate the African American suffering experiences based on their spiritual traditions such as conjuring voodoo, and hoodoo spirits. The nuanced distinction between fiction and non-fiction narratives of trauma should be delicate and sophisticated, yet both serve the formulation and formation of collective memory and identity.

4. Contextualizing the ritual of “Chair Maiden”

Chair Maiden had survived not only because of stories or nursery rhymes, but above all because of a traditional divination ritual. The practice revolved around young girls singing and holding a four-legged bamboo stool in their hands. In some cases of this custom in Lugang, Taiwan, bamboo baskets were used for divination, therefore, one scholar in Taiwan theorizes that this custom was a common form of artefact worship (Chien 2011, 23). We have seen, however, that Chair Maiden was often used in Taiwan’s ritual practices with a bamboo stool, which was an ordinary piece of furniture in Taiwanese homes. During the divination stage, the questions asked are usually based on the privacy of the main participant, such as their age or month of birth. Further questions would then progressively ask the participants about their concerns. The response from the bamboo stool as answers are simply expressed in terms of “yes” or “no,” or are answered by the number of times the bamboo chair is struck.

Through the accounts of some folklore surveys, such as *Journal of Taiwan Customs* (1921), the general course of the ceremony was as follows:

First, a chair is placed in the center of the hall and covered with clothes or cloth, then several people surround the chair and offer scissors, ruler, powder, rouge, and flowers. During the burning of gold paper and incense, everyone chants a mantra together, and then the center of the chair vibrates. Those standing around can ask about the year’s abundance of good or bad, whether the disease is cured or not, whether there will be loss of money, whether to travel, the age of the people around and so on. If the chair answers that the disease is cured, the legs of the chair will vibrate.⁹

Another text recorded by the historian Lien Heng (1878–1936) also mentions that there was a ceremonial taboo during the ritual process of calling Chair Maiden:

On the eve of the Mid-Autumn Festival, children gathered in the courtyard. Two of them would hold a bamboo chair, cover it with a woman’s dress, put it in a bun, prepare mirrors, flowers and rice, and knives and rulers, burn incense and paper, and recite incantations to greet the “Zigu” (the so-called “Chair Maiden” in Taiwan). When they arrive, their chairs

⁹ The original text in Chinese is:

所謂椅仔姑, 是在陰曆八月十五日夜晚進行的, 先把一張椅子擺在廳堂中央, 在椅子上用衣服或布覆蓋起來, 然後幾個人圍著椅子, 旁邊供奉著剪刀、尺、白粉、胭脂、鮮花等東西, 並且燒金紙和線香, 大家一起唸唱咒文, 這時中央的椅子便會震動起來, 站在周圍的人就可問年的豐凶、事的好壞、疾病的痊癒與否、失財與否、旅遊可否、周圍人的年齡等等。如果椅子姑回答疾病可以痊癒, 那椅腳就會震動一下。

will move, and they will answer any questions about good or bad luck.
If you hear the voice of your sister-in-law, the god will suddenly stop.¹⁰

The above description shows the separation of the same gender but different generations in this ritual. As the legendary sister-in-law is taboo in the ritual, the presence of an elderly woman in the ritual may interrupt the divination or cause it to malfunction. This reflects the fact that the older generation is not welcome to see or participate in it. Young participants usually prepare a rice spoon to dress up as a female figure to invoke spirits before the calling. Similarly, in ancient Europe, folks used to tie grains into female figures, known as Corn Mother and Corn Maiden or boudoir brides, as a symbol of fertility and to pray for a good harvest (Frazer 1922). Because of the similarity of this process, some scholars have suggested that Chair Maiden has the same ritual purpose or even an extended transformation of the living sacrifices (Chen 2004; Yang 2010). Corn Maiden in Europe was a springtime custom of the peasantry, there were no obvious restrictions on the performers and participants of the ritual. Therefore, the biggest difference between the two customs of Corn and Chair Maiden lies in the identity of the participants.

In the field of cultural anthropology, there are still associations of power and status when it comes to chairs. Different materials and uses of chairs also depict different identities. Interestingly, the ancient Chinese customs preferred people to kneeling-sitting position on mats to limit their spontaneous movement in group circumstances. In contrast, it seemingly offered greater room for freedom and individuality while sitting in chairs and stools in Western cultures (Wu 1973). In the case of Chair Maiden, thrones were potent symbols of authority, while bamboo chairs, more precisely "stools" without any support for the back or arms, are substitutes of plebeian life, which were accessible furniture in common families in the south of China and even in Taiwan. Short stools appear in daily life with people doing crafts or temporary rests. In contrast to the literary model of spiritual writings, a chair as a ritual game reflects one of the characteristic pieces of evidence for the participation of the underage illiterate group in the activity. Also unlike the mode of spirit-medium through a physical body as *danggi* in Taiwan (Chao 2002),¹¹ Chair Maiden is much closer to a Ouija board, which is normally used by two or more participants who place their hands lightly on top of a triangular

¹⁰ The original text in Chinese is:

中秋之夕，小兒女集庭中。兩人扶一竹椅，上覆女衣一襲，裝義髻，備鏡奩、花米、刀尺之屬，焚香燒紙，口念咒語，以迓「紫姑」（臺人謂之「椅仔姑」）。至則其椅能動，問以吉凶則答。如聞呼嫂聲，則神忽止。

¹¹ According to Chao's study, *danggi*, also expressed as *jitong* (乩童) in Mandarin, is the Taiwanese term for a type of spirit medium who acts as a mouthpiece for the deity that possesses him or her.

planchette (Andersen et al. 2019). By conjuring “someone” with an object (Soong 2001; Soong 2010; Soong 2014), the spirit that had suffered traumatic experiences in history was to reappear with the absent object (in the case of Chair Maiden, it was the chair).

Participants show fear and anticipation of the unknown during the ceremony. They prepare offerings of female symbols such as rouge and flower to welcome the spirit of the chair, while the crowd chants a song repeatedly until the bamboo chair is animated. To ensure that it is the spirit of the chair and not some other spirit, the authenticity of the spirit will be verified through a question-and-answer session. Most of the divination activities of the world’s peoples have evolved from divination for the group to divination for the individual. The function of the former is to unify the views of the group to support the effectiveness of the social system. The latter, on the other hand, focuses on removing personal doubts and soothing anxiety (Lee 1978). The theater and performance scholar Rossella Ferrari (2020, 212) reports from the East Asian colonial experience that the staging of ‘ghostly’ testimonies of traumatic experiences not only compelled the testimony of past suffering but also disrupted the colonial authority’s determination of present and future narratives, while reshaping the authentic voice of the victims.

Rituals often play the role of handling human affairs and relations while securing and renovating structural and hierarchical orders. By means of rituals and customs, the senior members of the group take responsibility for maintaining the sustainability of their society. In contrast, the juniors, with less understanding of how such rituals and customs apply to society, are unsatisfied with the seniors keeping rituals and customs that were rather “out of fashion” in times of change. Collective representations are “the result of an extensive process of collaboration with a temporal and not only a spatial dimension” (Durkheim et al. 1980). Following the Durkheimian understanding of “organic solidarity,” rituals are seen as a way of encapsulating the collective memory and consensus of the community (Greenwald 1973; Stephenson 2015; Ptacek 2015).

Through rhymes, chants, incantations, and cults, the memories of ancestral communities were spoken and preserved in verbal and non-verbal forms of performance. These forms are even more vital and valuable than the erection of monuments of trauma. For communities that had suffered oppression, such rhymes and lyrics were meant to retell the stories of their suffering ancestors and thus comfort their cultural trauma. Victor Turner (1969) has pointed out that ritual functions socially as a symbolic interaction of individuals and communities, whereas in a historical dimension, rituals play the interfacial and liminal role of exchanging and consolidating communal values, codes, and habits, to resist the structural authority of political oppression. In other words, such rituals represented those who had experienced domestic and state violence. Through the repetition

of songs and the collective mode of sharing during the ceremony, some wounds in the past, in the deeper mind, can be seen and healed in public.

From the perspective of ritual functions, Chair Maiden presents a correct model of self-identification. In this case, firstly, a ritual provides another specific collectivity with which to identify. Secondly, it can provide functional roles that satisfy an individual's core identity or self. Thirdly, it can provide status, both through simple membership and through the provision of specific roles to be played at certain times of the year. Finally, it can provide a sense of inner strength that enables individuals to cope with their increasingly complex lives in an increasingly complex and postmodern Taiwan (Katz and Rubinstein 2003, 13). Chair Maiden is a sympathetic ritual but powerful enough to heal the wounds of participants at the same time. The annihilation of experience at the core of what we think of as personal trauma is never entirely divorced from larger social and political modes of denial (Caruth 2016, 111). As a ritual practice for unmarried girls, we believe that Chair Maiden would fulfill these religious functions and transform a platform for the communication of potential grief and trauma for participants.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to convey the custom of Chair Maiden through the local records in Taiwan. We conduct an inductive and qualitative analysis of the related rural tales, local nursery rhymes, and ritual practices. Situating the discussion into the holistic social and environmental systems, we see the evolution of the ritual Chair Maiden being localized in Taiwan. Analyzed through the lens of cultural trauma, we believe that Chair Maiden is more than just the game that Japanese scholars thought it was.

We consider this special religious phenomenon as well as its historical context. Chair Maiden shows the collective image of an underprivileged group of girls in Taiwan before the 1970s. Like the mythic traditions in the case of Chair Maiden, we can see a similar linear development carrying voices from the ancient past to the present even across the strait between mainland China and Taiwan. Therefore, perhaps in remembrance of the deceased, to achieve self-healing, those participants who called upon the Chair Maiden's spirit also brought their personal traumatic experiences and confusions into the ritual activity, seeking recognition and answers. With a different attitude of resistance to power or abuse, the young participants were able to share their voices safely and have a friendly network for a reunion on certain days.

To conclude this chapter, Chair Maiden, a memory of a death ritual in Taiwan, covered some traumatic experiences, but dealt with them in a positive way. Fortunately, some of the oral literature has been preserved, and one can learn

more about the religious entertainment and healing methods of early Taiwanese women. Through the three interfaces of stories, rhymes, and rituals, a collective pain was transmitted from generation to generation. We observe in the ritual a resistance to the prohibition of adult participation, and a tenderness towards the vulnerable. It is hoped that through the discovery and collection of multilingual texts, further comparative analyses can be carried out by future scholars.

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NARRATING WOMEN'S BODIES AND VIOLENCE: TESTIMONIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE VICTIMS IN JAPAN

Chiara Fusari

Rape myths and sexism fuel victim-blaming tendencies and the stigma around sexual violence resulting in victims' silence and shame. As demonstrated in recent years by the #MeToo movement, victims' voices play an important role in spreading awareness about the reality of sexual violence and showing how widespread the problem is. This chapter investigates how victims' stories and testimonies can contribute to challenging dominant narratives about sexual violence in contemporary Japan. What alternative narratives do they present and how can they be politically relevant to bring about change? To do so, an analysis of three case studies of women, who went public with their experience of sexual violence and became advocates and activists themselves, has been conducted. Analyzing the memoirs of the three women, this chapter shows how, by reclaiming their voices, victims not only can empower themselves, but also contribute to placing the issue on the public agenda.

Keywords: sexual violence, gender, activism, social movement, feminism, Japan

1. Introduction

Since the late 2010s, sexual violence in Japan has increasingly gotten attention becoming a topic of discussion in media, politics, and society. In 2017, the #MeToo movement spread worldwide, reaching also Japan, resulting in a series of high-profile cases, such as a journalist accusing the at the time vice minister of finance of sexual harassment. The Penal Code's articles on sex crimes were reformed twice, in 2017 and 2023. In 2022, Gonoï Rina¹ publicly denounced the

¹ The chapter presents Japanese names in Japanese naming order, family name first and given name second.

sexual harassment she had suffered when she was a member of the Self Defense Forces. In 2023, the BBC released a documentary exposing the sexual abuse of young boys perpetrated, since the 1970s, by Johnny Kitagawa, founder of one of the most famous talent agencies in Japan. While an increasing number of victims are finding the courage to speak up and denounce the violence they have suffered, it is a rather recent phenomenon. In fact, for a long time, sexual violence was considered a taboo topic, and many victims are still driven to silence and shame. Going public and denouncing sexual violence is not an easy choice as victims expose themselves to great risks. Social reactions to disclosure, such as slander, victim-blaming, or secondary victimization,² and the lack of institutional support perpetuate silence, whether it is self-silencing or being silenced (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023).

Storytelling "is a powerful tool in the fight to dismantle the culture of silence surrounding sexual and gender-based violence" (Guarini 2023, 261). This chapter focuses on sexual violence against women, and investigates how victims' stories and testimonies can contribute to challenging dominant narratives about sexual violence in contemporary Japan. A dominant narrative is defined as a culturally shared moral and ethical framework for understanding experiences that "serves to restrict definitions of rape and determines who can be a victim and who can be a perpetrator" (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 500). The silencing of victims contributes to making sexual violence invisible, hindering social justice and change. Victims' voices therefore have the potential to disrupt such silence. What alternative narratives do victims' stories present and how are they politically relevant? The chapter aims to address these questions by looking at the experiences of three Japanese women victims of sexual violence who decided to publicly tell their stories and take action to contribute to social change: Kobayashi Mika, Yamamoto Jun, and Itō Shiori.

This chapter applies two important concepts, rape culture and victims' voices. Rape culture is defined as "one that normalises and excuses rape, a social context in which the desires of privileged aggressors are prioritised over the comfort, safety, and dignity of marginalised populations that are seen as targets, as prey" and it is "slut-shaming, and victim-blaming, and, of course, heterosexist" (Nicholls 2021, 26–27). Rape culture is a form of structural violence which is "violence [that] is built into the structure [of a society] and shows up as unequal

² Secondary victimization can be defined as "when the victim suffers further harm not as a direct result of the criminal act but due to the manner in which institutions and other individuals deal with the victim. [It] may be caused, for instance, by repeated exposure of the victim to the perpetrator, repeated interrogation about the same facts, the use of inappropriate language or insensitive comments made by all those who come into contact with victims" (European Institute for Gender Equality 2016).

power and consequently as unequal life chances" (Galtung 1969, 171, quoted in Nicholls 2021, 16). A fundamental element that results from and at the same time sustains rape culture, are so-called rape myths. They are views of rape constructed in a male-dominated and patriarchal society that rely on stereotypical gender roles and create a climate hostile to victims shifting the blame onto them while simultaneously justifying or rationalizing the perpetrator's behaviors (Fa 2007, 5–6; Howard Valdivia et al. 2023). As such, they play a crucial part in informing people's (mis)understanding of sexual violence at all levels of society. Rape myths not only inform preconceptions of what sexual violence is, but they also construct an image of an "ideal victim" (Tsunoda 2001, 99), affecting how society perceives and circulate victims' testimonies.

These concepts will provide the analytical framework to understand the experience of sexual violence of Kobayashi, Yamamoto, and Itō, the significance of their decision to come forward with their names and faces, and the consequences of their choice to speak out. Through their stories, the chapter looks at the role of victims' voices in challenging rape culture, but also at how rape culture itself shapes the victims' experience of disclosing sexual violence.

Sexual violence has been a taboo topic for a long time, nevertheless Japanese feminists have been fighting for years to raise awareness about it and improve the societal perception of the problem. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, women across the country established the first grassroots organizations to support victims of sexual violence, such as the Tokyo Rape Crisis Centre which opened in 1982 in the capital. They also addressed specific issues. Women in Kobe, for example, in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995, spoke up about the increase in sexual violence in disaster-hit areas (Masai 2020) and women in Okinawa, in the context of protests against the presence of US military bases, denounced sexual violence on local women by American military personnel (Miyagi 2017). Women's organizations also engaged in various educational efforts and advocated for legal changes.

Local feminist efforts were further galvanized by international events, such as the four World Conferences on Women between 1975 and 1995, and the institution of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Violence against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, both organized by the United Nations (UN), which helped to prioritize issues related to women's rights and gender-based violence globally. It was not until the turn of the century, however, that the first victims in Japan started to come forward publicly with their names and faces. Telling their stories, they showed the reality of sexual violence, debunked rape myths, and defied the dominant narrative that kept them in silence. Then, in 2017, the #MeToo movement starting from the US spread all over the world through social media resulting in an outpouring of victims' testimonies that shed light on the pervasiveness of

sexual harassment and abuse. In Japan, the #MeToo movement consisted mostly of anonymous posts on social media platforms, while there were few high-profile cases and no major street protests like in other countries, such as neighboring South Korea (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). In 2019, the movement was galvanized by the Flower Demo, a series of monthly demonstrations against sexual violence. The movement started in April 2019 when feminist activists called for a gathering in front of the Tokyo station to express outrage after four controversial acquittal verdicts in cases of sexual violence. In the following months, the movement started to expand all over the country and local branches were established in all 47 prefectures (Flower Demo 2020). Kitahara Minori, one of the initiators of the Flower Demo, argued that the reason why many victims had stayed silent for a long time is that society was not ready to listen to and believe them (Kitahara 2020). However, at the Flower Demo, victims spontaneously took the microphone to share with the crowd their experiences of sexual violence showing that people, indeed, are willing to raise their voices if provided with a safe environment.

While the literature on sexual violence in Japan is still limited, there has been a flourishing of studies on the topic. Many of them come from experts in the legal (Tsunoda 2001; Burns 2005; Itō 2019) or psychological (Saito and Otake 2020) field and they cover practical issues such as how to support victims or how they are treated in courts and during investigations. There is also increasing quantitative data to better understand the real situation of victims of sexual violence in Japan (Osawa 2023). In recent years, new research emphasizes the development of collective action and social mobilization on the issue of sexual violence, focusing in particular on the #MeToo movement in Japan and the Flower Demo (Hasunuma and Shin 2019; O'Mochain 2020; Flower Demo 2020; Miura 2021; Lilja 2022; Mizoroki et al. 2023). Little attention has been given, however, to what it means for victims to speak up, what their intention and the subversive potential of their voices are, how they fit in the larger discourse on sexual violence, and how they (re)shape it.

To fill this gap, this chapter analyzes the stories of Kobayashi, Yamamoto, and Itō through their autobiographical books. They all belong to the genre of memoir, which is seen as a subgenre of autobiography that focuses on a specific event or period in the author's life (Couser 2012, 23). Memoirs, as well as other forms of biographical narratives, are not objective statements, but are re-elaborations of memories, emotions, feelings, and sensations, so it is always important to differentiate "between the life as lived and experienced, and the life as told" (Eichsteller and Davis 2022, 19). Although editors and publishers might influence the style, content, and format of the book, by writing a memoir, the victim-author can take control of the narrative by telling her story in her own words, minimizing the reinterpretation and distortion of their words by the media.

A memoir is part of the process of speaking out. Writing a book, compared to holding a press conference or giving an interview, allows the victim-author to go more in-depth in telling the story in a direct and honest way. Each memoir is different in style depending on when, why, and how it was written. It may take almost the form of a diary (Kobayashi 2008; Itō 2022), have a more analytical style (Kobayashi 2016; Itō 2021), or even include practical advice for other victims (Yamamoto 2017). Analyzing their memoirs, I focus on how they recall, rationalize, and interpret their experience with law enforcement, the justice system, and medical institutions. I also look at the impact the violence had on their everyday life and their relationship with loved ones, the psychological effects of trauma, how they dealt with it, what led them to choose to go public, and what have been the consequences.

As Alcoff (2018, 43) explains, “speaking can be a powerful act of reclaiming and remaking one’s life, making common cause with allies, and taking action against our perpetrator or the systemic forces that enable them.” Victims’ voices are fundamental to challenging rape culture. By connecting the personal to the political, the cumulative effect of expressing individual experiences of oppression can facilitate change and “enables to see those structures of power which legitimate and perpetuate these behaviors” (Savigny 2020, 25). Victims’ voices contribute to raising awareness of specific problems, such as police mistreatment of victims during the investigation process, negative experiences with health professionals, or problematic verdicts in court cases. This led to concrete changes in how various institutions deal with sexual violence, improving the treatment of victims, and limiting the risk of encountering forms of secondary victimization.

The expression “sexual violence” here is not limited to forcible sexual intercourse or to what is recognized in the Japanese Penal Code as “sex crimes.” Instead, I adopt a broader perspective, including all forms of sexual encounters forced upon a person’s will regardless of the use of physical violence. As Alcoff (2018, 12) explains, “to violate is to infringe upon someone, to transgress, and it can also mean to rupture or break. Violations can happen with stealth, with manipulation, with soft words and gentle touch to a child, or an employee, or anyone who is significantly vulnerable to the offices of others.” While I mostly use the term “victim” to refer to people who have experienced sexual violence, as in Japanese the term *higaisha* (被害者, “victim”) is still widely used, I acknowledge that the term “victim” is controversial and that the “association of women with victimization has exacerbated existing gender ideologies about women as weak-minded and vulnerable” (Alcoff 2018, 169). It is ultimately up to individuals to identify as “victim,” “survivor,” or however they feel more comfortable. Moreover, not all victims can or want to talk publicly about their experience and there should be no pressure on victims to speak out.

The chapter is structured in four main sections. First, I outline the situation of sexual violence in Japan, looking at available data and recent legal reforms. Subsequently, I introduce in more detail the three case studies. The third and fourth sections form the main body of this study and focus on exploring how rape culture shapes society's understanding of sexual violence and what role victims' voices play in debunking rape myths and creating positive change.

2. Sexual violence in Japan

Sexual violence against women is a widespread problem in Japan. Every three years, the Japanese government distributes to a random sample of 5,000 people between 18 and 59 years old a questionnaire to collect data on gender-based violence. According to the 2021 data, about one in every 14 women has been a victim of rape, which was defined according to the legal definition at the time as forced sexual intercourse (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2021). The data on sexual violence shows, however, only the tip of the iceberg, as according to the same government survey around 37% of victims spoke to someone, and only 5.6% reported the violence to the police (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2021).

Public discussion and awareness on sexual violence (性暴力 *seibōryoku*) and related issues, such as molestation (痴漢 *chikan*), especially on public transportation, and sexual harassment (セクシュアルハラスメント *sekushuaru harasumento* or セクハラ *sekuhara*) in the workplace, have also risen in the last decades thanks to feminists' efforts. Nevertheless, victim blaming, shaming, stigma, and fear of secondary victimization are strong factors contributing to silencing victims and reinforcing the taboo on the topic. Moreover, of the cases reported to the police, only a fraction goes to court and often legal proceedings to get justice are physically, mentally, and sometimes financially burdensome for victims (Sawaragi 2021). Courts' verdicts are frequently informed by the same dominant narratives of gender and the sexuality underpinning rape myth, such as the common misconception that rape is a sudden, violent attack by a stranger. Many cases reported to the police, as well as official figures of court cases won by victims, belong to this category of a stereotypical attack on a woman in a public space by a stranger (Burns 2005, 56). This contributes to reinforcing a cognitive bias among judges and prosecutors that this is the most common scenario of sexual violence. Government data, however, contradicts these assumptions, showing that only 12% of sexual violence victims claimed that the assailant was a total stranger. In most cases, the perpetrator is someone that the victim knows, such as a family member, lover, ex-lover, friend, acquaintance, colleague, or superior at school or work (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office 2021).

In Japanese, rape is often referred to as “the murder of the soul” (魂の殺人 *tamashī no satsujin*) to express the devastating impact that it has on the victim’s life. The real consequences of sexual violence are often, however, not sufficiently understood. It can lead to developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and even suicidal tendencies, it can also compromise one’s relationship with sex, result in economic problems, and lead to social isolation (Osawa 2023). It is therefore fundamental for victims to be able to access adequate support. Since 2011, One Stop Support Centers (性犯罪・性暴力被害者のためのワンストップ支援センター *Seihanzai Seibōryoku Higaisha no Tame no Wan Sutoppu Shien Sentā*) providing victims with legal, medical, and psychological support, have been established in every prefecture in Japan (National Police Agency 2021). There are still many problems that need to be addressed, however, such as funding, the lack of centers catering to mid- and long-term support, accessibility of services, and staffing.

The law plays an important role in sanctioning what behaviors are considered acceptable in society. Not all forms of sexual violence are considered sex crimes according to Japanese criminal law, although the legal definition has been expanded greatly through two reforms of the Penal Code, in 2017 and 2023. The Japanese penal code was originally written in 1907, during the Meiji period (1868–1912), and for over a century, the provisions on sex crimes remained mostly untouched. The old version of the law defined *gōkan* (強姦, “rape”) as using force or intimidation to have sexual intercourse with a female of not less than 13 years of age, and the minimum sentence was two years (Maesawa 2017, 3). Hence, rape was limited to penile-vaginal penetration and only recognized women as victims and men as assailants, while all other acts, including oral and anal penetration, were included in the lesser crime of *kyōsei waisetsu* (強制わいせつ, “indecent assault”). One of the main reasons why the law was considered outdated by activists was the excessive focus on physical violence, which did not acknowledge the real experiences of the victims, the power dynamics often involved in cases of sexual violence, and the variety of victims’ reactions. For example, “freezing” is now recognized as a common psychological unconscious response to threat and in certain cases deciding not to struggle or scream is a conscious choice dictated by the fear of causing a violent reaction from the assailant (Hopper and Lisak 2014).

To understand why rape was originally defined that way, we must consider the socio-cultural context in which the 1907 penal code was written. The old law was rooted in Meiji Japan’s understanding of gender roles and family system, called *ie* (家, “household”), which enshrined patriarchal authority. The head of the family, a man, had almost complete control over the other family members, while women were seen as properties of men and had barely any civil rights (Tsunoda 2013; Itō 2019). Consequently, rape was understood as a crime against a man’s property and

not against the woman as an individual with dignity and rights of her own (Yano 2007, 200). Moreover, the lack of female politicians, lawyers, and police officers resulted in the complete absence of women's perspective and input in the redaction of the law. Although, eventually, the 1947 Constitution established equality between the sexes and women's rights were guaranteed, it was only in the 1970s that, in the context of the women's liberation movement, women began to actively argue that the protected legal interest in case of sexual violence should be sexual freedom and the right to sexual self-determination (Tsunoda 2013).

Thanks to the work of feminist activists as well as pressure from international bodies, such as the UN (Itō 2019, 33), the first extensive reform of the penal code occurred in 2017. The main changes were the modification of the name from the "crime of rape" to "the crime of forced sexual intercourse" (強制性交等罪 *kyōsei seikōtōzai*), and the lengthening of the minimum sentence to five years. Moreover, the definition of sexual intercourse was broadened to include oral and anal sex which made it possible to also recognize men as victims of rape. Finally, sexual relationships between minors and their guardians were criminalized regardless of the use of violence (Ministry of Justice 2017).

Many of the changes that activists pushed for were, however, not included in the 2017 reform, most notably the elimination of "force requirement," wherein victims had to show that the level of force used by the perpetrator significantly hindered their ability to resist. After years of lobbying campaigns, activism, and discussions, on June 16, 2023, the Diet passed a new reform. The name was once again changed, this time to "the crime of non-consensual sexual intercourse" (不同意性交等罪 *fudōi seikōtōzai*). Furthermore, the definition of sexual intercourse was extended to also include the insertion of body parts other than the penis into the vagina or anus. The legal age of consent was raised from 13 to 16 years old³ (Ministry of Justice 2023). An important change is that to determine the lack of consent new concrete examples other than physical coercion and threat have been listed, such as abuse of social or economic power and the use of alcohol or drugs (Penal Code 2023). The same new conditions apply to the crime of indecent assault. The statute of limitation has been further expanded and new crimes, such as grooming and non-consensual photography, have been created (Kaneko 2023). This reform is considered a great victory by activists as it contributes to moving away from a very restrictive legal definition of rape, based on physical violence, toward a new definition that is more centered around consent.

³ However, this does not apply when an individual aged 13 to 15 has consensual intercourse with a person less than five years older than them.

This section served to outline the current situation of sexual violence in Japan and the evolution of the legal definition of sex crimes. The next section will provide further details about the three case studies.

3. Introduction of the case studies

The women in these three case studies, Kobayashi Mika, Yamamoto Jun, and Itō Shiori, are not the only victims who have published a memoir about their experience of sexual violence. There are two main reasons why their stories have been selected. First, they represent examples of three different forms of sexual violence: stranger rape (Kobayashi), child sexual abuse (Yamamoto), and acquaintance rape (Itō). Second, they have become activists and advocates who support other victims, spread awareness, and work to change the situation. Their stories offer a good perspective on how different experiences of sexual violence can be and how the trauma caused by such violence can impact people's lives. No victim's experience is more or less valid than others, and all three women make it clear that they do not aim to speak or represent all victims, but through their voices, they want to contribute to spreading awareness on sexual violence. I will consequently briefly introduce their life stories and their books.

In 2000, Kobayashi was raped by a stranger who approached her on the street. Immediately after, accompanied by her ex-boyfriend, she went to the police station to denounce the violence; however, her rapist was never found. The day after the violence, she went to work and tried to live her life normally, however, the experience had a great impact on her mental health, resulting in frequent flashbacks, panic attacks, and depression compromising her quality of life. She had also problems engaging in sexual acts, which negatively impacted her romantic relationships. After the rape, she wished for more "understanding" (理解 *rikai*) from the people around her and not finding it exacerbated her feelings of shame, guilt, and anger. In particular, her parents' negative reaction upon her disclosure of the incident worsened her mental health and strained their relationship. Meeting other victims in online forums and finding people who could understand her was a key element to her journey of recovery and eventually, seven years after the rape, it led to her choice to tell her story publicly. She published her first book in 2008 (with a paperback edition released in 2011) with the title *Seihanzai higai ni au to iu koto* (性犯罪被害にあうということ, *Encountering Sexual Violence*, 2011). It is a collection of thoughts she wrote on her phone two years after the violence. She chose not to edit them for publication because they reflect her emotional state and thoughts at the time (Kobayashi 2011, 225). The book was one of the very first autobiographical works published in Japan by a victim of sexual violence under her real name and received great media attention. Soon after publication, she began to receive

messages from many other victims and she included their testimonies in her second book, *Seihanzai higai to tatakau to iu koto* (性犯罪被害とたたかうということ, *Fighting Sexual Violence*, 2016). The book includes the data she gathered through her interactions with almost 3000 victims of sexual violence, shedding light on how diverse victims' experiences are and spreading a better understanding of the reality of sexual violence and the impact it has on victims' lives.

Yamamoto is a survivor⁴ of child sexual abuse at the hands of her father. The abuse she suffered led to various psychological issues, such as fear of men, a problematic relationship with sex, and even alcoholism. After becoming a nurse, she received specific training for supporting victims of sexual violence, even taking part in workshops abroad; she met other victims and got increasingly involved in various advocacy organizations. Thanks to this support network in 2010, 23 years after the start of the abuse, during a lecture on medical care for victims of sexual violence, she publicly spoke for the first time about her experience. She eventually became one of the leading figures in the advocacy and lobbying campaigns for legal reforms and created an association called Spring whose mission is "to create a society in which sexual abuse survivors can live more comfortably" (Spring, n.d). She was also a member of the Ministry of Justice's Criminal Law Study Committee on Sexual Offences in preparation of the Penal Code reform of 2023. She published her book *13 sai "watashi" o nakushita watashi* (13歳、「私」をなくした私, *At 13 Years I Lost Myself*) in 2017. In it, she covers over three decades, giving important insight into changes in society, law, and the media's approach to the sexual violence and treatment of victims that she witnessed and contributed to bringing about. There is a section after each chapter including practical information that she said, "helped me going forward" (Yamamoto 2021, 8). Yamamoto's testimony sheds light on child sexual abuse, the difficulty for children and young people to even understand what is happening to them, and how long-lasting the consequences of trauma can be.

Itō, a journalist and documentary filmmaker, was raped in 2015 by a senior journalist, Yamaguchi Noriyuki. The two had met for dinner to discuss a job opportunity for Itō, however, during the evening she blacked out and woke up in a hotel room with Yamaguchi having intercourse with her. She reported the case to the police who at first ordered the arrest of Yamaguchi, but then suspended the operation at the last minute for unclear reasons. The prosecution eventually dropped her case, arguing that there was not enough evidence. In 2017, Itō called for a press conference and went public with her experience. She faced enormous backlash, especially online, that led her to leave Japan and live in the UK for a period

⁴ Here "survivor" is used instead of "victim" as Yamamoto refers to herself as a "survivor" (サバイバー *sabaibā*) in her memoir.

of time. Itō's case was politically charged because Yamaguchi was an influential man with connections to powerful politicians, such as former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (Itō 2018). This contributed to the slander targeting Itō. Her press conference in 2017 occurred a few months prior to the start of the #MeToo movement in the US and she became the face of the movement in Japan. Despite the online slander, Itō decided to file a civil lawsuit against Yamaguchi, which she eventually won in 2019, when the court recognized that "the sex was not consensual" (Aizawa 2019). In 2022, she won another important lawsuit against Sugita Mio, a Liberal Democratic Party politician, for "liking" defamatory tweets posted against Itō on a social media platform (Tanaka 2022). Itō published her first book, *Black Box* (ブラックボックス *Buraku bokkusu*) in 2017. The memoir has a clear journalistic style and explains the details of her relationship with Yamaguchi, the dynamics of the violence and its aftermath with a specific focus on her (mostly) negative experience with the police, the judiciary system, and victim support services in order to shed light on the inadequacy of the system. The book has been translated into multiple languages, with an English edition coming out in 2021. The BBC made a documentary on Itō's story, and she was even listed among the 100 most influential people of 2020 by *Time*. In 2022, Itō published her second book, *Hadaka de oyogu* (裸で泳ぐ, *Swimming Naked*), which is a collection of short essays on Itō's personal and professional life seven years after the rape. It can be seen as a diary of her recovery journey after sexual violence (Itō 2022, 133–134). Among other things, Itō reflects on the impact that the backlash she suffered after going public, opening up about her mental health struggles, as well as her complicated relationship with her family and with dating. The second book feels rawer compared to *Black Box* because, as Itō herself explains, in *Black Box* she tried to be as objective as possible without letting her feelings show (Itō 2022, 268).

The experiences of these three women are different, both in terms of the violence they suffered, but also in the aftermath, the impact it had on their lives and how they decided to go public. Despite these differences, they were all affected by living in a society dominated by rape culture that sought to silence them, and through their voices, they challenged victim-blaming narratives and rape myths.

4. Rape culture and the silencing of victims

Rape culture is part of a patriarchal and sexist system of domination and subordination which is sustained and reinforced by rape myths that contribute to silencing survivors and fuel victim blaming tendencies. They inform people's prejudices and preconceptions about how a victim should behave, speak, or look (Onozawa 2020, 5), and victims' testimonies are often discredited or minimized if they do not fit such preconceptions (Alcoff 2018, 11). Examples of rape myths

include assumptions that rape is a sudden attack at night by a stranger and the idea that women “ask for it” by behaving and dressing a certain way (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 500–501). Rape culture is also facilitated by the so-called “sexual double standard” that depicts men as sexual subjects with natural and uncontrollable sexual urges (Ueno 2018, 285) and the female body as passive, vulnerable, and culpable (Gavey 2005; Tsunoda 2013). When denouncing sexual violence, judicial systems often investigate and interrogate women’s behavior, clothing, and verbal expression to see if she “tempted” the man, interpreting “tempting” or “provoking” behavior as a “will for sexual activity” (Ehara 2009, 123). From these ideas come, for example, the rape myth that secretly women desire to be raped and that when they say no, they do not mean it (Burns 2005, 107–108). Thus, tackling the problem of sexual violence means challenging “conventional ideas and norms of heterosexuality and gender identity that excuse or romanticize rape as a form of strong desire or normative masculinity or an inevitable feature of a certain kind of interactions or living situations” (Alcoff 2018, 19).

The silencing of victims can happen at various levels, and it can be cultural or interpersonal. Howard Valdivia et al. (2023) identify different forms of silencing. It can take the form of “testimonial quieting” when the audience fails to recognize the speaker as credible and has a negative reaction to their disclosure. In this vein, the reaction of family members and other close people can have a great impact on the recovery journey of the victim. The reaction of Kobayashi’s mother—anger at the public discussion of her victimization and warning her not to tell anyone else—had a deep impact (Kobayashi 2011, 85). Kobayashi (2011, 8) explains:

Those words have remained in my head for a long time. It reminded me of society’s common sense and harshness. My body, my way of thinking and seeing things, my relationships with family, lovers and friends, it all changed. I have done nothing shameful or wrong. I have nothing to hide. And yet... I felt as if everything in my life up until then, even my own existence, had been denied.⁵

Such negative reactions not only made her wary of telling other people (Kobayashi 2011, 96) but also increased her sense of shame and made her feel “dirty” (汚れてしまった *yogorete shimatta*) (Kobayashi 2016, 12). In Kobayashi’s eyes, her mother’s words represented society’s overall view of sexual violence as something shameful that should not be talked about. This sort of mechanism alongside victim blaming, silences victims and strengthens the taboo and stigma surrounding sexual violence by making the issue invisible and relegating it to the private sphere. Kobayashi’s deteriorating relationship with her parents further worsened because they were also against her decision to go public and appear in the media

⁵ Translations from Japanese are by the author of the chapter unless specified otherwise.

(Kobayashi 2011, 211). Similarly, Itō's family opposed her choice to go forward with her name and face (Itō 2022, 266).

When institutions minimize victims' experiences, refuse service, or fail to provide the needed support, one can speak of "institutional betrayal" (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 504). An example is the experience of Itō when the police decided not to arrest Yamaguchi and the prosecution dropped her case (Itō 2017). The media can also contribute to institutional betrayal and reinforce silence when they fail to give proper attention to the case, and they perpetrate a narrative based on rape myths (Hasunuma and Shin 2019). In Itō's case, while foreign media gave great coverage to the story following the NHK documentary, the mainstream Japanese media were slow to take up the story, contributing to the silencing (Guarini 2023, 465).

In other cases, victims themselves decide to stay silent as a form of "testimonial smothering" because of shame and self-blame due to the stigma still surrounding sexual violence and the subsequent fear of retaliation or negative consequences (Howard Valdivia et al. 2023, 502). Feelings of shame, of being "dirty" or "unworthy," are often common among victims of sexual violence (Osawa 2023, 128–129). Moreover, the way women are socialized in Japan makes it difficult for many of them to speak out. Itō (2022, 76–78) explains, for example, that she "unconsciously thought that it is not good for women to express anger" and that she was always told that girls should not use vulgar language. Policing of women's speech (Nakamura 2014) as well as values and cultural factors, such as endurance, self-control, or social prescriptions against drawing attention to oneself, also make it difficult for Japanese women to speak up (Burns 2005, 51). This was the case of Yamamoto, who took over two decades to be able to talk about the sexual abuse she suffered. In her case, she was a child at the time of her victimization and the assailant was her own father, a person whom she thought could be trusted and who was supposed to take care of her. As a child, she was unable to understand what was happening, recognize it as sexual violence, and talk about it (Yamamoto 2017, 54). Lack of sex education and awareness of child sexual abuse, as well as stereotypes reducing sexual violence to stranger rape, likely contributed to her decades-long silence.

When a victim's behavior does not align with rape myths' stereotypical images, she might lose credibility. Burns (2005) conducted an in-depth analysis of court cases involving sexual violence in Japan in the late 1990s and early 2000s in order to understand how biases and rape myths might influence judicial decision-making. She observed that to determine the reliability of a victim's testimony some markers of truth are, for example, strong physical resistance, sexual inexperience, evidence of significant shock and distress, promptness in reporting the sexual attack, and a consistent and comprehensive clear description of the event (Burns

2005, 111–118). Psychological studies show, however, that reactions, such as freezing, are common responses to sexual violence and that memories of traumatic events are often fragmented and incomplete (Hopper and Lisak 2014). Talking about her own experience of rape, Kobayashi (2011, 17) recalls how “my voice was gone. I could not scream. It was like I had forgotten how to. I tried to fight back but my body would not move.” She points out how the image of a victim struggling with all her might is far from the reality in many cases (Kobayashi 2011, 19).

During her press conference in 2017, Itō was heavily criticized for her demeanor and her clothes, in particular for having the top button of the shirt undone, which did not match the ideal image of a victim of rape (Hernon 2018). Moreover, after the rape, her father asked her why she was not angry and the police officer told her that if she did not cry or get angry more, it would not feel like she was a real victim (Itō 2022, 174). In another example of how the ideal victim image works even in court, Kobayashi (2011, 130) reports the story of a friend who during the trial for a rape case was reprimanded by the judge who asked: “How can you be so composed in this situation? Is it because you are lying? Normally a woman would not be able to stand here like that.” Alcoff (2018, 201) explains that “the emotional intensity of disclosure is often used to police survivor speech”—if she displays anger or too many emotions, she might be labeled as hysterical and discredited, while if she shows self-control and calmness, she might be suspected of not being a “real” victim.

There seems to be a gap between victims’ experiences of sexual violence and the idea that society has of it, and for many people sexual violence feels like something far away, not related to them, something they might just hear on the news or see in a TV series (Maenosono 2022, 2). One way to close such a gap in people’s perception is to make victims’ voices heard (Saito and Otake 2020, 4). We have to change the common perception of what rape scripts and rape victims look like in order to make it easier to recognize sexual violence when it happens. This could also reduce the risk of secondary victimization from the police, such as when Itō had to re-enact the dynamics of the rape using a life-size doll while several male police officers hovered over her taking pictures (Itō 2018, 107), and also from family and friends as in the case of Kobayashi’s mother who admonished her not to tell anyone else about what happened (Kobayashi 2011, 96).

This section focused on how rape culture and rape myths contribute to silence victims. The following one will highlight the importance of victims’ voices and their subversive potential to challenge misconceptions.

5. The importance of victims' voices

It is important to think about the reason why victims' testimonies are of such crucial importance in challenging the dominant narrative of sexual violence. Although some argue that victim's personal stories do not have that much power to create change, according to Burns (2005, 133), "subversive stories" that break the silence around sexual violence and present an alternative "reality" are an important form of resistance. Similarly, Nicholls (2021, 4) points out how over the years thanks to feminist activists' efforts and movements, such as #MeToo, there has been a great change "in cultural attitudes about the seriousness of sexual violence as a widespread social problem." Victims' personal narratives can become a form of activism, they contribute to awareness raising and play a crucial part in bringing about change in society.

Alcoff (2018, 39) rightfully notes that just speaking up is not enough to make victims' speech politically effective and bring about social change. We also need to consider the conditions and context of its reception, interpretation, and uptake. Regardless, she stresses that the victims' voices are essential.

Speaking out also has the potential to reframe the issue, moving from a private individual trauma to a broader social sphere. It implicates the hearer in a social interaction that raises political and moral demands. And speaking out can empower victims, as an enactment of constructive agency and a new formation of assertive subjectivity. Hence, there is good reason to believe that speaking out has an inherent political effect. (Alcoff 2018, 179)

Talking about one's own experience of sexual violence is not easy. Kobayashi (2016, 5) explains that "whenever I appear in the media the sign 'victim of sexual violence' is attached to my back. Even though I published a book, I still have a hard time revealing my name and face, to be honest, every time I say 'I am a victim of sexual violence,' I feel a lump in my throat, and it is not fun. It is not something you get used to." Every time they are interviewed or asked to speak at events, it is arduous and painful to recall traumatizing events. Nevertheless, they chose to tell their stories in their own words and open up about the mental, physical, and relational consequences of sexual violence, to show the painful and difficult recovery process they went and still go through, and to denounce victim blaming and the secondary victimization they have experienced. Kobayashi (2016, 7) hoped that she can "help people to gain greater understanding not only of victims but also of the people around them."

Victims speaking up and writing about their own experience of sexual violence is a form of empowerment. That is especially true in a cultural environment like Japan which tells women not to be emotional or hysterical (Ogawa 2022,

34–35), and polices women's speech as women's femininity is evaluated based on the way they speak—they should not talk too much and use an elegant way of speaking avoiding rough language (Nakamura 2014). Women talking about their experience of sexual violence works to give visibility to the issue by placing it on the public agenda for concrete legal and institutional change (Burns 2005, 157). Itō's memoir *Black Box* raised the issue, for example, of the lack of preparation of police and hospitals in dealing with rape drugs. As a result, the newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* picked up the topic in a series of articles. The National Police Agency also issued new guidelines and instructions to improve proof collection and preservation in rape cases, and to check for the use of rape drugs. Finally, the cabinet office posted on its website a series of practical advice on what to do if a person suspects that they have been drugged and sexually abused (Itō 2019, 143). While Itō was not able to prove that she had been drugged, her denunciation had practical consequences that hopefully will allow other victims in the future to be believed and treated more fairly.

Alcoff (2018, 2) argues that "it is the voices of victims that need to remain at the center of the fight for cultural change. [...] [T]his knowledge must be heeded to enlarge, enrich, and also complicate our understanding of the problem." The inclusion of victims' voices and experiences in lobbying campaigns for the reform of the penal code was crucial to push for legal changes that can better reflect the reality of sexual violence. In 2020, Yamamoto was chosen as a legislative council member to discuss the penal code reform. This was seen as a great victory by advocates as, for the first time, victims' voices were actively included in political discussions on sexual violence. In her memoir, Yamamoto (2021, 221) argues that "it is tiresome to talk about one's own experience of sexual violence, I wish people would understand without [victims] talking about it." Nevertheless, she believes that no matter how hard it is, victims need to keep speaking up so that they can create a law that reflects the lived experiences of victims. She believes that "if we can create a culture of no tolerance of sexual violence, [...] we can surely create a society in which people live without fear of sexual violence and respect each other's sexuality" (Yamamoto 2021, 223). Spring, the organization founded by Yamamoto, mainly focuses on lobbying activities for legal reform. Since 2018, Spring members hold a special lecture once a year at the National Police University detailing how to deal with sexual violence cases. By listening to victims' stories and learning from their experiences, the lectures aim to foster a better understanding of the needs of sexual violence victims and minimize the risk of secondary victimization and mistreatment when dealing with the police (Spring 2022). These are merely some concrete examples of how including victims' voices in the conversation on sexual violence can lead to concrete institutional changes and improvements in how victims are treated.

Another important aspect of sexual violence is the psychological impact it has on victims. Mental health is still often a taboo in Japanese society and in the case of sexual violence, lack of understanding of the consequences of trauma is still an issue. In Japan, the concept of PTSD was only introduced after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. Only recently, it began to also be applied to sexual violence cases, but it takes time to understand trauma and the psychological consequences of sexual violence (Tsunoda 2013). While expert studies are indeed important and have more scientific authority to educate on the topic, victims' voices are equally fundamental in breaking the stigma and taboo of mental health issues and trauma.

Kobayashi (2011, 57) recalls:

Every day I did my best to live like nothing had changed. I spent my life at work and in social situations where I was surrounded by people and could not talk about the incident, trying not to let others know that something had happened, so I think it looked like everything was the same as always. The speed of time and the rhythm of daily life had not changed. However, when I was alone, life was not at all the same as it had been before.

The rape deeply compromised her relationship with sex, and flashbacks along with panic attacks became a daily occurrence. Similarly, Yamamoto (2017) recalls how to an outside eye she lived her everyday life normally, but, in reality, the trauma of the sexual abuse she suffered in her childhood left her with a fear of men and sex, led her to alcohol addiction for a period of time, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Similarly, in an interview, Itō commented on how she relied on alcohol, sleeping pills, and other medication to cope with PTSD (Womany 2018). Victims speaking out about their mental health, their response to trauma, and their emotional journey and sharing their side of the story, can contribute to challenging simplistic, stereotypical ideas of how victims should behave for their experience to be considered valid.

Talking publicly about one's experience of sexual violence can also play an important role in establishing a connection with other victims. For Kobayashi, finding other victims on online forums played a crucial role in her healing journey (Kobayashi 2011, 126). After publishing her first book, she received thousands of messages from other victims, who had never disclosed their experience to anyone, felt isolated, or did not know what to do. Being able to interact with people who have been through similar traumatic experiences can be extremely empowering as it allows victims to realize that they are not the only ones and that what they are feeling and going through is valid. The fact that when a victim goes public, she often starts to receive messages from other victims, can be seen as an indicator of how powerful and valuable such testimonies are and serves as inspiration to

speak out or get involved in various forms of advocacy and activism. At the same time, however, it is also an indicator of how society still fails to support victims.

Speaking out is a risky choice. It may result in backlash, victim blaming, negative reactions from family and friends, strained relationships, and secondary victimization. There are many risks that victims might face upon speaking out, even more so when they decide to do it publicly, revealing their names and exposing themselves. In fact, according to Kitahara (2021, 22), fears of retaliation and secondary victimization are one of the main reasons why in Japan the #MeToo movement remained rather quiet, with few victims coming forward and many deciding to stay anonymous. The fear of slander and further trauma is a very real and valid one as exemplified by Itō's case. The question emerges as to why victims, despite the great risks, still decide to speak publicly to denounce sexual violence.

Itō (2022, 32) explains that she chose to be a journalist to tell the truth about various issues, so she felt like she could not turn her back on her own truth as that would mean denying not only her past self but also her present. Itō (2022, 32) explained:

I decided to make public what happened because no matter how much I pursued the truth and tried to point out the absurdity of the justice system, there was a thick wall called "power" and "system." How many people, thousands, no tens of thousands of people have choked back tears in front of this wall? My beloved sister and the children who will live in the future may suffer the same fate. With that in mind, I decided to speak out, using my real name and my face.

Kobayashi (2011, 10–11; 2016, 7) illustrates that the main aim of both her books is to help people better understand the reality of victims of sexual violence and the people around them. To do so she shares not only her experience but also, in the second book, the things she has seen and learned as she interacted with other victims, became more involved with the media, and started speaking publicly. Finally, Yamamoto (2017, 11) talks about her experience as a survivor of child sexual abuse, a nurse, and an activist, because she says: "I hope that through this book, understanding of sexual violence will spread in Japanese society, that one day this suffering will cease, and that this book will be of some help to you as you walk the road to recovery." Over the years, she often heard people tell her that "there's nothing we can do, sexual violence will keep happening," or that "it is strange for people to talk about it," and even that "victims who cannot endure it [我慢する *gaman suru*] are at fault" (Yamamoto 2017, 10). When she hears these kinds of comments, she cannot help but feel that the reality of sexual violence is still not understood (Yamamoto 2017, 10). She feels the need to speak up about it because for so long she was silenced, and nobody helped her. Knowing that there are many more people in a similar situation, she hopes they can receive the support

and understanding that they need (Yamamoto 2017, 196). Making people realize that sexual violence is not something far away and disconnected from them can create a society that helps and protects victims who speak out so that they are not subject to victim blaming.

6. Conclusion

This chapter tackled the issue of how victims' voices complicate the discourse around sexual violence in Japan by looking at the example of three women who decided to speak publicly and became advocates. Rape myths and sexual double standards shape society's understanding of sexual violence, and fuel victim-blaming tendencies and stigma. The structural silencing of victims rooted in sexism, gender discrimination, and misogyny reduces sexual violence to a taboo and a personal problem, making it invisible. Talking about it and denouncing it is seen as shameful and frowned upon. Those victims who decide to tell their stories and denounce societal ignorance of sexual violence do so at significant risk of secondary victimization and slander. Victims' testimonies show how this silencing can be cultural and systemic as victims are, for example, dismissed by the police, the judiciary, or support services, such as One Stop Centers, and can also become the target of vicious slander and bullying. Silencing, however, can also come from people close to the victim. Such a negative reaction upon disclosure can seriously compromise a person's ability to further talk about the harm they suffered, to look for support, and recover.

Nevertheless, their voices have the subversive potential to erode such commonly held misconceptions and shed light on the reality of sexual violence and its consequences, as can be seen in the three case studies. Speaking up can also be a strong source of empowerment as victims can take control of their narrative and tell their stories with their own words, find allies, make meaningful connections with other victims, and develop a deeper understanding of their experience. As Burke (2021, 7), the original creator of the "me too" movement, argues, "exchange of empathy between survivors of sexual violence could be a tool to empower us toward hearing and into action." By reflecting on the consequences of their decision to speak out and go public, Kobayashi, Yamamoto, and Itō acknowledged the importance of the connections that they have built with other victims as well as with activists and supporters. That solidarity provided comfort from isolation, supported them in their healing journey, and allowed them to continue their advocacy despite the psychological burden of trauma and backlash.

As argued by Alcoff (2018, 2), victims' voices and experiences must remain at the center of the struggle for cultural, social, and institutional change as their knowledge and experiences can enrich and complicate the understanding of the

problem. By breaking the silence, these women contributed to placing the issue on the public agenda, shedding light not only on the lived experiences of victims and the lack of awareness and understanding in society, but also raising concrete issues on how the media, medical institutions, judicial systems, and law enforcement treat sexual violence victims. These three women, after publicly telling their stories, became advocates themselves and not only met other victims and supporters, but also interacted with experts and professionals. All those encounters and experiences provided them with new knowledge and a deeper understanding of the nature of sexual violence and the structural forces silencing victims, informing their activism. Victims' voices alone are not enough to bring social and cultural change. With better sexual education, gender equality, and media representation, however, victims' testimonies can contribute to changing the dominant narratives on sexual violence. By debunking rape myths, they create a society that is more welcoming for victims that decide to speak up, offer them better support and do not stigmatize or silence them.

The scope of this chapter is limited as it looks at the testimonies of only three victims, all of them women, and relies on their memoirs. The chapter has only briefly touched upon the issue, but it is important to also look at the role victims' voices played in social movements and lobbying efforts for the legal reforms. Future research should focus on how public and media reception of victims' speaking out has changed over time and give more attention to the voices of male victims as well as LGBTQIA+ individuals.

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PART III

BODIES, GENDER, AND IDENTITIES IN LITERATURE

LIKE SNOW LIKE MOUNTAIN: NARRATING GENDER VIOLENCE IN THE ERA OF #METOO ACTIVISM

Daniela Licandro

Like Snow Like Mountain (2022) is a short story collection by the emerging Chinese woman writer Zhang Tianyi (1984–). The collection explores women's embodied experiences of pain, physical and emotional, paying special attention to harassment and violence. In the era of #MeToo movements, *Like Snow Like Mountain* emerges as both a testimony of women's suffering and a critical intervention into discourses and practices of gender violence in post-socialist, neoliberal China. Drawing on gender theories, feminist approaches, and literary studies, this chapter interrogates the collection's contribution to understandings of gender violence and the relationship between women, violence, and agency in the backdrop of #MeToo activism. The analysis of representations of sexual harassment and the figure of the battered woman shows how Zhang's fiction destabilizes gendered dichotomies such as public/private, passivity/agency or victim/perpetrator, underscoring the intersection of gender-based violence and other forms of inequality formed along gender, sexual, age, class, and racial lines.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese literature, gender violence, #MeToo activism, embodied experience, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Like Snow Like Mountain (如雪如山 *Ru xue ru shan*, 2022) is a short story collection by the emerging Chinese woman writer Zhang Tianyi (张天翼, 1984–). Published by The People's Literature Publishing House, the collection has been a success: it received the fourth PAGEONE Literary Award and has reached a score of 8.5

on the rating platform Douban (豆瓣).¹ Pushing further Zhang Tianyi's former explorations of love, sexuality, bodies, and interpersonal relationships, as developed for instance in *Love of Patients with Sexual Blindness* (性盲症患者的爱情 *Xingmangzheng huanzhe de aiqing*, 2018), *Like Snow Like Mountain* offers a critical reflection on women's experiences of pain, gender violence, and their impact upon women's everyday lives.

Such reflection demands attention in the era of #MeToo activism spreading inside and outside China. Although the #MeToo movement reached a stalemate in China in late 2019–early 2020, sexual scandals have continued to surface, with or without the #MeToo hashtag (Han and Liu 2023), thrusting academics, entertainment celebrities, as well as leaders of religious and charity organizations into the national and international spotlight.² Most recently, in late April–early May 2023, the Chinese and non-Chinese media overflowed with news of sexual allegations against screenwriter Shi Hang (史航, 1971–), ushering in a new wave of #MeToo reactions and manifestations of solidarity. Shi Hang had made a reputation for himself as a supporter of women's campaigns, and had endorsed Lin Yi-han's (林奕含, 1991–2017) *Fang Siqi's First Love Paradise* (房思琪的初恋乐园 *Fang Siqi de chulian leyuan*, 2017), a novel on sexual abuse that has become a hallmark of Taiwan's #MeToo movement. The fact that Motie Library (磨铁图书 *Motie tushu*), in response to the accusations against Shi Hang, announced on the microblogging site Weibo that it would remove Shi Han's recommendation of Lin Yi-han's novel (Motie tushu 2023), attests to the pressures mounting around issues of gender-based violence in contemporary China. Against this backdrop, this chapter asks how literature has responded to the widely felt urgency to expose that which has systematically been concealed, neglected or naturalized. In particular, how does Zhang's *Like Snow Like Mountain* contribute to understandings of gender violence and the relationship between women, violence, and agency in the era of #MeToo activism?

Along with gender discrimination, sexual harassment and domestic violence have occupied a preeminent position in contemporary Chinese feminist discourses and activism. Over the past decade, a new cohort of feminists has capitalized on digital technologies and social media to mobilize people against gender

¹ Instituted in 2021, The PAGEONE Literary Award is cosponsored by the PAGEONE Bookstore (in Beijing), the Qinghua University Center for Literary Writing and Research, and the international publishing brand Astra House.

² #MeToo events, which occurred between January 2018 and July 2019, have been recorded in the *#MeToo Movement in China Archive*, available in Chinese and in English. The Chinese version comprises stories, media coverage, and opinions that appeared in Chinese online platforms before, in most cases, being erased. The English version focuses on reports and opinions published in the English media.

discrimination and gender-based violence. Visibility is key to these feminists, who resort to public performances and protests to raise a feminist consciousness and democratize the discussion online and offline. Indeed, Chinese feminists' spontaneous, intentionally dispersed and decentered activism has been constrained by multiple hurdles including state censorship, corporate interests, and over-politicization by the Western media (Li 2022, 5), but it has nonetheless succeeded at bringing to awareness the urgency of redefining gender-based violence as "part of a larger institutional system of patriarchal oppression" (Han and Liu 2023, 2). The pressures that their activism has exercised on Chinese civil society have reached even into the domain of legislation. In 2015, in the context of growing mobilization against sexual harassment, China passed its first law on domestic violence (Hong Fincher 2018, 80). In 2020, the concept of "sexual harassment" (性骚扰 *xing saorao*), which had appeared only superficially in the 2005 revision of the 1992 PRC Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women (中华人民共和国妇女权益保障法 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo funü quanyi baozhangfa*), entered the Civil Code. It was defined by Article 1010 as the situation of "a person who has been sexually harassed against his/her will by another person through speech, writing, image, physical conduct, or the like" (Wan et al. 2023, 272).³ These achievements, however limited in scope and effect, cannot be separated from the unwavering, resilient activism of contemporary feminists.

Feminist discourses and practices in China are heterogeneous and plural (Zhu and Xiao 2021). Scholarship has variously investigated their (Chinese) characteristics (Lin 2023), their inherent contradictions, their promises and pitfalls, from a variety of angles and theoretical perspectives. Some studies have focused on the actors and their strategies (Wang 2021), on understandings and applications of the concept of "gender" (Spakowski 2021), or the place of "class" in contemporary feminist discourses (Wang 2010; Zhong 2021; He and Zhang 2021). Other studies have examined the relationship between feminisms and technologies (Chen and Wang 2020; Han and Liu 2023), as well as the complex interactions between global and local forces (Hong Fincher 2018; Wang 2010; Wang 2021; Li 2022). These studies have expanded our understanding of contemporary Chinese feminisms, situating them not solely within the specific historical, cultural, political, economic and legal contexts that engendered them, but also within a long history of women's rights movements in modern China.

Building on their insights, this chapter analyzes how contemporary Chinese literature relates to feminist discourses and practices. While feminist and gender

³ The PRC Law on the Protection of the Interests and Rights of Women was further revised in late 2022. The amended text devotes much space to sexual assault and sexual harassment, strongly urging institutions to establish adequate mechanisms to prevent and address those phenomena (Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui 2022).

perspectives have been crucial to the study of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, I am aware of only a few works that have focused on literature's engagement with discourses of sexual harassment and gender violence brought to light by #MeToo activism (Chau 2019; Liu 2022). In her article, Angie Chau (2019) analyzes English translations of late 1920s-early 1930s Chinese fiction to show that even though translations, like the original texts, tend to "smooth over" scenes of sex and abuse, they nonetheless offer productive opportunities to problematize literary representations of gendered violence. Moving to the contemporary literary scene, Xi Liu (2022) identifies different articulations of gender violence in Chinese science fiction. Neither Chau's inquiry into the pedagogical value of teaching Chinese literature in translation for the purpose of reinterpreting scenes of abuse, nor Liu's mapping of representations of gendered violence in science fiction novels offer an exhaustive account of the multiple ways in which Chinese literature has responded and/or can help respond to gender violence in the era of #MeToo movements. Drawing upon gender and queer theories (Fahs 2016; Freeman 2010), feminist approaches (Burke 2019; Fraser 2009), and literary studies (Xiao 2022), my close reading of Zhang Tianyi's heretofore unstudied collection integrates former studies and shows that *Like Snow Like Mountain* offers at once a testimony of women's suffering and a critical intervention into discourses and practices of violence against women in post-socialist, neoliberal China.

The analysis is organized around episodes of sexual harassment and the figure of the battered woman as recurrent themes and/or images that help elucidate the collection's take on the very issues (sexual harassment and domestic violence) that have been central to contemporary feminist discourses and activism. Each of the stories included in Zhang's collection features a female protagonist named Lili, but in each story Zhang uses different Chinese characters for "Lili" (立立, 粒粒, 沥沥, etc.). The returning sound, albeit differently visualized, establishes a connection among the stories beyond the thematization of women's pain. Each Lili is a different individual undergoing different experiences of suffering across multiple spaces, both public and private. Yet they are also the same woman whose subjectivity is constituted in experiences of violence and pain that point to the female body as a site where a plurality of oppressive gender ideologies and practices are embodied and temporally structured. In the stories, menstruation, marriage, childbirth, menopause, and aging are events that highlight a woman's relation to temporalities that are historically and culturally signified. As Megan Burke aptly notes, "sexual domination is anchored into feminine existence through temporality" (Burke 2019, 5). Women's embodied experience of time is inscribed with systemic violence and oppression. And yet, as my analysis of episodes of sexual harassment and the figure of the battered woman will show, Zhang's stories do not present Lili merely as a passive victim of an oppressive heterosexual normative

system. These stories, I argue, destabilize gendered dichotomies such as male/female, active/passive, mind/body, inside/outside, and public/private, underscoring the intersection of gender-based violence and other forms of suffering and inequality formed along gender, sexual, age, class, and even racial lines.

In order to tease out the convergence of different systems of power, my close reading of Zhang's stories will be informed by an intersectional mode of critical inquiry. As an approach, intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to demonstrate that "the violence many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions, such as race and class" (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). Since then, intersectionality has gained enormous traction in scholarship committed to exposing the connectedness of different systems of power in the production and experience of inequalities and injustice. Furthermore, by revealing "how various social positions (occupied by actors, systems, and political/economic structural arrangements) necessarily acquire meaning and power (or a lack thereof) in relation to other social positions" (Collins 2020, 121), the intersectional paradigm is useful in attending to the relational nature of the identities of the female (and male) characters in Zhang's stories. From the intersectional perspective, then, one can effectively appreciate the ways in which Zhang's texts strive to present women's experience of suffering and violence as heterogeneous and mediated by different dimensions that include class, gender, age, and so on. As a whole, these texts remind us that identity politics can hardly provide an adequate solution to women's pain if it is not complemented with a critique of intersecting unjust systems (Fraser 2003).

Finally, a note on terminology: scholars have shown the limits and the shifting understandings of the terms "victim" and "survivor" to address individuals who have experienced abuse (Lamb 1999; Field 2020, 21–25; Lazard 2020, 43–68). In the absence of a satisfactory, inclusive term, I retain "victim" to refer to individuals, fictional and otherwise, who have experienced some form of violence, and "survivor" to designate individuals who are undergoing or have undergone a process of healing. Throughout, however, I do not intend these terms as stigmatizing labels that dichotomize passivity and agency, but as descriptions of fluid identities that exist on a continuum between passivity and agency.

2. Sexual harassment

Like Snow Like Mountain is made up of seven short stories. In order, "I Only Want to Sit Down" (我只想坐下 *Wo zhi xiang zuoxia*), "The Blood on the Floor" (地上的血 *Dishang de xue*), "Swimmers" (游客 *Youke*), "Anniversary" (纪念日 *Jinianri*), "Salt of Spring" (春之盐 *Chun zhi yan*), "Snow Mountain" (雪山 *Xue shan*), and "New Year's Visit" (拜年 *Bainian*) constitute autonomous narrative units. However, their

sequence traces a temporal trajectory punctuated not only by events that characterize women's gendered life experience such as menstruation, marriage or childbirth, to name a few, but also by the multiple subject positions that each Lili occupies first as a college student, then as a young professional or as an achieved professional, and finally as a caring old mother and wife. In presenting feminine existence as a linear succession of moments oriented toward production and reproduction, these stories register its temporal constitution, that is, how woman embodies prescriptive, oppressive temporal legacies that bind her to a social (and national) scheme, undermining her agency and relation to freedom (Freeman 2010, 3–5; Burke 2019, 45–46). In Zhang's stories, as we will see, the embodiment of oppressive ideologies that are temporally woven in the female body-subject is complicated by women's efforts to carve out a space of self-determination and agency from within the very system that manipulates them. The dynamics between embodied gendered temporalities and resistance is especially evident in situations of sexual harassment and gendered violence.

Sexual harassment features in more than one short story. Here I focus on "I Only Want to Sit Down" and "Swimmers" because in these texts sexual harassment emerges as crucial to the unfolding of the story plot, lending interesting insights into discourses of sexual harassment, constructions of the female body-subject, as well as woman's agency. If in the first story sexual harassment lays bare the vulnerability of the female protagonist, revealing the intricate relationship between experiences of suffering and her positioning vis-à-vis not only the (male) predator but also a wide spectrum of characters, in the second story, harassment becomes an occasion to expose the language of "evidence" that harms victims of violence, and to forge empowering solidarities.

2.1 "I Only Want to Sit Down": vulnerability and agency

Set against the backdrop of the Spring Festival travel rush (春运 *chunyun*) that sees thousands of people, especially migrant workers and students, return to their hometowns, "I Only Want to Sit Down" narrates the humiliations and sexual harassment that a female student named Zhan Lili (詹立立) suffers on the train home.⁴ Sexual harassment occurs only at the end, but its occurrence is built in the story from the very beginning through a series of happenings and tensions that accumulate, like in a crescendo, and converge in the final scene of abuse that marks at once the apex and the end of the short story.

⁴ The story was first published in *October* (十月 *Shiyue*) in 2020 and later included in *A Collection of New Women's Writings: The Beautiful Changes* (Zhang 2021). Note that "Zhan Lili" sounds like "standing Lili" in Chinese, anticipating Lili's predicament on the train home. I thank the editor Martin Lavička for drawing my attention to the play with names in the story.

We meet Lili in the opening scene, in the middle of an overcrowded railway station: “in the steaming railway waiting room there are one thousand people, three thousand bags, and one Zhan Lili” (Zhang 2022, 3).⁵ The opening is particularly significant in the way it individualizes the female protagonist amidst an anonymous crowd of people, establishing a sense of alienation and non-belonging that will remain dominant throughout the story and will be key to understanding the character’s vicissitudes. From this point on, the events are narrated mainly from Lili’s perspective. In the following scene it is through her eyes that we take in details of the surroundings such as the “My Fair Princess” hair clip on a little girl’s head. The girl had caught sight of the clip named after the most popular TV show of the year—the Taiwanese costume drama *My Fair Princess* (还珠格格 *Huan zhu gege*)⁶—among the special items displayed on the shelves of the railway gift shop, and, spellbound, had been unable to leave the store until her parents bought one clip for her. Lili is drawn by this specific detail because “there is an identical princess hair clip in Lili’s suitcase; she has bought it for her cousin” (Zhang 2022, 3).

The narrative then zooms out to allow a view of Lili standing next to Sun Jiabao (孙家宝), a fellow schoolmate that is waiting for the same train as she nibbles on French fries. Lili is dutifully holding Jiabao’s bag. The sense of dutifulness that Lili displays toward her fellow student is clarified by a flashback that draws our attention to the fact that Lili has not been able to buy a ticket with a seat and has been hoping to take Jiabao’s seat on the train once Jiabao reaches her destination. The lack of a seat defines not only Lili’s socio-economic position but also her position within her own family. Upon learning from the class monitor that hard-seat tickets have been sold out, Lili has the option of buying either a ticket without a seat for the same price or a hard-sleeper ticket by adding one hundred fifty-two renminbi. The decision however “is not up to her, because it is her parents who fork the money out” (Zhang 2022, 4). The economic limitation overlaps with the low status that Lili occupies in the family as a daughter. When Lili makes a phone call to her parents to ask them if she can purchase the more expensive hard-sleeper ticket, she does not get a straight no for an answer, but her father’s point that young people can bear hardships does not leave room for negotiation. The denial, however, comes from the same parents who have spent a large sum of money to enroll Lili’s younger brother in a military academy and since then have been living mostly in Zhengzhou, in Henan province, specially to “accompany him during his studies” (陪读 *peidu*) (Zhang 2022, 4). From the outset, then, Lili’s economic and gender position puts into relief vulnerabilities and patterns

⁵ The edition I am using is a reprint by Lightning Source. Translations are my own.

⁶ The first season of the TV drama was aired in 1998. It was an instant success.

of discrimination that will be amplified and complicated in the encounters and events that she experiences on the train home.

The travel is too long and painful to be endured without a seat. Upon getting on the train, Jiabao exchanges her seat by the window with one by the aisle to squeeze in some room for Lili. "Sit down and don't move," Jiabao tells Lili, who soon understands the reason for that exhortation:

Every crevice on the train, big enough to hold a person, was going to be filled; if she did not take it, someone else would. Two minutes later, in the space left by her folded legs, a man without a seat squeezed in, his whole body cuddled up, the elbows resting on the back of the chair. Like a "thinker," he supported his cheeks with his hands, settling into a comfortable position. She could not sit down even if she had wanted to. She tapped the man with her knees, but he remained still. From his mouth held between his palms a few irritated words came out: "What the hell are you pushing for? I can't move either! Let's wait until the damn people have passed!" (Zhang 2022, 7–8)

Fully packed, the train becomes the stage not only for various activities that keep travelers busy during the long journey—playing cards, listening to music, cracking sunflower seeds, sleeping, and so on—but also for tensions and fights that inevitably arise when a large number of people from all walks of life find themselves crammed into a small space. At one point, it is Jiabao's seat that becomes an object of contention between Lili and an older man. As planned, Lili occupies Jiabao's seat when Jiabao gets off the train, immediately sinking into a state of "relaxation that comes from being 'supported'" ("有所托"的轻松 *yousuo tuo de qing-song*) (Zhang 2022, 18). That feeling, however, is short-lived. Lili soon realizes that she has been holding her urine for too long, so she runs to the toilet after leaving her down jacket on the seat. When she returns, she finds that her jacket has been tossed on the table. In her seat "a fat man with wide shoulders, wearing a camel-colored vest, legs spread apart, both palms facing up resting on the thighs, is sleeping with nostrils flaring with each breath" (Zhang 2022, 21). Lili tries to explain to him in vain that the seat belongs to her schoolmate who left it to her. To her arguments, the man coldly responds that "if she [your schoolmate] has gotten off the train, the seat belongs to whoever gets it first, right?" (Zhang 2022, 21). A frustrated Lili then turns to a man who has been traveling with her from the beginning, and begs him for support: "Old Uncle, please, please, you can confirm, didn't my schoolmate leave her seat to me? Wasn't I sitting here until a minute ago?" (Zhang 2022, 21). But the man, while cracking a hard-boiled egg on the edge of the table, unaffectedly, replies:

It is true that the seat was your schoolmate's but what that man says is also true; since your schoolmate has left, the seat doesn't belong to

anyone. You have a ticket without a seat, don't you? You, college students, have studied; you are reasonable, right? Letting you sit but not letting someone else sit? That is not reasonable. (Zhang 2022, 21)

Being female and young, Lili becomes an easy victim of the bullying at the hands of the two older men. But the episode discloses more than an unequal power dynamics determined by gender and age differentials. By addressing Lili with "you, college students," the man draws a separating line that conceals entrenched class divisions and social tensions. As a university student, arguably belonging to the educated middle-class, Lili is perceived as "other" by the surrounding people—mostly migrant workers. The scene recalls an earlier moment, at the beginning of the journey, when Jiabao proudly takes out her student ID for the train attendant to check. At the sight of the name of the prestigious college that Jiabao and Lili attend, the surrounding people react by putting on a fake smile, "their expression suggesting at once admiration, contempt, and sympathy—let the girl show off, college students can only enjoy these few years, once they enter society they'll become depressed workers (灰头土脸打工仔 *huitou tulian dagongzai*)" (Zhang 2022, 10).

After losing the seat, Lili moves to the gangway connection, the only place where, because of the cold, she can find a little empty spot on the floor and there she settles, her body in pain, until the train attendant gently invites her to take a seat in his cabin. Lili accepts the invitation without a second thought. From the beginning of the journey, the train attendant's gentle behavior toward the passengers as well as his ability to enforce rules in a professional and respectful manner have captured Lili's attention, eliciting feelings of admiration. But there is more: the inspector is a good-looking man. Throughout, the prospect of catching sight of him, of striking up a conversation with him, or of being watched by him becomes Lili's silver lining amid the dire circumstances, and a not-so-subtle narrative subtext that is catalyzed by Lili's gaze and desires:

All emotions are later deemed love at first sight, yet at this moment Lili could only see the right side of his face: a black eyebrow against the temple, a feminine full-lashed big eye, the entire fan-shaped upper face brightened by it. (Zhang 2022, 8)

The train attendant squeezed through, and positioned himself between the seats in the middle of two rows. Extending one hand, he picked the ticket and ID card. Lili tilted her head up and stared at him; she was finally able to see the whole picture under the brim of his cap. His two eyes were like two clear lakes, his full eyelashes like plants surrounding the lakes. His nose was at the center, a wide mountain ridge, and there was a round and plump mole nestled in his eyebrow. (Zhang 2022, 10)

The objectification and sexualization of the train attendant through Lili's gaze is interesting not only because it subverts the familiar trope of the male gaze and its inherent male subject-female object dyadic structure, conferring on Lili a certain degree of agency in a context in which her gendered and socio-economic positions have made her especially vulnerable, but also because it demands a more nuanced and responsible reading of the events ensuing Lili's acceptance of the train attendant's invitation to use his seat.

In the train attendant's cabin, Lili is sexually harassed. The predator turns out to be the very train attendant—his name is Zuo Yixia (左一夏)⁷—who touches Lili's leg while she is asleep. Lili's attraction toward Yixia throughout the narrative is by no means a justification for what she suffers. It is one thing to be the author of one's sexual desires, it is another to be assaulted without consent. The story makes this point clear, thus taking an unambiguous stance against victim-blaming discourses that delegitimize survivors' stories, inside and outside China.⁸ After guiding Lili into the cabin, reassuring her that she can use his seat while he is on duty, Yixia returns to his job. Left alone, Lili "hopes that he remains this busy until she gets off the train" (Zhang 2022, 25). Her former desire to exchange stares with Yixia morphs into the fear of unwanted, possible scenarios. When Yixia returns from a round of inspections, Lili, to avoid embarrassing silences, fills the space with conversation and tells him "train stories" that have been passed down in her family. The conversation, during which she learns that Yixia was forced by his parents to work in the railway and give up on his dream of becoming an actor, establishes an atmosphere of trust that dispels Lili's fears, reassuring her about his good intentions: "She guesses that he has helped many people like this; anyway he cannot sit down in the cabin, so he might as well do some good deed" (Zhang 2022, 28). Feeling safe, Lili falls sound asleep, but is soon awakened by Yixia's fondling:

That large hand, reaching under the down jacket folded on her legs, was touching her leg. Its five fingers moved with a gentle rhythm, tightening and loosening; when they loosened, the palm kneaded and pressed into the flesh. When they tightened, the fingertips sunk in, slightly pinching the flesh. It was like an experienced housewife kneading dough: she knows that strength is the essential yeast; calm and focused she carries

⁷ The name of the train attendant sounds like "Take a seat." Again, many thanks to Martin Lavička for noticing the pun.

⁸ Illustrative is the case against Liu Qiangdong (刘强东), the founding CEO of JD.com, China's second-largest e-commerce site, who was accused of raping a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota after a dinner. Liu's attorney, Jill Brisbois, and many other detractors insisted that the sexual act was consensual (Li 2019, 122–126; Zhongguo mitu zhi bianjizu 2019, 1277–1278).

on, one movement after another. Each movement was an unquestionable imperative. (Zhang 2022, 29)

The description goes on for several more paragraphs, marking a narrative slow-down that, I argue, registers Lili's subjective perception of time as dilated. Time dilation or paralysis is a recognized structure of sexual domination. In situations of harassment, violence, or creepiness, Burke explains, a woman's "capacity to exist beyond herself becomes reduced to that present" (Burke 2019, 33–34). Lili "remains still, her round eyes suspended in the air, the whole person suspended in the air" (Zhang 2022, 29) while he touches her, her thoughts fixated on what she is experiencing. Lili's temporal horizon shrinks into an expanded, almost frozen present that, by disconnecting her from her past and future, "diminishes her claim to her self as free" (Burke 2019, 120).

Lili's immobility then appears as a symptom of a denial of agency that Lili experiences as a temporal disconnect. Indeed, she does not push Yixia away, but Lili's apparent passivity is complicated by an inner dialogue where two opposite yet overlapping discourses are articulated. Here is an excerpt:

He must be thinking that he is touching his future girlfriend [...] but another kind of silent noise was growing louder and louder, a cry of humiliation and anger. She wanted to leap up, shout out loud, and even open her mouth to gasp, ahead of time, because of those hallucinations. But that suspended version of herself raised both hands and pressed her head firmly against the folded forearms.

[...] You must understand: if you have a fallout with him (撕破脸 *sipolian*), you will have to leave! You will have to walk away from this bright, cozy place, and return to that filthy place, where there is no support, no belonging; standing again on the two feet that have just recovered from swelling, standing in pain...the soul must learn to cut ties with the body, that is the new testing point of life science. Got it? Do you understand?

[...] Let's exchange (换吧 *huan ba*), it's worth it!

As her breathing slowly calms down, she thinks: it is not that bad, after all, here's another train story that can be passed down in the family.

Twenty years from now, when telling this story, with her lips curved downward in a smile, she will say: the girl sold half a leg in exchange for a compartment soft seat, it was worth it. Moreover, she was wearing thermal underwear beneath the jeans, what could that idiot touch? (Zhang 2022, 29–30)

The state of suspension Lili experiences does not interrupt her thoughts. She voices indignation and a sense of offense. She even prefigures her gasping when, later, she will relive the scene of abuse in her mind. But the fear of losing the seat and the memory of the nightmarish, painful travel trigger a change of perspective,

which is a change of language. The turning point can be located in the expression “let’s exchange,” which signals Lili’s decision to accept the harassment for the sake of keeping the seat. The language of outrage and indignation is thus replaced by an ironic, seemingly playful language that enables Lili to reframe what she is experiencing as one of those family “train stories” that she will recount with a smile on her face. On the surface, the discursive shift enables Lili to reassert herself as an active agent who *chooses* between keeping or losing the seat. In the attempt to re-interpret the situation and restore her agency, however, Lili internalizes a language that embodies the very violence and oppression that women experience in their everyday life. In particular, the mobilization of a language of transaction—exchanging a leg for a seat—to transform an episode of harassment into an entertaining anecdote, is illustrative of the mechanisms by which violence is naturalized in everyday discourses and practices.

A question remains: does Lili have a choice? In my view, the text does not offer a clear-cut answer, rather it points to ambiguities that encourage a nuanced understanding of gender violence and women’s agency. By drawing attention to the various subject positions that Lili occupies along different axes, including age, gender, sex, and class, the story points to a range of vulnerabilities, as well as privileges, that tie sexual harassment and gendered violence to multiple intersecting oppressive systems. Particularly revealing is how, for instance, the family operates as an oppressive institution that curtails not only Lili’s freedom on gender basis, but also Yixia’s freedom on the basis of kinship obligations, thus destabilizing the male perpetrator-female victim binary. At the same time, by foregrounding the efforts that Lili makes to claim her sexual desires as the subject of the objectifying gaze, as well as her attempts to repurpose reifying, gendered discourses in order to restore her ability to choose, the short story lays bare complex processes of negotiation through which women incessantly and creatively work out spaces for self-assertion and agency from within the system that regulates them.

2.2 “Swimmers”: discourses of evidence, gendered temporalities, and subversive intimacies

The #MeToo movement in China and elsewhere has encouraged survivors to come forward and denounce abuse, but in doing so it has also drawn attention to the obstacles encountered by those who break the silence. Being believed is the first and foremost challenge survivors face. Adding insult to injury, lack of belief humiliates the victims by delegitimizing their stories. To this culture of distrust, deeply steeped in rape myth ideology, belong discourses of “evidence” (Childs and Ellison 2000; Persson and Dhingra 2022, 13–23). Apparently invoking standards of objectivity and rationality, notions of evidence and proof establish epistemological regimes that, as Kathy Mack and Sharyn Roach Anleu put it, “reflect

and construct the social and cultural context in which they function" (Mack and Roach Anleu 2000, 127). The demand for evidence of abuse, inside and outside the courtrooms, instantiates the pervasive nature of a heterosexist patriarchal culture that denies gendered violence and attributes responsibility to the victims. It comes to no surprise then that Luo Qianqian (罗茜茜), the woman who initiated the #MeToo Movement in China in 2018, "gathered a lot of evidence" before going public with accusations of sexual harassment against Professor Chen Xiaowu (陈小武) (Ho and Tsoi 2018).

Discourses of evidence are central to online and offline debates surrounding sexual harassment and gendered violence, as exemplified by the piece "How is Evidence of Sexual Harassment Gathered?" (性骚扰到底怎么取证 *Xing saorao daodi zenme quzheng*) that a Weibo user, under the pseudonym A Xiong Yi (啊熊姨) posted on their page on May 1, 2023 (A Xiong Yi 2023). Highlighting the harm that demands for evidence do to victims of abuse, Zhang Tianyi's "Swimmers" enables a critique of discourses of evidence, while at the same pointing to strategies of resistance that disrupt oppressive heterosexist regimes by reconfiguring the individual's relationship to the past, present, and future. If violence (over)determines woman's existence by hurling her into a passive present that is disconnected from the past and forecloses alternative future possibilities, resistance operates as an "untimely" event that tends to the past "in order to gain a future" (Burke 2019, 137).

The protagonist of the story is Wang Lili (王沥沥), a young professional who has developed a passion for swimming. Swimming is more than a hobby for Lili; it has become an escape from the draining routine of daily life and a relief from the constant vexation of penetrating gazes:

At the end of the workday, an indescribable unease envelops her. It's as if those staring eyes have left her body pitted and scarred, as if her skin has peeled away, revealing exposed wires underneath. Only underwater, when water embraces and protects her, she feels safe; the places on her body that have cracked, the spots where the wind leaks in gradually close up, becoming smooth and even once again. (Zhang 2022, 56)

Lili is introduced after a long prologue that portrays the swimming pool, its internal spatial arrangement, and the experience of going to the pool. As if on a guided tour, readers walk into the building and meet the women at the front desk—Xiao Jin (小金), the younger, who explains to visitors the rules and policy of the swimming pool, and Yuan Dajie (袁大姐 sister Yuan), just over forty years old, who is always eating melon seeds. Locker key in hand, visitors take a turn to the left if they are male, to the right if they are female. We enter the women's changing room. In a documentary-like fashion, the text zooms in details such as the two rows of white washbasins at the entrance, the closets, the benches, and the showers. As visual details give way to other sensory experiences such as the description of

the steamy aroma—"a blend of chlorine, the fragrance of shampoo and shower gel, and the natural scent of people's skin" (Zhang 2022, 51)—that enshrouds the whole space, it becomes clear that what seemed an objective "documentary" is actually the reproduction of a subjective, phenomenological experience. We are following Lili, before we even know her. It is through her eyes that we watch women changing their clothes, peeping at each other's bodies, comparing their own bodies to others'. Still from Lili's perspective, we are induced to discern those women's swimming skills from the characteristics of their swimsuits. And finally, it is through Lili's body-subject that we "feel" the experience of being in water:

It's as if hundreds of anchor chains release from your body all at once. A slight movement of your arms and legs makes you float weightlessly, like a drifting jellyfish.

Water is like a kind of love, the one that makes people relax and feel safe. That moment's feeling is truly wonderful, even better than downing a large gulp of ice-cold beer, better than when your tongue slips into a cute mouth during a kiss. (Zhang 2022, 52)

Lili feels free and safe in water until one day when a man in his forties or fifties touches her. The man is one of the regulars, his main characteristic being a protruding belly that looks like a "rice dumpling" (汤圆 *tangyuan*) that has got stuck half way while being inserted into a hole (Zhang 2022, 57). At first Lili persuades herself that he has touched her unintentionally while swimming past her. But when he touches her a second time, she has no doubt that it is a case of harassment. Thereafter, every time Lili is at the pool, she first checks which lane "Rice Dumpling" is swimming in before choosing a lane. Alertness and self-imposed restraint seem to be Lili's only defense, although for a moment she entertains the possibility of reporting the harassment to the women at the desk:

Should I tell Xiao Jin and Sister Yuan? Tell them there's a guy touching women's buttocks in the water...but what can Xiao Jin do? Forbid him from coming to swim in the future? I can't have Xiao Jin warn every female guest: "There is a guy who likes to harass, be careful, ladies." The crucial thing is that there are no cameras underwater, there is no evidence (无凭无据 *wuping wuju*). (Zhang 2022, 58)

Unable to "prove" the harassment, she chooses to remain silent. The event is brushed aside as though it never happened.

Summer arrives and a new female guest appears at the pool: her shiny white swimsuit and outstanding swimming technique capture Lili's interest. Her name is Ling Kehua (凌可花), Lili reads one day on the book for registration at the front desk, but only later in the fall will Lili have a chance to finally speak to her. It happens in the showers: Kehua has forgotten to bring her shampoo and asks Lili if

she can lend some to her. As they talk, a trickle of blood flows down Lili's leg; her period has caught her unprepared so, after showering, it is Kehua who returns the favor by handing Lili a sanitary pad. Out of this exchange grows a form of intimacy that will prove to be pivotal in contrasting humiliation and offense.

The same man who has touched Lili, one day, harasses Kehua. Screaming at the top of her lungs, Kehua gets out of the pool, everybody's eyes fixed on her. When a lifeguard, Old Zhao (老赵), steps forward to understand what has happened, without hesitation, Kehua points her finger at the man with the big belly and accuses him of touching her buttocks and leg. Rice Dumpling responds to the accusation by claiming that the touching was accidental, that brushing each other's bodies is almost inevitable in a common pool. But as Kehua insists that the touching was done on purpose, annoyed, Rice Dumpling asks about evidence:

"So, do you have any evidence (证据 *zhengju*)?" Turning to Old Zhao:

"Hey, do you have underwater surveillance cameras?"

Old Zhao replied, "Well, no."

Rice Dumpling said: "Then, that's it, it's over! There is no evidence (*wuping wuju*). Sister, if you want to fake an accident (碰瓷 *pengci*), choose a place with cameras next time." (Zhang 2022, 66)

He goes as far as to offend her with a despicable sexist remark:

Sister, if you looked like Fan Bingbing,⁹ maybe people would believe you a bit more. Look at your dark skin, the thick legs—I'm really not interested! Even if you paid me to touch you, I would still find you below my standards. (Zhang 2022, 67)

Although he is reproached by Old Zhao for the sexist comment, the language of evidence has successfully sown the seed of doubt among the people present; Old Zhao himself considers the situation "difficult to deal with." Kehua is in tears when Lili finally finds the courage to shout "I'll testify!" (作证 *zuozheng*) (Zhang 2022, 67). She tells everyone that he has touched her as well, more than once. Lili's "me-too" intervention suddenly makes Kehua's accusations more credible in the mind of the spectators. Xiao Jin, for one, argues that there must be something true if more than one person comes forward with the same accusation. Her reasoning is unfair toward the victims, but it suggests that coming forward as a group can have positive ramifications as much for the victims as for the larger community. In the face of the perpetrator's denial and his refusal to apologize for what he has done—he is certain that in the absence of evidence he will get away with it—another lifeguard steps in. The lifeguard warns him that without an apology the

⁹ Fan Bingbing (范冰冰, 1981–) is a Chinese actress. She rose to fame in 1998 with the role she played in *My Fair Princess*.

case will be reported to the “system” that will put him on a sort of “black list,” with consequences as to his ability to get a credit card, obtain loans, etc. (Zhang 2022, 68). Frightened by the threat, the perpetrator apologizes. The “system” is of course an invention of the lifeguard who wants to put pressure on the perpetrator, but it also stands as a concrete manifestation of solidarity and support toward Lili and Kehua. Indeed, the man has harassed the young women with impunity, but much has been gained at the community level from breaking the silence. In this scene, #MeToo activism is not simply evoked, it is staged and even endorsed as a viable, albeit imperfect, mode of resistance.

The apology, however, does not erase the harm that the victims have suffered. Nor is the solidarity expressed by the community sufficient to heal the wounds caused by the abuse. Because oppressive gendered systems rely upon embodied temporal structures, resistance efforts, Burke emphasizes must “generate disorder in the order of time that produces and maintains the reality of sexual domination” (Burke 2019, 128). Kehua, in particular, is thrown into silence by the abuse. After the event, she appears stuck in her pain and trauma, trapped in a temporal dimension that ties her to the experience of violence while unhinging her from other possible temporalities and aspects of life, including her friend Lili. The young women thus drift apart, but when they meet again in the pool, a month later, the encounter becomes an occasion to rekindle the previously built intimacy and discover its subversive potential. Their intimacy fissures the temporal entrapment by enabling alternative temporal configurations and modes of affection. If heteronormative systems affect how “one experiences her self through the way she can be touched by others” (Burke 2019, 132), intimacy here resists oppression precisely by instituting a new way of touching and being touched, as demonstrated by the scene when Kehua holds Lili’s hand to help her improve her swimming technique:

Both of their hands were cold due to being submerged in the water for a long time, and only the parts pressed tightly together were warm. For a few seconds, Wang Lili felt like her entire being had vanished, with only that point of contact remaining, keeping her alive. She exerted all her strength to experience that hand, to remember the shape of the slender hand bones she could feel through the skin, and the power of restraint and guidance transmitted through the muscles of the fingers and palm. (Zhang 2022, 71)

The touching hands effect a temporal suspension that differs from the temporal suspension caused by the experience of, or by the possibility of experiencing, abuse. This moment can be deemed “untimely” (Burke 2019, 132–137) and queer because it interrupts the temporal habit that produces and maintains heteronormative oppression, activating healing mechanisms that have the potential of restoring agency and freedom. The touch that feels like a return to life for Lili

reconnects Kehua to the past, thereby opening up “the possibility for a relation to the future” (Burke 2019, 139). After swimming, Kehua, who has never completely taken off the swimsuit while under the shower, lets Lili see her full naked body for the first time. A scar runs down Kehua’s stomach below the navel. No word is uttered, but “Wang Lili understands everything. Very clearly, exceptionally clearly” (Zhang 2022, 73). We are not told what caused the scar, but it is easy to intuit that behind it lies a story of pain and trauma—maybe an unwanted pregnancy or an abortion by hysterotomy—that the experience of harassment in the pool brought to life. By showing the scar, Kehua gives visibility to what has been concealed, and by doing so allows herself to inhabit the past in a different way. The past is no longer felt as a congealed dimension that constraints the present and the future but as an open source that can inflect the present and the future in unpredictable, indeterminate ways. In connecting to an open past, the individual challenges the limits of her gendered temporal existence and reclaims her agency. Kehua disappears again after this moment, but the story leaves open the possibility of a future encounter with Lili. The assertion of indeterminacy against the determination of oppressive regimes is reflected in the story’s open ending.

3. The battered woman

Let us return for a moment to the scene in “I Only Want to Sit Down” when Zhan Lili shares with the train attendant two “train stories” that have been passed down in her family. The first one revolves around Lili’s grandmother, who once traveled home with her newborn grandson. On the train home the baby was kidnapped by a female peasant who had been battered by her husband for years for not becoming pregnant. The peasant was traveling to Shanghai, intending to take her life there by jumping into the river, when she saw the cute baby on the train and decided to take him with her. To keep him quiet, she even made him drink alcohol. The story ends with the image of Lili’s forgiving grandmother who offers to pay for the peasant’s return ticket.

Lili’s story introduces to us the figure of the battered woman as a “detail” that is not central to the story plot but is “telling” in that its “presence or absence,” as Jiwei Xiao puts it, “shines a light on what is hidden in the text” (Xiao 2022). The battered female peasant in this vignette unmasks social and ethical complexities that demand a nuanced understanding of gender violence and configurations of victimhood. The female peasant is a victim of unequal gender relations but also of an unjust economic system that has made her vulnerable and, likely, economically dependent upon her husband. She is about to give up on her miserable life when she sees hope in the possibility of having a child, even if not her own. The kidnapping is a desperate gesture, but one that signifies the woman’s effort to

transform herself from a passive recipient of violence into an agent of change. That the gesture comes with ethical implications further troubles not only rigid divisions between victimization and agency but also between victim and perpetrator, highlighting the ambiguities, tensions, and negotiations embedded in those relations.

The battered woman reappears in "The Blood on the Floor" as a revealing detail that situates domestic violence at the intersection of various forms of inequality and injustice. As domestic violence makes manifest differences that are linked to the city's colonial past and to larger patterns of marginalization and socio-economic unevenness, it emerges as a phenomenon that undercuts binary constructions of public and private, victim and perpetrator, as well as passivity and agency. Interestingly, in this story, female victims of domestic violence prove their resilience by repurposing the experience of menstruation and its inherent gendered temporality to form intimacies as potent sites of resistance.

The story is centered on Lili (粒粒), a young professional who returns to her hometown to pay a visit to her mother, Wang Chang'e (王嫦娥), who has remarried and now lives with her second husband Yang Qi (杨器), a former teacher whose standard Mandarin stands out in an unspecified province where everyone is used to speaking the dialect. The story focuses on the night that Lili spends at her mother and Yang Qi's place, and on the accidental staining of the bedding caused by the unexpected arrival of Lili's period. Flashbacks to the past, invariably refracted through Lili's memory, are interpolated within this narrative line.

The first flashback occurs while Lili makes a tour of her mother's new apartment. In the studio, she notices the absence of their old bookcase, now replaced by a new one. Lili remembers that the old bookcase was handmade by her biological father, who "got divorced from her mother four years before" (Zhang 2022, 34). Although this memory conveys a certain attachment to the old bookcase—and by extension to the father who made it—to her mother, who is eager to explain why she has gotten rid of that piece of furniture, Lili would only like to say: "it doesn't matter. Didn't I advise you to get a divorce when I was only eight years old? Didn't I join you in cursing him all along for being a 'scoundrel raised in a pit?'" (Zhang 2022, 34). Lili's unspoken thoughts, and the brutal spatial image (the "pit"), hide a past of suffering that is not immediately disclosed. What is disclosed instead is that the language of the pit is her mother's, who has always associated people's behavior to their geographical provenance. In Chang'e's cultural mapping of the city, the northern area, previously under colonial rule, with its beautiful Western buildings, is where people have style and a taste for the aesthetic. The eastern area is home to the best universities, thus those who grow up there are the most educated and refined. The south is mostly inhabited by people coming from the provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang; not glamorous, but not bad, either. Finally, the

west side is the most degraded area, where brothels, gambling dens, and criminal associations thrived before the founding of the New China. We can already guess where the “pit” is located in this geography, but before we know more about Lili’s father, Lili dwells on how this cultural mapping is reflected in the stories that her mother used to tell her. In passing, Lili recalls one such story. It is about the neighbors’ daughter who within three months after getting married began suffering her husband’s battering. Once, one of her eyes was severely injured. The man had been raised, of course, on the west side of the city, Lili was told by her mother when she inquired about his provenance.

In this reminiscence, the battered woman returns again as a detail that while being secondary to the story line is key to understanding the complexity of gender violence beyond reductions and simplifications. Her story emerges as an uncanny moment that stands out because of, rather than in spite of, the naturalization of the violence implicated in colonial, social, and gender inequalities. The association between violence and the batterer’s origins in Chang’e’s narrative helps to reframe domestic violence as a matter that is not confined to the private space of the home. At the same time, this association establishes simplified causal relations that, by hindering possibilities of intervention and change, naturalize violence. The limits of the correlation between violent behavior and a person’s birthplace is further captured by Lili’s subsequent reflection on her father’s bad temperament:

But as she grew older, she gradually realized that being able to explain her doubts in such a simple way was a kind of naive blessing. Why is he treating me like that? Because he has a bad personality. Why does he have a bad personality? Because he comes from a region with unfavorable customs. Well, then there’s no solution, nothing to blame. If we had a choice, who would choose to be born in a rotten place? (Zhang 2022, 35)

The logics of her mother’s argument is put to the test in order to demonstrate that a critique of violence requires a more profound analysis. This awareness informs Lili’s subsequent recollections.

From the beginning, the image of Lili’s rude father is contrasted with the image of a refined, well-mannered Yang Qi, who was born into an educated family hailing from the east side of the city. Yang Qi’s intellectual upbringing reverberates throughout the house: the elegant European furniture, the books, and the calligraphy hung on the walls epitomize his intellectual cultivation and taste. He is also a caring man and a great cook. The shrimps Lili is served for dinner are made by Yang Qi, who tells Lili “how he chooses them, how he kills them, how he marinates them with sauce” (Zhang 2022, 36). Over dinner, however, Lili’s mother is interested less in the shrimps and more in demonstrating to Yang Qi that her daughter’s education matches his own. When she asks her daughter to read the

calligraphy on the wall, a distressed Lili obeys because “she knows her [mother], she understands her, she forgives her” (Zhang 2022, 37). This moment of tension is the occasion to rethink her mother’s past and her relationship with her former husband.

Lili’s mother fell easily for that man who, on a rainy night, showed up at her place to propose, completely drenched and in tears. He was a welder but the company’s profits were too low. He then tried other jobs, from “breeding tropical fish” to “selling leather jackets, tobacco and alcohol, driving a taxi, and trading stocks” (Zhang 2022, 38), but always incurred enormous financial losses. Disappointed, he would take it out on his wife. At one point he thought that setting up an activity abroad could change his life, but when Chang’e refused to give him money to travel, he began smashing things in the house, yelling at her: “You’re not allowing me to soar! It’s you who ruined my future!” (Zhang 2022, 38). He beat her twice. He beat Lili countless times.

The precarious economic condition of Lili’s father does not justify the mistreatment of the wife and the daughter, but it helps situate violence in a larger context that alerts us to the fact that “matters of redistribution” are as important as “matters of recognition” (Fraser 2009). This context foregrounds battering as a phenomenon that crosses domestic boundaries and is interlaced with multiple forms of discrimination and inequality. In this sense, I would argue, these fictional depictions of violence do not aim at pathologizing the battered woman. Indeed, Chang’e’s anxieties about proving to be a suitable match for her new husband by asking her daughter to read the calligraphy conceal insecurities that find their roots in a past of violence and frustration. Lenore Walker’s study of the battered woman syndrome has shown that women that have been hit suffer from low self-esteem (Walker [1984] 2009, 155). However, Zhang’s fiction is not invested in examining the “syndrome” of the battered woman. It actually departs from problematic views of the “battered woman” as an identity, as “a separate and unique category of womanness,” to use bell hooks’s words (hooks [1997] 2020, 264),¹⁰ to elucidate the intersectional nature of gender violence and women’s coping strategies. Lili turns to these coping strategies in her last set of memories.

In the middle of the night, Lili is awakened by the sudden arrival of the menses. The sight of the blood stains on the bed sheets, blanket and mattress cover brings back to her mind the memory of her menarche. The event had surprised her during a PE class at school, causing the staining of her uniform. Back at home, her mother immediately scrubbed the blood off her pants, prepared a basin of warm water for her to wash, and taught her how to wear a sanitary pad. Throughout, she

¹⁰ Born Gloria Jean Watkins, bell hooks (1952–2021) chose not to capitalize her name for ideological reasons. To respect her position, her name is kept lowercase.

kept a smile on her face. Chang'e's delight became clear a moment later when she told Lili that when it had happened to her, she had been very happy. Lili asked her why and her mother responded:

Because in my aunt's family there was a cousin who was born like a "stone woman" [石女 *shinü*]; she never menstruated and could not have children. The first time I bled, I told myself, with a sigh of relief, this is good, I'm not a stone woman. I can have children in the future. (Zhang 2022, 41)

This passage makes manifest a culture that shames women who do not or cannot fulfill expectations of reproduction. Being able to reproduce is necessary to be validated and recognized as a woman in a heteronormative society. The mother's desire for menstruation then bespeaks a desire for recognition that turns the occurrence of menstruation into a longed-for occasion to become a (fertile) woman. In this longing, a particular relation to time is projected: to become a woman is to be anchored to the present, a present of waiting (Burke 2019, 25–28). Longing for menstruation overlaps, however, with the anxiety of keeping it out of sight. Even as it is necessary for a woman to realize her feminine existence, menstruation is regarded as a "stigmatizing mark" (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020, 182) that elicits negative feelings. In the urgent removal of menstrual stains and in the hygiene practices, one can see reflected constructions of menstruation as a blemish that must be concealed (Fahs 2016, 38). In other words, when it comes to menstruating, a woman is damned if she does, damned if she does not.

Remarkably, it is precisely because of its stigmatized construction that menstruation turns into a resource to resist violence. After Lili's first period, menstruation becomes a topic that conspicuously enters her conversations with her mother, and a site of intimacy:

they remembered each other's dates, and provided advice and care; for example, they reminded each other not to wash the face with cold water, to drink a cup of brown sugar water before bedtime, to use a hot water bag for abdominal pain, placing it on the other's lower abdomen. (Zhang 2022, 42)

Every time they talked about the menses, Lili's father would "stare at the television or newspaper, pretending not to hear, without proffering a word. This topic was a symbolic extension of his adult daughter's body, a taboo subject" (Zhang 2022, 42). Once Lili understood that the topic inhibited her father, she began to "use" it. When her parents quarreled, and her father, enraged, "started hitting things, substituting noise for words" (Zhang 2022, 42), Lili would deliberately bring up the topic of menstruation to her mother. Her upset father would push the door open and leave.

Because of the stigmatization of menstruation, the intimacy that Lili and her mother have built around menstruation can be mobilized as a tool to cope with violence. What I call the “menstruation talk” creates a protective barrier that, however, is not unbreakable. When, during the night, Lili wakes her mother up to tell her that she has stained the bedding and does not have pads with her, she expects her mother to hand her a pad, as she used to do. But her mother has already entered menopause and no longer keeps sanitary pads at home. While Lili is waiting in the bathroom, Chang’e sends Yang Qi out to buy pads. When Lili learns that Yang Qi is out to buy the pads for her, she bursts out crying inconsolably. The shock of learning about her mother’s menopause is aggravated by the betrayal of her mother who has broken their intimacy by allowing Yang Qi—a man—to cross a sacrosanct boundary. After Lili goes back to her bed, Chang’e spots a drop of Lili’s blood on the bathroom floor. Instead of removing it, she observes it, as she used to: the vivid color is a sign of health, she thinks. The following morning, however, Yang Qi removes the stain. When Chang’e finds it out, she also begins crying. On this sad image the story ends, reminding us that intimacies are as empowering as they are fragile.

4. Conclusion

Neither women’s writing nor gender is a stable category in China. As He Guimei and Zhang Li (2021) point out, women writers’ efforts in the 1980s to assert gender equality, on the basis of a notion of humanism that was rooted in Enlightenment ideology, gave way in the 1990s to an inward turn that redirected the focus of inquiry toward women’s personal and bodily experiences. Yet the rehabilitation of the private and the body in women’s writing dissociated the exploration of women’s issues from larger social and national questions, ultimately doing little for the feminist cause of liberating women. Take for instance “Ragdoll” (布偶猫 *Bu’oumao*), an essay penned by writer Zhou Xiaofeng (周晓枫, 1969–) and included in her 2017 collection *Like Migratory Birds* (有如候鸟 *Youru houniao*). The essay draws attention to violence in intimate relationships, but by psychologizing women’s experience of violence, emphasizing, for instance, their attachment to their perpetrator, it reduces women to the status of victims and gendered violence to a personal, private matter. Since being a woman is not an isolated identity, but emerges at the intersection of multiple relations, as He and Zhang suggest, questions of gender and violence should be situated within the context of ethnicity, nationality, and social class, in a discursive space where the separation between the public and the private is not tenable (He and Zhang 2021, 385–389).

Some efforts in this direction have been made within the field of contemporary science fiction, as demonstrated by Xi Liu (2022). Literature can offer a productive

terrain to reflect critically on gender relationships and gender violence. In this chapter, the analysis of representations of sexual harassment and gender violence in Zhang Tianyi's short story collection has brought to light Zhang's investment in encouraging a more nuanced understanding of women's issues. As she says in an interview with the Chinese literary magazine *October* (*Shiyue*): "emphasizing a certain kind of gendered issue makes a fictional work weaker" (Zhang 2021, 406). By re-coupling matters of "recognition" and matters of "distribution," as Nancy Fraser would put it (Fraser 2009), Zhang's collection makes an important intervention not only in contemporary Chinese literary practices but also in contemporary feminist discourses. Since the 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women, the "global feminist concept of gender" has become a privileged analytical category among Chinese feminist activists (Wang and Zhang 2010, 40). Yet, as Zheng Wang and Ying Zhang explain, the tenuous line separating Chinese NGOs and the All China Women's Federation, and the gradual erasure of the language of class from contemporary Chinese political discourse and activism, have turned the pursuit of women's rights into a "safe space" (Wang and Zhang 2010, 68). Such space is "safe" because it "segregates feminists from other parallel struggles that have yet to obtain legitimacy" (Wang and Zhang 2010, 68). At a time when feminism is showing disturbing similarities with neoliberal values of personal empowerment and responsibility (Fraser 2009), Zhang Tianyi's collection urges us to rethink mechanisms of gender violence within a broader interpretive horizon that enables critiques of multiple forms of oppression, thus expanding the scope and potential of feminist analysis and #MeToo activism.

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BECOMING-SIMULACRA: TEXTUALIZING MURDEROUS WOMEN IN HEISEI JAPAN (1989–2019)

Fengyuan Zhen

During the Heisei era in Japan (1989–2019), depictions of murderous women became widespread in literature and media. Despite being a minor percentage of reported crimes, murders committed by women, exemplified by Kijima Kanae's case, gained significant media attention and inspired numerous fictional and non-fictional works. Influenced by Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and simulacra, this study views media-constructed images of murderous women in the Heisei era as simulacra detached from accessible reality. Analyzing selected writings based on Kijima's crimes, the chapter argues that instead of revealing the truth of the crimes or the "essence" of female criminality, these texts generate a hyperreality devoid of "truth." The "truth" is utilized by Heisei authors as perspectival interpretations to engage with discourses surrounding gender and sexuality, the monstrous potential of human beings, and social issues, such as consumer culture, the expanding cyberspace, and the shift in the gender division of labor, which concerned the general public in Japan during the Heisei era.

Keywords: simulacra, murderous women, gender ideology, femininity, Japanese literature, Heisei Japan

1. Introduction

In Heisei Japan (1989–2019), images of murderous women proliferated and were widely circulated on both the page and screen. The popularity of the Murderous Evil Woman (悪女 *akujo*) archetype in Japanese novels, films, and TV dramas coincided with the media's obsession with real-life female murderers, such as Hayashi

Masumi, Kijima Kanae, and Ueda Miyuki,¹ who were dubbed “the three most infamous evil women in the Heisei era” (平成の三大悪女 *Heisei no saidai akujo*) in the Japanese magazine *Shūkan gendai* (週刊現代, *Modern Weekly*) (Ōwaki 2017, 148–150). These three women gained a huge amount of attention from the media. Their names and photos frequently appeared in the news, in tabloid magazines, and on variety shows. Their crimes were also adapted into novels, TV dramas, films, and even adult comics. While the images of murderous women proliferated in the media, real-life murders committed by women made up only an extremely small percentage of reported offenses. According to the annual *Hanzai hakusho* (犯罪白書, *White Paper on Crime*) published by the Japanese Ministry of Justice (1989–2018), the percentage of homicides committed by women among reported offenses during the Heisei era consistently ranged from 0.3% to 0.4%. Within the category of homicide cases, only approximately 20% were attributed to female perpetrators each year. These statistics highlight the relatively small proportion of women involved in homicides throughout this period. The increase in images of murderous women in Heisei Japan does not indicate that Japanese women were becoming particularly evil or murderous during the Heisei era.

The gap between the “representation” and “reality” is thus made evident by the images of murderous women, yet, this area remains relatively unexplored by scholars. This chapter therefore aims to fill the gap by answering the following question: If these images are not a simple reflection of reality, how can we understand their intertwinement with the social and cultural context of Heisei Japan? To address this question, this study examines the images of murderous women in both fiction and non-fiction writings based on the case of Kijima Kanae, one of “the three most infamous evil women in the Heisei era.” Among the three, Kijima stands out as the most frequently portrayed in various forms of literature. She was found guilty of murdering three of her would-be husbands and was suspected of being involved in four additional deaths between 2007 and 2009. She met her victims through matchmaking (婚活 *konkatsu*) websites. Before their deaths from carbon monoxide poisoning, each victim had transferred millions of yen to Kijima’s bank account. Despite her conviction and final death sentence in 2017, Kijima has consistently maintained her pleas of innocence, making her death sentence controversial. The sensational nature of her crimes gained significant media attention, inspiring numerous fictional and non-fictional works that offered diverse interpretations of her actions. These works serve as valuable materials for delving into the public’s imagination of murderous women in Heisei Japan, as well as for interrogating the complicated relationship between reality and representation.

¹ In this chapter, Japanese names will be presented in Japanese naming order, family name first and given name second.

2. Poison woman: writing female criminality from the Meiji to the Heisei era

This study is greatly informed by Christine Marran's (2007) study on the representation of criminal "poison woman" across the Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–1926), and the Shōwa era (1926–1989), which offers valuable insights into the relationship between the murderous, transgressive female images and the Japanese social and historical context.

According to Marran (2007, xxiii), the Meiji Restoration's encouragement of pursuing truth and the rise of small newspapers (小新聞 *koshinbun*) targeting less educated readers in Meiji Japan triggered the boom of writing stories featuring real-life female criminals, who were dubbed "poison women" (毒婦 *dokufu*). While the term suggests a connection to poisoning, it was generally used to refer to women who committed murder or robbery, regardless of their criminal methods (Marran 2007, xxiii). In Meiji Japan, poison-woman literature became a popular subgenre of crime fiction and was circulated widely in newspapers.

Marran (2007, xvii) points out that the emergence of a new female image often coincides with social and political upheaval, which can potentially bring significant changes to women's lives. Marran (2007, 56) notes, for example, that the appearance of the on-the-run poison-woman coincided with the removal of class boundaries and changes in travel laws after the Meiji restoration, allowing women to travel without a passport. The public's fear of the lone female traveler can be seen through this literary representation. Notably, these narratives not only responded to the transformation of women's lives in the Meiji period, but also exposed both authors' and readers' drive "to categorize, to contrast the criminal individual's experience with that of the collective as part of a quest for meaning and understanding of why the crime occurred" (Allen 2013, 16). By writing about deviant, real-life female murderers, who stood as antitheses to the idealized "good wife, wise mother"² (良妻賢母 *ryōsai kenbo*), and by condemning them as guilty, sexually abnormal, and unenlightened Others, male authors asserted their own identities as civilized citizens while propagating Meiji enlightenment discourses³ (Marran 2007, 63–64).

The concept of "good-wife-wise-mother" characterizes the modern ideal of womanhood constructed during Meiji Japan, deeply intertwined with the development of the modern gender division of labor. This division of labor emerged from

² The term "good wife, wise mother" represents the idealized role for women in Meiji Japan, emphasizing domesticity, motherhood, and commitment to the family.

³ As advocated by the Meiji Restoration, the pursuit of enlightenment was a crucial aspect of Japanese modernization. This discourse promoted Western-style education, civilization, family institution, and a break from feudal values.

the establishment of the “family-state” system (家族国家 *kazoku kokka*), which universalized the samurai code for all Japanese men, demanding their loyalty towards the nation and the emperor, while requiring women to embody samurai ideals of loyalty and commitment within the domestic sphere (Liddle and Nakajima 2000, 41–42). It imposed upon women the tasks of domestic work and proper education of children to support their families (Butel 2012, 67–68). This gender ideology largely confines “good” women to the domestic sphere. Notably, this ideology has predominantly reflected middle or upper-class ideals of femininity since its formation in the Meiji era. In the Heisei era, this expectation of female domesticity continues to influence public perceptions of womanhood. Throughout the Meiji to the Heisei eras, criminal women in literature have typically faced criticism according to middle-class standards of ideal womanhood and have been excluded from the category of “good-wife-wise-mother.”

After the spread of sexology and psychoanalysis from Europe to Japan in the 1910s, poison-woman literature in the Taishō and early Shōwa eras began to focus on exploring the connections between female criminality, physiology, and psychology. In Yokose Yau’s *Kinsei dokufu ten* (近世毒婦伝, *Stories of Early Modern Poison Women*, 1928), for example, female criminals were depicted as “gender transgressive,” being portrayed as “masculine, sexually driven, and unrepentant” (Marran 2007, 114). Psychoanalysts Takahashi Tetsu and Ōtsuki Kenji conducted a psychoanalytic diagnosis of poison woman Abe Sada, who killed her lover and cut off his penis in 1936. They concluded that Abe was “primitive” and had not formed a fully developed sexuality, attributing her brutal act to her wholly unsuppressed sexual desire (Marran 2007, 114).

During the Taishō era, poison women were often regarded as sexual criminals and female sexuality became the “primary touchstone for explaining crime by women” (Marran 2007, 112). During the post-war period, however, the portrayal of historical poison woman figures, such as Abe Sada, underwent significant changes. Although Abe had been pathologized in the 1930s, she was later praised by leftist intellectuals for “being unencumbered by ideological pressures” in the post-World War II era (Marran 2007, 136). Women’s transgression became a privileged means of signifying resistance towards oppression and authoritarianism. In the film *Ai no korīda* (愛のコリーダ, *In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976), director Ōshima Nagisa treated Abe as an eroticized icon of emancipation, interpreting her act of cutting off a penis as a form of resistance against masculine totalitarian politics and cultural values in pre-World War II Japan (Marran 2007, 136).

The trend of depicting murderous women as symbols of emancipation or victims of patriarchal society continued into the Heisei era. During this period, feminist theories gained increasing popularity. This prompted authors to explore the complex relationship between gender inequalities, the hardships faced by

women, and their involvement in criminal activities. One such author is Kirino Natsuo, a female novelist, who delves into this theme in her renowned crime fiction novel *OUT* (1997). Scholars, such as Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt (2015), Mina Qiao (2018), and Wendy Jones Nakanishi (2018), view women's acts of killing depicted in Kirino's work as responses to oppressive patriarchy. They examine how Kirino's writings illuminate the precarious existence of women in post-bubble Japan, and view her novels as exposés of Japanese society.

From the Meiji to the early Shōwa era, the criminality of the "poison woman" was largely interpreted in relation to her "deviant" biological sexuality. In the post-war era, however, a feminist perspective was introduced, leading to a different interpretation of murders committed by women. Women's crimes were no longer perceived as completely evil but were seen as expressions of political resistance against authoritarian or patriarchal oppressions. In the following sections, I will investigate whether the representational modes found in the previous poison-woman literature persist in the texts featuring Kijima Kanae in the Heisei era, and whether any significant changes have occurred.

Raechel Dumas (2018, 145) argues that stories of the monstrous-feminine in Heisei Japan, particularly in horror films and science fiction, are "gendered narratives of cultural crisis." According to Dumas, the Heisei era was marked by a prevailing sense of crisis, primarily revolving around the economic recession, shifting gender norms, and the breakdown of the family. The fearful female monsters serve to "agitate the open wounds" in society (Dumas 2018, 18). She identifies the frequent use of monstrous-feminine bodies as expressing society's anxiety over women's becoming-uncontrollable femininity (Dumas 2018, 10). This anxiety is exemplified by the portrayals of "out-of-control" sexuality in popular culture, such as the manga series *Tomie* (富江, 1987–2000), where a teenage girl is depicted as a seductive immortal monster who manipulates men into killing her and then seeks revenge on them (Dumas 2018, 10). As Marran (2007, 174) observes, the narrative surrounding criminal, murderous women continuously evolved, and the murderous-woman figure proved to be "flexible enough to be an agent of new gender discourse." Building upon Marran and Dumas' insights, this study will investigate how the portrayals of female murderers, may also serve as a medium that bridges the discourses related to the gender and social issues of the Heisei era.

While Marran, Dumas, and other aforementioned scholars all emphasize the importance of understanding the social context and societal upheavals when examining images of criminal women and monstrous feminine, this study draws on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation to further point out that the social context should be understood as textual and discursive rather than objective reality. By looking at various interpretations of one real-life murderer, Kijima

Kanae, this study problematizes the idea of truth and reality, and will argue that the images of murderous women in the Heisei era are simulacra, with no reality being the referent. The four works that will be discussed in the chapter are listed below.

1. Sano Shin'ichi's non-fictional work *Betsukai kara kita onna: Kijima Kanae akumabarai no hyakunichi saiban* (別海から来た女——木嶋佳苗悪魔祓いの百日裁判, *The Woman from Betsukai: 100-Day Trials of the Devil Kijima Kanae*, 2012)
2. Kitahara Minori's non-fictional work *Dokufu: Kijima Kanae hyakunichi saiban bōchō ki* (毒婦。木嶋佳苗100日裁判傍聴記, *The Poison Woman: 100 Days of Watching the Trials of Kijima Kanae*, 2013)
3. Yuzuki Asako's novel *Butter* (2017)
4. Mari Yukiko's novel *Gonin no Junko* (五人のジュンコ, *Five Junkos*, 2016)

3. Heisei murderous women as simulacra

As previously discussed, the image of the “poison woman” is a literary construct with a history that can be traced back to the Meiji era. It is coded by historical and stereotypical interpretations of female criminality and sexuality, carrying fictional elements within its understanding. The media representations of female murderers in Heisei Japan were, to some extent, built upon this Meiji-era construction of the “poison woman” image, which was sensational, imaginary, and textual. In weekly tabloid magazines, female murderers were depicted sensationally and dubbed as evil and poisonously dangerous. The articles about Kijima Kanae came with headlines such as “Kijima Kanae, the poison woman of the Heisei era, indulges in excessive eating in jail just before her first trial” (平成の毒婦と呼ばれた「木嶋佳苗」初公判直前の拘置所「爆食生活」) (*Shūkan shinchō* 2011) and “The buxom marriage hunting swindler who brings death” (死を招く豊満「婚カツ」詐欺師) (*Shūkan bunshun* 2009).

Journalists, writers, and the public have obsessively scrutinized the physical appearance and relationships with men of female murderers. Their narratives constructed murderous women into seductive, uncanny spectacles, luring people to get close to them. Some female murderers, including Kijima Kanae, became celebrities to a large extent, even attracting fans and supporters. Do these media representations truly capture, however, the reality of these criminal women? I suggest that the images of murderous women in the Heisei era can be seen as simulacra, a term coined by Jean Baudrillard. These images only present the appearance rather than actuality or truth and blur the boundary between the realm of the fictive and that of the real.

According to Baudrillard (1994, 1–3), the rapid development of media technologies, television in particular, since the post-World War II period, has devastated the boundary between the original and the representation. We have fallen into a hyperreal space where the representation or the simulacrum precedes and replaces the real. The real is obscured by a barrier of images and becomes unattainable. For example, when a murder case is reported by journalists or adapted into fiction and films, it undergoes a process of simulation. The actual act of murder is replaced by the constructed discourse and signs created by the media, which themselves are simulations of the original murder. People's understanding and the narratives surrounding a murder case do not represent the actual crime itself, but rather the simulated versions of the crime (news, fiction, films, discourse, etc.). As a result, the original crime itself becomes obscured and disappears.

Baudrillard therefore considers the 9/11 attacks and Gulf Wars “non-events.” He is not denying the occurrence of the attacks but criticizing how media technologies have manipulated people's experience and knowledge of war and terrorism and reduced the real into a bonus of the mediated events, “like an additional *frisson*” (Baudrillard 2003, 29). According to Baudrillard, the mass media acts as a simulation machine, constantly generating images and leading to the volatilization of reality or the original. Instead, a hyperreality composed of signs emerges, where simulations of reality are perceived as the real. In this hyperreal realm, signs of objects have replaced the actual objects themselves. Baudrillard argues that we have entered an era of signs reproducing themselves autonomously even without referents in the real world in the second half of the 20th century.

Baudrillard's theory ultimately leads to the recognition that the hierarchy between truth and appearance has disappeared, as everything has been transformed into signs. In “Transformation of Semantics in the History of Japanese Subcultures since 1992,” Japanese sociologist Miyadai Shinji (2011) similarly acknowledges the “loss of divinity” of reality. Namely, the collapse of the hierarchy within the reality/fiction binary in Heisei Japan. By illustrating how adult videos have shifted from expressions of popular actresses or narratives to fetishist images easily accessible on the Internet, and how anime/manga characters and school-girls in uniforms are consumed on an equal level, Miyadai (2011, 254–255) points out that “reality is grasped as an aggregate of signs.” Furthermore, Miyadai (2011, 236) points to the diminishing discrimination against *otaku*, those who were previously viewed as inferior for escaping from “reality” into “fiction,” since 1996, as evidence of the equivalence between reality and fiction taking effect.

Both Baudrillard and Miyadai's theories articulate the dissolution of the reality/representation binary. Drawing from their perspectives, I interpret the media-constructed images of Heisei murderous women as simulacra with no accessible reality to be their referent. These images have become the primary source of the

public's knowledge of female murderers. Simultaneously, the "essence" of these female murderers and the "truths" of their crimes have been obscured and replaced by these images, rendering them inaccessible and indecipherable to the public.

As introduced earlier, this study focuses on the writings based on Kijima's crimes. These writings provide different interpretations of Kijima's motives for killing and serve as great examples demonstrating that the images of murderous women are simulacra. I will demonstrate that instead of uncovering the truths which could justify the controversial trials or overturn the judgment, these texts generate a hyperreality emptied of "truth." The "truth" behind the crimes and the "actuality" of murderous women were utilized by Heisei authors as perspectival interpretations to engage with discourses about gender and sexuality, as well as social issues, such as the economic recession, the consumer culture, and the shift in the gender division of labor due to more women entering the workforce, which concerned the general public in Heisei Japan.

4. Textualization of murders committed by women in Heisei Japan

As previously argued, the Heisei narratives surrounding murders committed by women are hyperreal. Whether in news or in novels, a murder is presented to people in the mediated form of crime narratives as a simulacrum rather than a social reality (Black 1991, 21). In his studies of the 18th-century penal reform which brought Europe from the time of public execution into the time of surveillance, Hutchings (2001, 31–34) points out that, since the removal of spectacular execution from everyday life, people's access to punishment has been mostly mediated by texts, such as novels, crime fiction, and Gothic stories. Hutchings (2001, 31) views "the displacement of law from the body into text" as a textualizing process of punishment. I argue that people's relation to murder is similarly symbolic and textualized in Heisei Japan. People's access to murder also involves a process of displacing actual violence from the body into text/signs. To articulate this process more precisely, the concept of textualization, which extends beyond the act of writing and encompasses the practices of comprehension, reading, and interpretation, is employed in this research.

I suggest that the textualization of murder involves two intertwined avenues: rationalizing and aestheticizing. The French philosopher Georges Bataille identifies two conflicting impulses inherent in every subject: the need for clarity, control, and comprehension on the one hand, and the desire for emotional intensity and intoxication on the other (Kennedy 2014, 234). The rationalizing and aestheticizing avenues are connected respectively to these two impulses. These two avenues may appear to be opposing, however, they generate non-dialectical effects. Rather, they dynamically interact and complement each other, blurring the boundaries

between subjectivity and objectivity, and between the realm of reason and the representable, and that of the unrepresentable and the sublime.

The rationalization of murder involves delving into the motives of the murderers. One example of this is the utilization of psycho-medical or juridical terminology to explain criminal behavior, such as labeling murderers as psychopaths. Another example is establishing a connection between violent actions and individuals' traumatic childhood experiences. In the texts portraying Kijima in the Heisei era, authors' approaches that link murders to social issues and provide reasonable explanations for the criminals' motives also exemplify this rationalization process. The rationalization of murder aims to make sense of the crimes by offering comprehensible justifications.

The aestheticization of murder involves associating the notions of violence, danger, and death inherent in the concept of murder with the unrepresentable, the sublime, and what Bataille refers to as sovereignty, which he defines as an experience of freedom, devoid of all the limitations of interests (Noys 2000, 60). The term suggests a state that transcends the modern aspiration of productivity. According to Bataille (2012, 61–75), in literature, a realm unconcerned with profits or practical benefits, both authors and readers can momentarily transcend their instinctual drive to preserve life and confront the unsettling aspects, the disruptions, and the decline that human activity usually seeks to avoid. By aestheticizing murders, authors embrace the sovereign evil, which is "something passionate, generous, and sacred in them which exceeds the representations of the mind" (Bataille 2012, 145). Authors such as Yuzuki Asako and Mari Yukiko emphasize either the emancipatory or the horrifying and devilish power of Kijima's acts of killing, exemplifying the aestheticization of murder. Interestingly, even non-fiction works engage in this process. Sano Shin'ichi and Kitahara Minori portray, for example, the "evil aura" of Kijima as a means to compensate for their inability to fully comprehend the complexities of the murderous woman. This approach can also be seen as an aestheticization of murder, as it serves as a way to mediate the unrepresentable.

The rationalization and aestheticization avenues suggest that the process of textualizing murder in the Heisei era involves interweaving various discourses, including gender, social issues, psychoanalysis, and the juridical, with the aestheticization of transgression. I will later demonstrate that murders by women were textualized as a site for exploring social problems, gender ideology, and the monstrous potential of humans in Heisei Japan.

These two avenues allow authors to articulate the transgressive acts that stand upon the boundary between life and death through language. By working simultaneously, they generate a self-in-between, which mediates between what is comprehensible for one's "self" (authors) and what appears to be unrepresentable in relation to the Other (murderous women). This sense of in-betweenness, signified

by textualization, aligns with Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of writing as becoming, holding the emancipatory potential to defy clear divisions between the intelligible and the unrepresentable, the self and the other, and truth and appearance.

According to Deleuze (1998), writing is a way through which we undergo an emancipatory process of becoming. He argues that, in writing, the author does not "impose a form (of expression) on the matter of lived experience," but "becomes woman, becomes animal or vegetable, becomes molecule to the point of becoming-imperceptible" (Deleuze 1998, 1). He adds that "becoming does not move in the other direction," namely, becoming Man, because man "presents himself as a dominant form of expression," imposing itself on all matter (Deleuze 1998, 1). Deleuze recognizes the transformative nature of writing as a process of becoming undone, wherein writers navigate beyond their own selves and venture into the realm of the Other. This movement allows writers to embrace different perspectives, liberating themselves from the domination of their own identities and embracing alternative forms of existence. In other words, writing as becoming is to become the Other, dismantling the dichotomy between self and other by continuously producing a self that exists in a constant state of in-betweenness. In this context, the term "the Other" does not refer to concrete or fixed entities, but rather to simulacra, the multiplicity resulting from the continuous sliding of signs.

In this study, the concept of textualization of murder in the Heisei era, which allows for the interrogation of the complexity of identity by traversing the realms of reason and the unrepresentable, and of self and other, resembles what Deleuze describes as a writer's potential in liberating themselves from the dominations of their own identities and embracing different perspectives and forms of existence. The textualization of murder can be conceptualized as a process of becoming simulacra, an attempt to embody the unrepresentable Other, wherein murder is understood and engaged with as a complex interplay of signs and meanings, offering the possibility of challenging and modifying dominant discourses.

5. The three textualizing patterns

The selected writings about Kijima Kanae exhibit three textualizing patterns. The first pattern textualizes Kijima's crimes as symptoms of social ills. The second pattern textualizes her murders as attacks on the patriarchal fantasies about femininity. The third pattern textualizes her killings as manifestations of inherent, transgressive otherness within human nature. These patterns show how Heisei authors mediate differently between their need for clarifying the murderer's motives and their encounters with the unrepresentable through rationalizing and aestheticizing avenues.

5.1 Pattern one: Sano Shin'ichi's *Betsukai kara kita onna*

Sano's non-fiction work *Betsukai kara kita onna* falls under the first pattern, which textualizes the crimes of murderous woman Kijima as symptoms of social ills that need to be eliminated. This non-fiction work consists of two parts, with Part One revolving around Sano's visit to Kijima's hometown Betsukai, a small town in Hokkaido, famous for dairy farming and Part Two focusing on the trials of Kijima.

In his work, Sano intertwines his critiques of consumer culture, the expanding cyberspace, and the loss of masculinity in the Heisei era with his interpretation of the "truth" of Kijima's murders. He rationalizes Kijima's murders as partially caused by problematic society. Sano's analysis of Kijima's crimes focuses on her insatiable desire for material comforts. He establishes a binary opposition between Tokyo and Kijima's rural hometown of Betsukai, underscoring his assertion that Kijima's transformation from a small-town girl into a murderer in Tokyo, who maintained a lavish lifestyle through manipulation and murder, was driven by the disparities between rural and urban areas during the late Shōwa and Heisei eras.

Sano criticizes Japan's emphasis on Tokyo's commercialized culture, blaming the government for neglecting urbanization disparities. He comments on Kijima's fantasies of Tokyo written in her high school yearbook and criticizes the government for shaping "naïve, distorted images of the city's glamorous life" (幼く歪んだ都市像) (Sano 2012, 19). For Sano, Kijima, who was brought up in an elite family and was never satisfied with staying in a small town, had a distorted fantasy about life in Tokyo, which resulted in her deviant ways of maintaining a luxurious life, namely, by defrauding and murdering her male victims. Sano criticizes the Japanese government's complicity with consumerism and their lack of concern about important urbanization issues.

Sano also emphasizes the role of the Internet in Kijima's crimes. He describes her online activities as an attempt to bridge the gap between rural and urban lives using the Internet (Sano 2012, 19). He highlights how the Internet facilitated connections between individuals from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, allowing Kijima to entice lonely urban men into her digital realm. This underscores the risks technology posed to Heisei Japan, as victims drawn to Kijima's online persona often lacked strong communal or familial ties. Sano expresses his concern about how Internet communication may have ruined people's offline interactions.

Sano further links the lack of authenticity in cyberspace to Kijima's descent into evil. He contends that the anonymous realm of the Internet awakened the latent "cells of her karmic sin" (宿罪の細胞), "drowning her in the allure of a false world and the power to soar in the world of evil" (虚偽の世界に遊ぶ魅力と、悪の世界に羽ばたく魔力に溺れさせた), and transforming her into "a monstrous criminal who was beyond her own control" (木嶋佳苗自身にも手に負えない怪物的犯罪者) (Sano 2012, 67). Sano contrasts Kijima's online talkative persona with her quiet offline

demeanor, and her attractive online image with her actual appearance, highlighting her evil's derivation from the ambiguity that characterizes the digital realm. Sano's portrayal of Kijima's evil revolves around her lack of authenticity. This lack of authenticity goes beyond her deceptive online identities and images; it extends to her fundamental lack of genuine humanity. Sano observed that Kijima remained expressionless and unaffected, even when confronted with pictures of her deceased victims and the anguish of their families. These moments reinforced his perception of her "hollowness of humanity" (空疎な人間性), suggesting that her evil nature arose from a profound lack of humanity, morality, and empathy (Sano 2012, 23). While rationalizing Kijima's murders as partially caused by social ills, Sano also aestheticizes Kijima as possessing an evil power that transcends intelligibility. In Sano's narrative, Kijima and her crimes exist in the space between the comprehensible and the unrepresentable, becoming simulacra that do not convey the truth of herself or her crimes, but rather signify a lack of truth and a lack of humane essence.

In *Betsukai*, Sano constructs the criminal otherness of Kijima through portraying her deviance from the "good-wife-wise-mother" ideal. Throughout his detailed account of Kijima's trials, Sano presents numerous dialogues between Kijima and the prosecutor, delving extensively into her sexual relationships with men, particularly her involvement in the sex industry (風俗 *fūzoku*). Despite the lack of direct relevance to Kijima's crimes, Sano presents these details as evidence of her evil.

Sano also expresses his aversion towards Kijima's bold opinions on sex, condemning her statements for unleashing a "demonic, prurient storm" (魔風、淫風) in the courtroom (Sano 2012, 117). He records her claim that her extraordinary sexual performance at the mistress (愛人契約 *aijin keiyaku*) club⁴ made her male clients adore her (Sano 2012, 235). By contrasting Kijima with a well-educated, attractive female judge, Sano underscores the vast gap between her and desirable women, hinting at his discomfort with both her assertion and her involvement in the sex industry. This discomfort can be seen as his fear of the uncontrollable femininity that challenges ideal womanhood in the Heisei era. Dumas (2018, 9) argues that consumerism led to women actively commodifying their bodies and seeking self-gratification, defying the "good-wife-wise-mother" type of obedient femininity. Sano's fear of this rebellious, consumer-driven womanhood, and his concern about men being exploited by uncontrolled female desires are expressed through his portrayal of Kijima's deviant sexuality. Sano's stance in *Betsukai* is reminiscent of authors of poison-woman literature from the Meiji era. As previously discussed, the early poison-woman narratives largely revolved around

⁴ A club targeting married male clients and providing them with dating and even sexual services.

the condemnation of the breach of this “good-wife-wise-mother” framework by murderous women. In the Heisei era, this association of murderous women’s evil with her “deviant sexuality” was also influenced by this gender ideology.

While criticizing Kijima’s uncontrollable, deviant femininity, Sano expressed his worries about the loss of masculinity of Japanese men in the Heisei era. He struggles to comprehend why men were attracted to Kijima despite her physical unattractiveness and lies. This astonishment is clear in his statement that falling for her trap is “a disgrace to the reputation of the Japanese men” (日本男児の名がすたる) (Sano 2012, 166). Sano interprets the male victims’ susceptibility to deception by women as a sign of immaturity and a lack of masculinity. He voices his serious concern that “in a rapidly aging society, men are moving in the completely opposite direction towards infantilization” (急速に進む高齢化社会の中で、男たちはそれとはまったく逆ベクトルの幼児化に向かって進んでいる) (Sano 2012, 273). Anxiety about masculinity loss emerged after the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s. Economic downturn led to layoffs among Japanese white-collar workers (サラリーマン *sararīman*), disrupting their role as family providers. Concerns about men’s emasculation and authority loss spread among Japanese male intellectuals (Dasgupta 2015, 13). The increased participation of women in the workforce, leading to a shift in the gender division of labor, further intensified this anxiety about diminishing masculinity. Sano’s concern responds to the destabilization of Heisei-era hegemonic masculinity tied to economic success and societal roles.

In *Betsukai*, Kijima is portrayed as a devil whose evil and crimes were nurtured and enabled by the consumer culture, the expanding cyberspace, and the weakness of her male victims in Heisei Japan. Sano’s narrative departs from uncovering the “truth” behind the crimes and extends to broader social criticism. For him, Kijima’s trials were of the utmost importance in revealing her true motives, securing her admission of guilt, exorcising the evil, and restoring the order of morality and justice. He hoped that, through the trials, the mystery of Kijima’s evil would be brought into the realm of reason and the representable, ultimately preventing similar tragedies in the future. The frustrating result of the trials, however, was that the Supreme Court finalized Kijima’s death sentence without unravelling her true motives, marking the end of Sano’s quest for the truth.

5.2 Pattern two: Kitahara Minori’s *Dokufu* and Yuzuki Asako’s *Butter*

Kitahara’s non-fiction *Dokufu* and Yuzuki’s novel *Butter* fall under the second pattern, which textualizes Kijima’s murders as attacks on patriarchal fantasies about femininity. In her work, Kitahara records the trials of Kijima, challenging the mainstream narrative, which condemns Kijima as malicious while sympathizing with her victims. She delves into Kijima’s perception of sexuality, femininity, and relationships, offering a feminist perspective on her crimes. Kitahara’s portrayal

of Kijima's appearance counters the tabloid depictions. Contrary to the unsavory images propagated by the media, Kitahara highlights Kijima's beautiful skin, voluptuous figure, and confident demeanor in court (Kitahara 2013, 19). She further notes how Kijima's refusal to lose weight to conform to the patriarchal definition of feminine beauty and feminine power (女子力 *joshiryoku*) empowers her female supporters, who are often referred to as "Kanae girls" (佳苗ガールズ *Kanae gāruzu*). Kitahara observed that as Kijima's trials received extensive media coverage and became a public spectacle, many women in their thirties, who were contemporaries of Kijima, became fascinated by her, attended the trials, and identified themselves as "Kanae girls" to show their support.

Joshiryoku literally means "feminine power" in Japanese. However, unlike the concept of "girl power" in Western pop culture, which signifies women's ability to take control of their lives, the notion of *joshiryoku* in the Japanese context is limited to women's ability to embody idealized womanhood. This includes excelling in domestic tasks, maintaining an attractive and slim appearance, and always behaving in a polite and gentle manner. According to the sociologist Kikuchi Natsuno's analysis of a survey conducted among Japanese university students (Kikuchi 2019), the term *joshiryoku* is closely associated with women's physical appearance and their perceived attractiveness in the context of seeking heterosexual romance and marriage. Kikuchi (2019, 98) points out the lack of awareness of feminism within the concept of *joshiryoku* in Japan and argues that the term encompasses both a new, neoliberal aspect of ability-based and individualistic gender norms, as well as conventional, stereotypical aspects rooted in heteronormativity. Therefore, *joshiryoku* can be seen as a reversal of "girl power," as it perpetuates rather than subverts heteronormative gender norms.

Dokufu explores the connection between Kijima Kanae and Kanae girls, through their shared aversion to *joshiryoku* and patriarchal expectations. According to Kitahara (2013, 92–94), many Kanae girls struggled to conform to patriarchal expectations and pleased men by enhancing their *joshiryoku*, only to later find these performances to be painful and distasteful in hindsight. They also empathize with the challenges and discriminations faced by women who are considered "not good-looking" like Kijima. By showing how Kanae girls were prompted by the events surrounding Kijima to start reflecting on the problematic gender norms and their own struggling performances of desirable femininity, Kitahara portrays Kijima as an icon of emancipation and empowerment for these women.

In *Dokufu*, Kitahara depicts Kijima through a contrasting lens, shedding light on both the "flashy/transgressive" (派手な) and "plain/conservative" (地味な) facets of her character. These two aspects can be understood, respectively, as Kijima's transgression against the normative perceptions of femininity, and her masquerade of ideal femininity as a means of survival specifically for securing financial

support from men. What attracts Kanae girls is exactly the flashy, transgressive image of Kijima. Kitahara captures the different reactions of men towards these two versions of Kijima. While the “flashy” Kijima becomes a source of anxiety and hostility among men, such as the judges, the prosecutors, and some male authors, such as Sano, the “plain” Kijima exhibits qualities of ideal femininity, successfully ensnaring her male victims.

Kitahara examines how Kijima approached her male victims. She noticed that Kijima faked her identity as a nutrition student and played the role of a caring woman who loved cooking and children, and only dated with the goal of getting married (Kitahara 2013, 25). In a conversation between Kitahara and clinical psychologist Nobuta Sayoko, included in the appendix of *Dokufu*, they argue that the caring role that Kijima performed while dating with her male victims transformed the care labor from expressions of affection to exerting power and control over others’ lives (Kitahara 2013, 247). Through providing care, Kijima was able to drug her male victims’ meals, tamper with fire alarms in their homes, and ultimately cause their deaths through suffocation with burning coals (Kitahara 2013, 247). While the “plain” Kijima appeared to cook tasty beef stew for her male victims, fulfilling their fantasies of being served by a nurturing woman, the transgressive Kijima simultaneously poisoned these meals, killing both the men and their fantasies. Through highlighting the stark contrast between these two versions of Kijima, Kitahara explains how Kijima’s murders instill fear in Japanese men, who are accustomed to being cared for. This fear arises from Kijima’s ability to transform what men perceived as “something akin to sweetness” (甘美さのようなもの) into a deadly poison (Kitahara 2013, 217).

In *Dokufu*, the “plain” Kijima, who presents herself as a caring and nurturing woman, is depicted as a deceptive mask, enabling her manipulation and exploitation of men who indulge in fantasies of ideal womanhood. Kijima’s true self is portrayed, in contrast, as cruel, transgressive, and terrifying, further aestheticized by Kitahara as an indecipherable darkness. Kitahara (2017, 141) describes Kijima’s eyes as “a pitch-dark cave” (真っ暗な洞), suggesting that others “cannot discern her thoughts or intentions from her gaze” (何を見て、何を考えているのが、瞳からはまったく分からないから). Kitahara suggests that only Kijima knows her true motives, leaving the cruelty and evil of her “true self” fundamentally unknown and unknowable to others.

Throughout the book, Kijima and her murders are textualized through a gender lens. Kitahara constructs Kijima’s simulacral criminality from a feminist perspective, connecting her transgressive acts with discourses on ideal femininity and patriarchal expectations. Increased emphasis is placed on how Kijima preyed on men, masquerading as a nurturing woman, rather than focusing on why she killed them. Kitahara rationalizes Kijima’s murders as intentional exploitation of

the “good-wife-wise-mother” framework for personal gain while simultaneously aestheticizing them as attacks on patriarchal fantasies that possess subversive power yet are driven by Kijima’s indecipherable evil. In Kitahara’s work, the simulacral image of Kijima does not signify the truth of her murders. Instead, it suggests an emancipatory possibility of transcending the confines of ideal womanhood.

Published in 2017, Yuzuki’s novel *Butter* gained prominence as a Naoki Prize⁵ nominee. It fictionalizes the Kijima Kanae case, with a female journalist investigating an accused female murderer, Kajii Manako. Yuzuki acknowledges inspiration from Kitahara’s *Dokufu*, adopting a feminist perspective to illustrate the murderer’s transgressive and ambivalent views towards femininity and heterosexual relationships. Interestingly, Kijima, displeased with Yuzuki’s portrayal in the novel, noted in her personal blog that the character Kajii is not a reflection of her (Kijima 2017). Kijima’s observation holds weight. Yuzuki blends news, nonfiction, and imagination to create Kajii, a character distinct from Kijima. Notably, the protagonist of *Butter* is the journalist Machida Rika rather than Kajii. The narrative follows Rika’s evolving views on womanhood, feminine beauty, and relationships influenced by Kajii, whose unapologetic embracement of her own desires empowers Rika.

In the novel, there is a resemblance between the connection of Kajii and Rika and that of Kijima and the Kanae girls. Empowered by Kajii’s acceptance of her true self and desires, Rika begins to adopt Kajii’s lifestyle, including her eating habits, leading to a consistent weight gain. Yuzuki portrays people’s negative reactions toward Rika’s physical changes. Rika’s boyfriend attempts to convince her to manage her weight, arguing that it is not only for her well-being but also for societal acceptance, given that overweight women might leave a negative impression on others (Yuzuki 2017, 98). Yuzuki reflects on others’ unfavorable attitudes towards Rika’s weight gain, shedding light on the discomfort surrounding Rika’s deviations from societal norms. This illustrates the disturbing power of unconstrained desire and implies that Kajii’s perceived evil arises from her audacious pursuit of desires that defy norms. Rika’s negative experiences in her journey of self-discovery foster empathy for Kajii, leading her to see Kajii not just as a friend but as a savior. This transformation is sparked by Kajii’s positive comments on Rika’s appearance. Kajii’s support empowers Rika, leading her to construct a feminist image of Kajii, which she believes might also inspire other Japanese women to challenge gender stereotypes and inequalities.

It is crucial to recognize that Yuzuki’s portrayal of Kajii is not intended as an in-depth investigation into the truth behind Kijima’s infamous crimes. It instead

⁵ The Naoki Prize, formally known as the Naoki Sanjūgo Prize (直木三十五賞), is a prestigious Japanese literary accolade that is awarded every two years. Established in 1935, the award is named in honour of the novelist Naoki Sanjūgo.

serves as a feminist projection of women's desires to transgress societal gender norms. As the protagonist, Rika, says in the novel,

梶井真奈子に取材することがもし叶ったら、事件の真相に迫るだけではなく、自分自身の生きづらさのようなものにもしっかり向き合ってみたいという思いがある。(Yuzuki 2017, 31)

If I were able to interview Kajii Manako, I would not only seek to uncover the truth behind the case but also confront the difficulties of my own existence.

In *Butter*, the female protagonist's investigation of the murderous woman Kajii becomes a means of exploring her own "self." Consequently, the presence of Kajii carries a dual simulacral quality. On one level, it is a simulacrum generated from the textualization of Kijima's crimes. Within the context of the fictional narrative, however, it also becomes a simulacrum generated from Rika's self-exploration, where she projects a feminist understanding of women's transgression onto this simulacral image.

In the novel, Kajii embodies empowerment but also vulnerability and misogyny. Yuzuki suggests Kajii's crimes stem from her inner conflicts and lack of support and friendship outside heterosexual relationships. Similar to Kitahara's work, the true motives behind Kajii's killings remain undisclosed. Within the narrative, Kajii's mentality and her relationships with her male victims are rationalized through the perspective of Rika, offering a feminist critique of patriarchal expectations of femininity. As the criminality and the nature of the murderous woman are framed through the lens of the feminist, who can be seen as the Other to the murderous woman, an aestheticizing process takes place, rendering Kajii's true nature unknowable. The aestheticizing process in the novel operates on two layers. On the one hand, it associates the murders with the unknowable and indecipherable to some extent. On the other hand, it links the presence of the murderous woman with a sense of emancipation. This manifests in Yuzuki's portrayal of Kajii's empowering transgression, which is dissociated from her crimes but strongly connected to her defiance against patriarchal regulations of women's desires.

5.3 Pattern three: Mari Yukiko's *Gonin no Junko*

Mari's novel *Gonin no Junko* (first published in 2014) falls under the third pattern, which textualizes murderous women as the monstrous Other. Renowned for her prolific production of mystery novels filled with grisly and grotesque episodes, Mari has earned the moniker of the "Queen of Iyamis" (イヤミスの女王) or what is referred to as "eww mysteries" (イヤミス) (Kōbunsha 2022). Most of her stories evoke feelings of horror and disgust, leaving readers with an unsettling sense of dread. In her notable iyamisu novel, *Gonin no Junko*, Mari delves into the theme

of evil exhibited by female murderers. She portrays this malevolence as omnipresent and hidden within the depths of every individual's psyche. By focusing on female murderers specifically, Mari explores the connection between this dark essence and femininity.

In an interview conducted by Hosoda Naoko (2015), the chief editor of the pop culture website MANTANWEB, Mari revealed that the inspiration for the story of *Gonin no Junko* stemmed from the crimes committed by Kijima. One of the characters in the novel, Satake Junko, is directly modeled after Kijima. The narrative revolves around five female characters, all named Junko but written differently in kanji, whose lives become entwined due to the arrest of a serial killer named Satake Junko, who coincidentally shares the same first name as them. Although the novel begins with Satake's arrest, Mari's focus lies more on the subsequent murders involving the other four Junkos.⁶ Mari expressed in the interview her deliberate decision not to place Satake Junko at the center of the novel, emphasizing that Kijima, being a born psychopath, should not be a figure for the public to seek inspiration from or attempt to comprehend (Hosoda 2015). By placing Kijima into the category of the indecipherable, evil Other, Mari's novel is not an exposé of the truth behind Kijima's murders. Without explaining Satake's motives or providing the details of her crimes, Mari transforms this notorious real-life murderer into a sign/simulacrum of evil within her novel. She constructs Satake Junko as the embodiment of evil itself. The interconnection of the four other Junkos through Satake's crimes serves as a metaphor, symbolizing their connection through the all-pervading evil inherent in human nature. This narrative arrangement highlights the omnipresence of evil as the central theme of the novel.

Although Mari does not provide explicit details of Satake's murders, she implies a connection between Satake's actions and the mindset of another murderer, Shinoda Junko. This is evident through her depiction of Satake's claimed deep connection with Shinoda, describing their "oneness of mind and body" (私とは一心同体だった子よ), suggesting that they kill for similar reasons (Mari 2016, 353).

Rather than explicitly depicting the brutal scenes of murder, Mari chooses to portray Shinoda's killing impulse, which is driven by an instinct to eliminate the intrusive Other, to protect the transgressive aspects of themselves, and to uphold a sense of normality. In the novel, both Satake and Shinoda engage in the killing of men after deceiving them for financial gain. While Satake's crimes remain unexplored in the narrative, Mari provides a clear explanation for Shinoda's motives. Shinoda resorts to murder when her fabricated identity is exposed and she faces a menacing threat from a man. Ironically, when Shinoda offers to return

⁶ Interestingly and noteworthy, not all Junkos are murderers, although they are all somehow involved in murder cases.

the money she had taken, the man instead demands sexual compensation, “reducing” her to the status of a prostitute and reinforcing her position as an Other, inferior to socially acceptable women. This experience triggers deep anguish and a sense of otherness and inferiority within Shinoda, which fuels her murderous impulse to eliminate the threat permanently. This portrayal of Shinoda’s murder of the man can be potentially interpreted as Mari’s exploration of Kijima’s motive. As portrayed in the novel, the woman’s killing impulse may be driven by a desire to eliminate the threatening presence of her male victims, who serve as a catalyst for triggering her feelings of otherness and inferiority.

In the story, Mari further portrays two more female murderers. One kills her own baby, not only because childcare impedes her work, but also due to the baby’s presence accentuating her sense of otherness and unnaturalness stemming from her deficiency in maternal affection. The second woman kills a child who witnesses her abusive behavior towards her ailing mother-in-law. By illustrating these murders as endeavors to eliminate the intrusive Other who lays bare the female characters’ transgressive otherness, Mari also underscores the connection between the pursuit of normalcy by these women and the patriarchal construct of ideal femininity characterized by caregiving, nurturing, and sexually preserved.

In *Gonin no Junko*, murders are not violently or brutally portrayed. With few depictions of the killing scene, the murders are rationalized as the most effective strategy to make the intrusive, threatening Other disappear. Simultaneously, they are aestheticized as driven by the women’s intense and forceful murderous impulses that exceed the realm of reason. When depicting the women’s murdering impulses, Mari frequently employs exclamation marks to convey the characters’ extreme emotions of disgust, annoyance, and hatred prior to their killings. The murderous impulses surge within them suddenly, prompting them to make an immediate decision to kill. The acts of killing in the novel are not meticulously planned. Instead, they are the characters’ spontaneous responses, driven by an instinct to protect their own existence from harm inflicted by the Other. By illustrating the blurry line between reason and madness in these murderous impulses, the novel textualizes killing as the characters’ instinctual survival strategy, deeply intertwined with their inherent transgressive otherness that defies patriarchal expectations of femininity.

6. Gender and textualization

In this study, the analysis of both fictional and non-fictional works does not rely on genre classifications or a division between reality and fiction. Instead, I categorize these works based on how authors position murderous women as the Other to themselves and mainstream society. These categorizations are crucial

in understanding the thematic and narrative choices made by the authors. I have identified three distinct patterns of textualizing murders in works featuring Kijima kanae. The first pattern positions the murderous woman as the criminal Other while highlighting the author's alignment with justice. The second pattern takes a feminist approach, expressing the author's empathy with them. The third pattern emphasizes the monstrous potential inherent in human beings and suggests that every subject can be transformed into a monstrous Other.

Within this process of positioning murderous woman Kijima, her gender and sexuality become important references for authors to interpret her actuality in terms of her otherness. This paradigm of textualizing female criminality through discourses of gender, sexuality, and femininity can be seen as a continuation of the poison-woman narrative framework. Throughout the Meiji to the Shōwa era, physicians, sexologists, and psychologists endeavored to discover the physical and sexual reasons for female murderers' criminality (Marran 2007). As shown in Marran's research, they sought to explain the "abnormality" of murderous women by linking it to their reproductive functions and sexual perversions. Female murderers' deviances from the "good-wife-wise-mother" framework were rationalized and pathologized by scholars and writers who sought bodily evidence to support their claims. In the Heisei era, discussing female murderers' performance within the "good-wife-wise-mother" framework still constitutes a pivotal part of the textualization of murderous women. Interestingly, William Pawlett (2013, 77) also notes a similar emphasis on sexuality as "an explanatory principle" for male serial killers in Western culture and suggests that sexuality is regarded as the "ultimate measure of both normality and deviance." This study argues that the gender and sexuality of murderous women have functioned as crucial media through which authors comprehend these simulacra, namely, as a pathway towards the Other.

Judith Butler's theory on gender and sexuality helps to understand this argument. According to Butler (2010), gender and sexuality which constitute one's identity make the individual culturally intelligible and socially recognizable. Butler (2010, 44) emphasizes that "there is no recourse to a 'person,' a 'sex,' or a 'sexuality' that escapes the matrix of power and discursive relations that effectively produce and regulate the intelligibility of those concepts for us." Butler (2010, 208) further introduces the concept of the "heterosexual matrix," which refers to a hegemonic discursive framework characterized by the obligatory conformity to heterosexuality and the expectation of a specific form of sexuality and gender expression. This framework assumes the existence of a natural sex for every individual, with prescribed masculine and feminine roles, and it operates as a grid that determines cultural intelligibility. It can be argued that gender becomes the simulation of human beings. It is through the sign of gender, this intelligible identity (even though

it does not lead to any “essence” or “actuality” of human beings), that people are able to approach the existence of the “self” and of the simulacral “Other.”

In the textualization of murders committed by women, gender operates as one mediating factor between the rationalization and aestheticization processes. While the rationalization is partly performed through the intelligibility of gender, the deviance of murderous women from gender norms, which renders them unrepresentable, enables the aestheticization process to occur. Gender thus serves as a crucial element that navigates both avenues through which murders by women are textualized.

It is noteworthy that, while the poison-woman literature of the Meiji and Taishō eras usually involved discussions of the corporeal sex of the female murderers, Heisei-era texts featuring murderous woman Kijima concentrated on women’s designated gender roles. Rather than anatomizing the murderers’ bodies, authors in the Heisei era dissected murderous women through the discourses of gender norms and inequalities.

If, as Butler suggests, the discussions on gender and femininity in texts featuring murderous women are shaped by power relations while reproducing power, we can still explore the potentiality that arises from multiplicity and the proliferation of narratives. Butler highlights the performativity of gender. According to her, gender should not be understood as a noun but as “a doing without a doer,” a process in which “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 2010, 34). Butler has noticed the potential to subvert the existing gender ideology in this process of repetition within the power relations which produced the very ideology. For Butler (1997, 40), performativity is “a renewable action without clear origin or end,” which suggests that while gender is defined by social context, “it is also marked by its capacity to break with context.” In other words, gender is not a fixed entity but rather an ongoing process in which a person’s identity is constituted through repeated expressions. Butler suggests the possibility of reshaping discourses on gender through repetition, which generates difference and multiplicity.

In the context of Heisei textualizations of murders, the concept of womanhood used by authors to discuss Kijima’s criminality has been modified and challenged by the differences and contradictions among various texts. Sano portrays Kijima’s “deviant sexuality” as constituting her criminal otherness. Conversely, this deviation from the “good-wife-wise-mother” framework is not condemned but imbued with an emancipatory dimension in Kitahara and Yuzuki’s writings. In this context, the otherness of murderous women signifies a subversive power that challenges patriarchy. In Mari’s work, women’s transgressions against patriarchal expectations and societal norms are portrayed as inevitable, even though the female characters often seek to hide their transgressive otherness through murder.

By analyzing texts falling under the three patterns, we observe that the vision of idealized womanhood is continuously challenged, modified, and even redefined by different authors. Drawing upon Butler's theory of the performativity of gender, this study suggests that the proliferation of narratives featuring murderous women not only circulates dominant discourses about gender but also serves as a platform for their modification or even subversion.

7. Conclusion

As demonstrated by the analysis of the selected writings, Heisei authors' interpretations of female criminality are deeply entangled with their discussions of consumer culture, the shifting gender division of labor, ideal femininity, and the perceived loss of masculinity associated with the economic downturn. Drawing upon Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation, I suggest that these discussions do not lead to a single conclusion about the essence of female criminality. Instead, they generate simulacra that often contradict but also complement each other, providing diverse perspectives on gender, sexuality, and Japanese society in the Heisei era. The proliferation of murderous woman narratives in Heisei Japan suggests that these texts play a vital role in effectively negotiating gender and social discourses that concern the general public.

Gender and sexuality have been primary lenses for approaching female criminality in both earlier poison-woman literature and Heisei-era murderous woman narratives. Unlike the relatively homogenous and condemnatory tone of poison-woman narratives in the previous eras, however, the textualizations of murderous women in the Heisei era present a variety of perspectives and can be divided into at least three patterns. These varied narratives contribute to the ongoing modification and redefinition of concepts such as "good-wife-wise-mother" and ideal femininity and masculinity.

This chapter explores how Heisei-era texts address the otherness of the murderous woman Kijima and grapple with the unrepresentable aspects of her murders. Rather than constructing a complete image that reveals the "truth" of her crimes, the textualization process becomes a form of "becoming-simulacra," where efforts to represent the unrepresentable Other continuously challenge, problematize, and dismantle binary structures such as reality versus representation, self versus other, and femininity versus masculinity.

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A LADY'S RECKONING: TORTURE, EROTICISM, AND SALVATION IN THE NOH PLAY *SHIKIMI TENGU*

Dunja Jelesijevic

The Noh play *Shikimi tengu*, written at the time of shifting conventions in Noh playwriting, focuses on the karmic retribution of the infamous *Genji monogatari* antagonist Lady Rokujō. Her suffering and potential redemption is framed by the motif of *tengu*—humanoid-avian creatures, variedly likened to goblins, monsters, or demons—mirroring narratives of Buddhist masters tested on their understanding of the doctrine or punished for their conceit. The following essay explores how these two narratives (one implicit, one explicit) converge in the play and create a unique discursive schema to address the religious and social underpinnings of the play in unexpected ways, complicating the notions of Buddhist salvation within the Noh. Namely, while exposing (and punishing) Rokujō's female sensuality and corporeality is supposed to bring about rejection of the material and corporeal desire, it seems to elicit a voyeuristic pleasure at the punishment that she gets. In this reading, *Shikimi tengu* ultimately challenges and subverts both the exercised Noh's theatrical conventions and the salvific project of its ritual and textual foundations.

Keywords: Lady Rokujō, Noh, gender, sexuality, enlightenment, *tengu* Noh plays

1. Introduction

The Noh play *Shikimi tengu* (榊天狗, *Tengu among the Anise*) focuses on the karmic retribution of Lady Rokujō, the infamous antagonist of *Genji monogatari* (源氏物語, *The Tale of Genji*), an eleventh-century tale about the courtly intrigue and amorous exploits of its eponymous hero, authored by a lady of the court known as Murasaki Shikibu (c. 973–c. 1014). For her earthly attachments, Rokujō is condemned to suffer grizzly torment at the hands of *tengu* (天狗)—humanoid-avian

creatures, variedly likened to goblins, monsters, or demons—who expose her to consuming flames, only to reconstitute her human body and repeat the process.

The play opens to an unnamed *yamabushi* (山伏),¹ a mountain ascetic from Kumano Shrine visiting the Shikimi Field by Mt. Atago. As he meditates on the beauty of his surroundings, he is interrupted by the appearance of a noble-looking lady picking *shikimi* (榧, “Japanese star anise”) for a Buddhist offering. The priest is curious about the lone appearance of what seems to be a high-born lady and inquiries about her circumstances. Through her enigmatic retort, it becomes clear that she is the spirit of Lady Rokujō. She intimates that, for the sin of pride over her beauty and knowledge of the *Lotus Sutra*, she was reborn into a demonic realm of a Buddhist hell and tortured by the *tengu*. Leading into the second act, the scenery transforms as the *tengu* gather at a mansion in the Sixth Ward (六条院 Rokujōin), ostensibly the former home of Lady Rokujō. There, her punishment is depicted in a prolonged scene of gruesome torture, led by the legendary fearsome *tengu* Tarōbō. The play concludes implying that Rokujō’s torment is to continue into eternity.

The play is a strikingly unusual rendering of Lady Rokujō’s fate, as direct references to the familiar *Genji monogatari* are virtually non-existent. Moreover, her suffering and potential redemption are framed by the medieval motif of *tengu*, mirroring popular narratives of celebrated Buddhist masters tested on their understanding of the doctrine or punished for their sins of pride and conceit. The way in which these two narratives (one implicit, one explicit) converge in the play poses a number of questions. Namely, what is the meaning of the gruesome depiction of Rokujō’s torture, and how is it juxtaposed with her characterization harkening back to the implied *Genji monogatari* backdrop? How is the relationship between the protagonist, her tormentors, and the observer of the scene structured through the medium of Noh, and what does that say about the nature of the sufferer, the spectator, and the punisher?

I argue that the interplay of the two narrative frameworks complicates and subverts the expected outcomes of the traditional Noh conventions—that is, aiming for Buddhist enlightenment—by rendering ambiguous the ultimate identities of the agent, the catalyst, and the achiever of the Buddhist salvation. Furthermore, I propose a reading of the scene of Lady Rokujō’s retribution as a torture-as-erotic-spectacle which invites and rebuffs the audience’s gaze, and—while overtly denying her enlightenment—covertly provides ways to reclaim her agency.

¹ A practitioner of the Japanese combinatory ascetic practice of Shugendō (修験道). The practice is known for combining elements from Buddhism, Shintō, and Daoism, and is associated with mountain asceticism.

2. Research background

In her recent study on the meanings and readings of concepts such as “body,” “woman,” and “desire,” Rajyashree Pandey (2017, 29) contends:

Misogyny, subjection, passivity, complicity, agency, rebellion, and resistance: these terms have now become integral to the repertoire that allows us to formulate the “woman question.” Likewise, it is “woman” that has become the axis around which the terms body, sex, eroticism, and gender [...] now revolve. These categories I have sought to argue are modern inventions and have a particular history that is rooted in Western thought. However, to the degree that they have now become part of our common sense, we cannot dispense with them altogether, for the questions we wish to ask of texts that belong to another time and place are inevitably driven by our own preoccupations.

Therefore, any investigation seeking to employ such concepts necessitates careful considerations of what they mean and how they are read in their own respective contexts. In the case of *Shikimi tengu*, this means taking into account medieval Japanese literary tropes, as well as the Buddhist and non-Buddhist Japanese worldviews operating at the time.

Bernard Faure has offered indispensable studies on gender and sexuality in Buddhism, particularly in his two seminal volumes *The Red Thread* (1998) and *Power of Denial* (2003). In them, he explores the internal Buddhist logic that informs views of sexuality and desire and a kind of reification of transgression in Mahayana Buddhism through the doctrines of Emptiness and Non-dualism. Diana Paul’s *Women in Buddhism* (1985) discusses Mahayana attitudes towards enlightenment for women (the possibility or lack thereof), whereas Liz Wilson writes about *Charming Cadavers* (1996), tackling the issues of visions of tormented female bodies displayed to men’s (and women’s) eyes as cautionary tales of dangers of desire and inevitability of impermanence. Wilson’s views of sexuality, desire, voyeurism, and conflation of pleasure and torture in the Buddhist contexts, inspired my own analysis of these topics, as they refer to *Shikimi tengu*.

Taking Pandey’s cautionary stance, my own approach draws on studies in classical and medieval Japanese literature with a particularly feminist bent, such as those by Pandey herself, Tonomura Hitomi, and Doris G. Bargen among others. These studies place under scrutiny relationships between coercion, courtship, and sex, as well as how those are negotiated in the very constructions of gender and body, and how they are related to subjectivity and agency in the Japanese pre-modern context. Discussions of pain and pleasure, as they pertain to premodern Japanese literature, are heavily influenced by the Buddhist frameworks and concepts of desire, suffering, and attachment. Hellish visions of torture are therefore

closely related to the idea of retribution and the “working out” of bad karma (fruits of action rooted in ignorant desire) incurred throughout one’s lifetime.

Finally, to explore the concepts of “looking” and “observing” and how those relate to body, agency, and gender, I want to examine a particular kind of male gaze and voyeurism through the concept of *kaimami* (垣間見, “peeping through the fence”), the literary trope of men secretly gazing at women at their leisure, which became one of the most recognizable erotic tropes in premodern Japanese literature. I argue that in *Shikimi tengu* there is an inversion of the *kaimami* trope of sorts; namely, what is being observed is not the expected charming erotically suggestive sight, but the torture and pain of a woman.

3. The “new style” and *tengu* plays

Originating from early folk performances and ritual practices, Noh in its most well-known form was developed in the fourteenth century by Kan’ami (c. 1333–c. 1384) and Zeami (c. 1363–c. 1443), a father and son pair of actors and playwrights. For their storylines, Noh plays relied on Japanese and Chinese classics, poetry, folk tales, or historical events, while their librettos were replete with direct quotations, references, and allusions. This intertextuality of Noh drama enabled the playwrights to productively interweave varied themes and motifs with familiar subject matter to create a unique discursive schema, within which seemingly disparate characters and tropes were allowed to coexist and interact.

The play *Shikimi tengu* is dated to the fifteenth century and is attributed to On’ami.² It was revised by Kanze Motoakira³ in the late eighteenth century and, having fallen off the repertory for a period of time, was revived in the new millennium (Tamura 2014, 199). The play is a precursor of what Miyake Akiko (1984) termed “new style” (新風 *shinpū*),⁴ which emerged towards the end of the Muromachi period (1336–1573). At the time, there was a marked shift in Noh playwriting away from the emphasis on elegance of dance and movement (the recognizable hallmark of Zeami’s style informed by the principle of *yūgen*),⁵ and

² On’ami (1398–1467) was a Noh actor and playwright of the Kanze school, more prominently known for his acting. He was the grandson of Kan’ami and the nephew of Zeami. Kanze school was founded by Kan’ami Kiyotsugu (c.1333–c.1384). After receiving the support of the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), it remained supported by the ruling shoguns well into the Early Modern period. Under the tutelage of Kan’ami’s son Zeami Motokiyo (c. 1363–c. 1443), it produced some of the most well-known and beloved Noh plays.

³ Kanze Motoakira (1722–1774) was a Noh actor and playwright of the Kanze school.

⁴ Miyake Akiko (1984) first coined the term to refer to this shift in the transition from the early to late Muromachi. For the traditional history of development of Noh, see Yokomichi and Amano (1987).

⁵ *Yūgen* (幽玄) is an aesthetic concept referring to the mysterious beauty and depth that Zeami

towards prioritizing narration and action. The plays were characterized by fast movement, quick changes, lessened focus on sophistication of poetry and prose, thus foreshadowing some of the characteristics associated with Kabuki, the emblematic genre of the Early Modern theater. These interventions could have partly been the result of an effort to cater to the growing and diversifying audience at the time, who were replacing the diminishing traditional patronage by the shogunal court and aristocracy. In line with their tastes, the new patrons wanted to see more dynamic stories and bombastic productions being staged, including local legends and customs, and tales featuring popular heroes and heroines of literature and lore.⁶ As well as being audience-pleasing, the new style liberated authors from the shackles of the ossified structuring and staging of the early Muromachi Noh and opened up new avenues of expression. It is important to emphasize, of course, that this in no way meant a wholesale revolution in the genre and the playwrights remained bound by the overall Noh convention, but the move was extensive enough to register a noticeable change.

Yamanaka (1996) argues that plays featuring *tengu* in particular are representative of this style and period, a claim bolstered by the fact that there are no known *tengu* plays written by Zeami, or any of his contemporaries. In fact, *Shikimi tengu* (along with *Kurama tengu*) is the earliest recorded *tengu* play. Being the earliest, *Shikimi tengu* was on the cusp of the transition towards the *shinpū* style, and so retained the characteristics of the traditional *mugen* Noh (夢幻能, “dream Noh” or “fantasy Noh”)⁷ worldview, complete with the appearance of supernatural beings, bending of boundaries of time and space, and an overall dream-like quality of the production. On the other hand, innovations emblematic of *shinpū* are clearly identifiable in the play. One of the more significant changes in the new style, for example, had to do with the traditional casting and role distribution,⁸ the increasing role of the supporting *waki* and *aikyōgen* characters in the plays, as opposed to the *shite*-centered Zeami approach (particularly associated with his *mugen* Noh plays). This pivot allowed the playwrights to explore and center multiple voices in

adopted from *waka* (和歌) poetry and made into one of the main aesthetic guiding principles of Noh. The style is characterized by paucity of means, subtlety of expression, and an emphasis on symbolic rather than representational expression on stage (and in the text).

⁶ For an extensive discussion on late Muromachi theater, see Lim (2012).

⁷ *Mugen* Noh refers to the category of plays which take place in a supernatural setting and are characterized by appearance of ghosts or demons. Typically, the first of the two acts will end with the sun going down, implying that the second act takes place in a dream world. It usually ends at the break of dawn with the ghost or the supernatural being disappearing. Whether the experience was dream or not is deliberately left ambiguous.

⁸ *Shite* (仕手) is the main protagonist of the play, while the *waki* (脇) is its counterpart. In *mugen* Noh, the *shite* typically transforms into a supernatural being in the second act. *Aikyōgen* (間狂言) is a supporting role and can perform a variety of functions.

their casting, as well as complicate the established relational poles between the protagonists. Exploring the alternative takes on the role distribution and the characters' viewpoint, as we shall see, will become an important plot point in *Shikimi tengu*, and crucial for its interpretation.

4. *Tengu* and Japanese religion

Creatures known as *tengu* are depicted as humanoid beings with a beak in place of a nose and a bird's wings and feet. This image was informed over time from a host of traditional Chinese ideas combined with local Japanese beliefs and lore. In her study of *Tenguzōshi* (天狗草子, *The Book of Tengu*), the thirteenth-century set of seven *tengu*-themed narrative picture scrolls (絵巻 *emaki*), Wakabayashi Haruko (2012) traces the epistemological transformation that *tengu* undergo in the Japanese religious tradition. Initially conceptualized as malevolent entities in the Japanese traditional beliefs, in the medieval period *tengu* were coopted within the Buddhist worldview, and in that context were variously depicted as defending or challenging Buddhism. Some of these depictions present *tengu* as vengeful ghosts, embodiments of temptation that taunt Buddhist monks, or even as transformed corrupt monks who cannot achieve enlightenment. As such, according to Wakabayashi, *tengu* are a manifestation of *ma* (魔; Skt. *māra*), the personification of the Buddhist concept of evil. This evil "does not necessarily refer to moral evil (*aku*) but rather to temptations of desire and passion that hinder one from attaining enlightenment" (Wakabayashi 2012, xv). Furthermore, Abe Yasurō (2002, 212) argues that *Tenguzōshi*, in fact, is responsible for establishing the idea of the "realm of evil" (魔界 *makai*) and conceptualizing *tengu* as demonic beings overseeing this realm.

Rather than embodying "evil" (temptation, desire) itself, *tengu* sometimes appear in literature as wise and deeply knowledgeable about the doctrines of Buddhism. In numerous tales and other media (including the Noh plays), *tengu* confront wayward monks, test them on their true understanding of the Dharma, and tempt them. This is not to lead the monks astray, but rather to expose their deep ignorance, pride, and delusion, and have them acknowledge it. Keller Kimbrough (2012, 277) suggests that *tengu* tales "can be seen to function on a symbolic level by depicting Buddhist and psychological abstractions as external, concrete phenomena, allowing audiences the privilege of visualizing the invisible, or seeing the unseen." In other words, they embody one's own seed of *ma* and, by forcing one to face it, lead them back onto the path of enlightenment.

While the definitive conceptualization of *tengu* was cemented with *Tenguzōshi*, the preceding tradition, such as other narrative scrolls and medieval anecdotal literature (説話 *setsuwa*), was crucial in paving the way for constructing their

unique identity. A lineage of *tengu* narratives, drawing on the early motifs from Japanese folk traditions, is found in different *setsuwa* collections, such as *Konjaku monogatari shū* (今昔物語集, *The Tales of Times Now Past*), *Uji shūi monogatari* (宇治拾遺物語, *A Collection of Tales from Uji*), and others. The depictions presented in those collections are closer to the character of *oni* (鬼, “demon”) characterized by bloodthirst, greed, and lustfulness. In some of the stories, it is difficult to distinguish whether the villain is an *oni* or a *tengu* based solely on the characteristics ascribed to them, and in the case of different versions of the same narrative they could even be interchangeable.

The introduction of Buddhist motifs created some provocative combinations; sometimes with a pointed message, and sometimes as a result of a fortunate coincidence of confusing different stories or different variations.⁹ In an attempt to disentangle the nuances of the respective depictions and their deeper meaning in *setsuwa* literature, Kurushima (2009, 26) distinguishes between the “non-Buddhist” (非仏法の *hibuppōteki*) *oni*, and the “anti-Buddhist” (反仏法の *hanbuppōteki*) *tengu*. The subtleties in distinction between *oni* and *tengu*, while an important and worthwhile discussion, is not the topic of this chapter and deserves a more in-depth treatment. While not wholly unproblematic, Kurushima’s formulation is helpful for its framing of the *tengu* as a distinctly Japanese Buddhist phenomenon, which becomes an important feature when casting *tengu* in the Noh, and distinguishing those pieces from *oni* (“demon”) plays, even when they shared the same categorization.¹⁰ As a part of an enduring tradition, and having the literary pedigree and the religious prestige, *tengu* lent themselves as excellent raw material for dramatization on the Noh stage, especially as new movements in playwriting were developing, and fresh and exciting innovations were brewing.

5. Encounter with a lady: fresh herbs and death flowers

As with the great majority of Noh plays, the plot of *Shikimi tengu* is informed by a number of *honzetsu* (本説, “base texts”). Plucking elements from these different texts and placing them in a new shared context, while retaining their respective

⁹ For an extensive discussion on *tengu* in *setsuwa*, see Origuchi and Komatsu (2000); for an extensive discussion on *tengu* in *Konjaku monogatari shū*, see Kurushima (2009).

¹⁰ The five categories of Noh plays (五番立 *gobandate*: god plays, warrior plays, women or “wig” plays, miscellaneous plays, demon plays) were codified at some point in the Edo period (1600–1868). When performed as entertainment in an official setting (e.g., before the shogun), the full program would consist of five plays, one category each, plus the *Okina* piece and four *Kyōgen* comical plays. The fifth category is named “demon” (鬼 *oni*), but it is a broader category including other supernatural and monstrous creatures, and *tengu* plays are placed in this category. In the cycle of a day’s performance, demon plays are performed last and are, therefore, also known as *kiri* Noh (切能), or the “cut-off” plays.

backgrounds (and all the “baggage” that comes with it), is a highly creative rhetorical move which, when done right, opens an abundance of possibilities for character-building and narrative development. In order to enable the different elements (such as familiar characters from different narratives, well-known locales, etc.), to interact—and to interact believably—framing had to be built where all of the elements, however disparate, would not seem out of place. In *Shikimi tengu*, the space in which the play takes place becomes the node at which the mobilized literary tropes converge, and the locus where the *yamabushi*, *tengu* Tarōbō, and Lady Rokujō can meet. The spatial and visual clues throughout the play build a network of associations through which the audience can, not only seamlessly imagine the shared world of the characters, but draw on the knowledge and understanding of their background to ascribe new meaning and significance to the characters’ interactions.

In his introductory travel sequence (道行 *michiyuki*), the *yamabushi* references a number of toponyms which for the audience at the time would evoke well-established associations with both Shugendō and the *tengu*, namely the Shikimi Field, Mt. Atago, and Kumano Shrine.

次第「しきみが原の道分けて、／＼、愛宕の山に参らん。ワキ詞「本山三熊野の山伏にて候。我未だ愛宕櫓が原に分け入らず候ふ程に、只今思ひ立ちて候。歌「西山や嵯峨野の嵐音寒き、／＼、音も小倉のつゞき、行方をさして行く程に、其名も高き愛宕山、櫓が原に着きにけり、／＼。(Kochu yōkyoku sōshō 1987, 127)¹¹

Shidai: Shikimi ga Hara no michiwakete, Shikimi ga Hara no michiwakete, Atago no Yama ni mairan. Honsanzan Kumano no yamabushi nite sōrō. Waga mada Atago Shikimi ga Hara ni wakete irazu sōrō hodo ni, tadaima omoidachite sōrō.

Uta: Nishiyama ya Sagano no arashi oto samuki, Nishiyama ya Sagano no arashi oto samuki, oto mo Ogura no tsuzuki, yukue wo sashite yuku hodo ni, sono na mo takaki Atago Yama. Shikimi ga Hara ni tsuki ni kerī, Shikimi ga Hara ni tsuki ni kerī.

Yamabushi: Making my way through the fields of *shikimi*. Making my way through the fields of *shikimi*. I am going to Atago Mountain. I am a *yamabushi* from Kumano Shrine. Having never gone through Shikimi Field by Atago Mountain, I have made up my mind to do it now.

Chorus: The sound of icy wind at Nishiyama and Sagano. The sound of icy wind at Nishiyama and Sagano. With the wind echoing still on Ogura as I follow my course towards the illustrious Atago Mountain, I have arrived at the Shikimi Field. I have arrived at the Shikimi Field.

¹¹ The libretto used for translation in this essay is from *Kochu yōkyoku sōshō*. I also consulted three additional versions from *Mikan yōkyokushū zoku*. All translations from the play are my own.

Janet Goff (1991, 130) points out that *tengu*, who were believed to dwell in the mountains, became identified with *yamabushi*. Goff further suggests that this connection explains the casting of the *waki* in *Shikimi tengu* as a practitioner from Kumano Shrine, a mountain complex associated with Shugendō. Mt. Atago is also home to a cult in which the *tengu* figure prominently. The deity of the mountain is Atago Daigongen (愛宕大権現) and at his shrine “a perpetual fire was maintained in order to worship the *tengu*” (Bouchy 1987, 257). The mountain is also associated with traditional beliefs in spirits and funerary practices of discarding the dead in the foothills, as well as rites of fire purification. The polyvalent liminality of the space—Buddhist/Shintō, the living/the dead, sacred/polluted—recommended the locale as a fitting site for a Buddhist hell or purgatory as staged in the play. Furthermore, at the *oku no in* (奥の院, “the upper shrine”) on Mt. Atago, Tarōbō himself was enshrined, representing the destructive aspect of the deity (荒神 *aragami*) (Bouchy 1987, 257). Beyond the religious tradition, Tarōbō, the great *tengu* of Mt. Atago, is a well-known character from tales, picture scrolls, as well as another Noh play, *Kurumazō* (車増, *The Handcart Priest*) also set in the Shikimi Field of Mt. Atago, where he uses his Buddhist wisdom to test and tempt a *yamabushi*.

While it is clear how the setting of the play relates to the *yamabushi* (the *waki*) and the *tengu*, the connection to *Genji monogatari* seems tenuous at best (Goff 1991, 130–132). Its allusions to and connections with other *Genji* plays are much stronger, however, and help successfully weave the Lady Rokujō narrative into the plot. The *yamabushi*'s *michiyuki* invokes the fields of Saga, the site of Prince Genji's visit to Rokujō at the Nonomiya Shrine, while the image of her picking *shikimi* flowers in the field references a similar scene from another Noh play, *Nonomiya* (野々宮), which dramatizes that episode. If these references, however, prove too subtle even for the purportedly knowledgeable Noh audience, the ghost unmistakably reveals herself as Rokujō, and removes any doubt as to her identity.

今は何をかつゝむべき。我は六条の御息所なるが、我一天の虚空として、美女のほまれ慢心となり、又一乗妙経を片時もおこたる事なければ、是又かへつて慢心となり、二の心のさはりゆえ、魔道に落ちて天狗にとられ、この愛宕山をすみかとせり。(Kochu yōkyoku sōshō 1987, 128)

Ima wa nani wo ka tsutsumu beki. Waga wa Rokujō no Miyasudokoro naru ga, ware itten no kokū to shite, bijo no homare honshin to nari, mata ichijō myōgyō wo henshi mo okotaru koto nakereba, kore mata kaetsute manjin to nari, futatsu no kokorosawari yue, madō ni ochite, tengu ni torare, kono atagoyama wo sumika to seri.

What should I hide now? I am Lady Rokujō. Insignificant under Heaven as I am, I succumbed to conceit over my famed beauty. Moreover, as

I have not for a moment neglected the *Lotus Sutra*, it also fuels my pride.
Due to these two deficiencies of my heart, I have fallen into the realm
of demons, and captured by tengu, Atago Mountain became my home.

Lady Rokujō has earned renown as one of the most popular characters from *Genji monogatari*. Her fame (or infamy) is owed to her exciting storyline as well as the traits of the character herself. In the *Genji* lore, she is known as beautiful and sophisticated, but a proud and jealous lover of Genji, whose living spirit (生霊 *ikiryō*) possesses and murders several of Genji's other lovers, casting her, arguably, as the villain of the tale. After the tragic episode (also dramatized on the Noh stage) of possession and death in childbirth of Genji's principal wife Aoi no Ue, Rokujō leaves her home to accompany her daughter, Akikonomu, who had been appointed maiden of the Ise Shrine. Upon returning to the capital several years later, Lady Rokujō dedicates herself to Buddhist activities in order to re-immers herself in the Buddhist teachings (having been estranged from them by living by Ise Shrine complex which forbids Buddhist rituals) and, possibly, to atone for her past transgressions. The play *Shikimi tengu* alludes to this latter aspect of her story, but none of her other, more gruesome, *Genji monogatari* history. It describes Lady Rokujō as an aristocratic lady who is led astray by vanity regarding her beauty and unseemly pride in her devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*.

In the opening of the play, the lonely lady gathering *shikimi* for the offering cuts a pathetic figure, evocative of Rokujō's background as a neglected lover and a dispossessed imperial wife.¹² Women picking fresh herbs (若菜 *wakana*) was a common trope in premodern Japanese literature and poetry, as well as the Noh, signifying vitality and fertility. Referencing the opening scenes of the Noh play *Motomezuka*, in which a coterie of rambunctious young women is found picking *wakana*, Terasaki Etsuko (2002, 43) writes: "Optimism is embodied in abundant natural images, such as the young herbs (*wakana*); [...] in the celebration of the coming of the new year, the anticipation of spring, and the renewal of life; and, most importantly, in images of sexuality." She continues:

Wakana is an important key word generating complex variants in the narrative. For example, the image of sexuality is always encoded in the words *wakana tsumu*. The word *wakana* literally means "young herb," but figuratively stands for a young woman. Consequently, the phrase "plucking the fresh herbs" means to seduce or to deflower a woman.

¹² Prior to the events of the *Tale*, Lady Rokujō, daughter of the highly ranked Minister of the Left, was a consort to the Crown Prince, who unexpectedly died at a young age. By the time we are introduced to the character in the *Tale*, she had lost both her husband and her father, making her position vulnerable in the context of the Heian (794–1185) court society. While she still warrants respect on account of her prior position as the future Empress Consort and her high birth, she no longer has any significant influence or power she could leverage.

At first glance, *Shikimi tengu* follows the familiar trope—Rokujō picking the fragrant *shikimi* flowers, a typical Buddhist offering. However, *shikimi* the plant was also known to be used as an agricultural pesticide, as well as to prevent animals from digging out graves (Small 1996, 337). Therefore, juxtaposed with the common literary image, the *Shikimi tengu* scene is an inversion of the trope: a single forlorn woman plucking, not fresh herbs, but the poisonous and death-associated *shikimi*. This places Rokujō in opposition with what the young women represent, while following the damning associations with Rokujō in the *Genji* lore. She is quite a bit older and a widow, and her love for Genji, as is well known, turns deadly quite literally.

Being a *mugen* Noh play, *Shikimi tengu* follows the standard narrative structure and character outline: a religious figure, frequently a Buddhist priest (*waki*), travels to a well-known place. There he encounters a mysterious person who is then revealed to be a spirit connected to the place (*shite*), trapped in the world of the living due to a residual grudge or attachment. The priest then performs prayers and rites for the repose of the suffering spirit, to help guide them to eventual enlightenment. While following the encounter/reveal paradigm, *Shikimi tengu* does away with other parts of the convention, not least the one concerning the role distribution. The priest to whom Rokujō reveals her true identity has no explicit role in the second act and, instead of receiving placating prayers, her spirit is tortured by demonic creatures with an unabashed gusto. Additionally, depending on the version of the libretto, Rokujō's ghost either shares her role as the *shite* with Tarōbō (in a rather unusual set-up), or is not even cast as the *shite* (as would be expected according to the *mugen* Noh convention), but as *tsure* (連れ), a supporting role, "attached" to the *shite*, Tarōbō.¹³ This shift in the traditional structuring indicates that the lesson taught and enlightenment to be achieved is not directed at Rokujō, the ill-fated ghost, but at the *yamabushi*, the *waki*, who remains an invisible silent spectator all throughout the second act. The play is not therefore a story of the salvation and redemption of Lady Rokujō, but a spectacle of her torture presented to the *yamabushi*. Moreover, the depiction of the torture itself and the exchange witnessed between Rokujō and Tarōbō suggests that the spectacle is not merely staged as a Buddhist lesson, but that there is yet something more at play.

¹³ In the earliest versions of the play, Rokujō is cast as the *shite*. In subsequent versions, Tarōbō was cast as the *shite* with Rokujō as a *shitezure*, or both Rokujō and Tarōbō were cast as the *shite*. In the contemporary revival, the two-*shite* role distribution was applied (Goff 1991; Tamura 2014).

6. A lady in hell

The second act of *Shikimi tengu* opens with a carriage coming down from the skies carrying a raucous party of *tengu*, led by the imposing Tarōbō. He announces that the events are now taking place at the mansion in the Sixth Ward, the scenery appropriated for the Buddhist hell of which they are in charge. Shortly thereafter, the audience is led into the torture scene.

天狗「今に始めぬ御くるしび、一日に三どの餌食とて、熱鉄のかな湯の丸かせ。
シテ「服せんとすれば炎となつて、
天狗「御身をやけば痛はしや。
シテ「叫ばんとすれば聲出でず。
天狗「身心忽ちほのほとなつて、
シテ「五體さながら、
天狗「大紅蓮の、
地「烟の中に絶え絶えと、形はさながら炭竈の、おき火となり給ふ。あらさてこりの姿や。小天狗立ち寄りて、／＼、おき火となれる御身をなづれば、又人のかたちとなつて、たま々生ある姿となるを、大天狗たちよりて、御髪を手にからまいて、一打二打打つと見えしが。みじんの如くに打ちくだきて、嵐に散り行く木の葉のごとく、ばつとちると見えつるが、虚空に答ふる聲ありて、どつと笑ふと聞えしが、有りつるあたごの櫓が原に、影の如くに御息所、影の如くに御息所は、夢まぼろしとぞなりにける。(Kochu yōkyoku sōshō 1987, 129)

Tengu: Ima ni hajimenu on kurushibi, hitohi sando ejiki tote, nettetsu no kanayu no maru kase.

Shite: Bukusen to sureba honō to natsute,

Tengu: Onmi wo yakeba itawashiya.

Shite: Sakeban to sureba koe idezu.

Tengu: Shinjin tachimachi honō to natsute,

Shite: Gotai sanagara,

Tengu: Daiguren no,

Uta: kemuri no naka ni taetae to, katachi ha sanagara suminama no, okibi to nari tamō. Arasate kori no sugata ya. Shōtengu tachiyorite, shōtengu tachiyorite, okibi to nareru onmi wo nadzureba, mata hito no katachi to natsute. tamatama shō aru sugata to naru wo, daitengu tachiyorite, migushi wo te ni kara maite, hitouchi futauchi utsu yo to mieshi ga. Mijin no gotoku ni uchi kudakite, arashi ni chiri yuku ko no ha no gotoku, batsu to chiru to mietsuru ga, kokū ni kotōru koe arite, dotto warō to kikoeshi ga, aritsuru atago no shikimi ga hara ni, kage no gotoku no miyasudokoro, kage no gotoku no miyasudokoro ha, yume maboroshi to nari ni keru.

Tarōbō: The torture that now begins: three times a day, she is fed melted iron and a scorching metal ball.

Rokujō: As I swallow, I turn to flames.

Tarōbō: Your body burning, it is painful.

Rokujō: When I try to cry out, there is no sound.

Tarōbō: Your whole being turns to flames.

Rokujō: My entire body,

Chorus: Just like a giant blood-red fiery lotus flower, grows faint. Amid the smoke, her form, just like glowing embers from a charcoal kiln. She is retribution itself! A lesser *tengu* draws near, a lesser *tengu* draws near, and rubs her body bursting in giant flames, so she takes the human form again. As she momentarily turns back to her living form, the great *tengu* comes by her side and coils her hair around his hand. He raises his iron rod, and while it seems like only one or two blows, her body is crushed into dust, that resembles scattered leaves blown off a tree by a wild wind. The sound of voices sounding off through the void. The roaring laughter is heard, and in the very Shikimi Field of Atago, like a shadow, Lady Rokujō, like a shadow, Lady Rokujō was but a dream.

While most *mugen* Noh plays, in one way or another, tackle the issues of Buddhist suffering and afterlife, few plays present detailed descriptions of torture in a Buddhist hell. Notable examples dealing specifically with torture of women in hell are, the earlier mentioned, *Motomezuka* and *Kinuta*. In the two plays, both female protagonists are punished for a specific crime: in *Motomezuka* for indirectly inspiring the suicide of the young woman's two suitors, and in *Kinuta* for excessive attachment to the woman's husband. Rokujō can, in fact, be charged with causing death and obsessive attachment but neither of these sins are explicitly stated in the play. While her excessive desire for Genji leads her to become a known "murderer" (via possession), this is not cited as the reason for her being born into the *tengu* hell, and the torment described does not align with any specific recognizable event.¹⁴ Instead, the audience is informed, through Rokujō's own words, that she is not punished for what she *did* but for what she *is*—beautiful, defiant, and haughty, and aware and proud of this fact.

Being consumed by fire represents hell's punishment, as well as the sin she is being punished for—burning in the flames of ignorant desire. The imagery of the "burning" Rokujō is a recurring motif in both *Genji monogatari* and the "Genji plays" which feature the character. In the events of the thirty-fifth chapter of the tale, Genji's consort, and the love of his life, Lady Murasaki, is struggling with illness, exacerbated (and, arguably caused) by the fact that she is being possessed by a spirit, which turns out to be Rokujō. Amid the readings of Buddhist scriptures for the unfortunate Murasaki, the spirit of Rokujō voices out:

¹⁴ Typically, the torture is a form of reenactment. For example, in *Motomezuka*, the female protagonist is attacked by iron birds killed in the archery competition between her suitors, and in *Kinuta*, the protagonist is beaten in the way she beat on the fulling block expressing her anger and attachment.

These rites and these noisy scripture readings only surround me with searing flame, and I hear nothing holy in them. That is my torment. (Tyler 2001, 655)

Described this way, she is solidified in the tradition as an embodiment of attachment and Buddhist suffering.

Discussing courtship in classical Japan, Doris G. Borgen (2017, 93) summarizes what is more or less the established position in scholarship about the roots of Rokujō's resentment towards Genji's lovers and his treatment of her:

If Lady Rokujō virtually personifies jealousy, it is largely because of her treatment in Noh plays in later centuries. In *The Tale of Genji* she expresses some envy of Aoi no Ue and Genji's other lovers, but what really motivates Lady Rokujō, as others have noted, is the fact that she is repeatedly humiliated [...].

In analyses of the two referenced episodes of the *Genji*—"Aoi no Ue" and "Yūgao"—named after the two women who both succumb to the possession by the living spirit of Lady Rokujō, scholarship largely places the emphasis on Rokujō's humiliation and injured pride. In the highly dramatic episode of the carriage fight in "Aoi no Ue" chapter, Rokujō is humiliated by Lady Aoi whose men push her carriage out of their way at the Kamo Festival, which she sought to attend incognito, in hopes of catching a glimpse of Genji. Earlier in the tale, when possessing Genji's mysterious lover Yūgao, the apparition disparagingly refers to the unfortunate young woman as a "person of no consequence" (かくことなるなき人 *kakukotonarunaki hito*). It is, therefore, not a stretch to assume that the resentment expressed is about status rather than jealousy over women themselves, or possessiveness over the man.

However, while Murasaki Shikibu's brush follows the genre conventions of the Heian storytelling, she also resists the idiom skillfully and her treatment of Lady Rokujō's character could be the most prominent example of this. Rokujō is a disruptor. She stakes claim to things that are not appropriate for her to desire. She has issues with Genji's lower-ranking lovers, as well as his principal wife. She refuses to stay in her lane, metaphorically and literally—in the aforementioned episode of the carriage fight, she finds herself in the way of her illustrious rival and suffers great ignominy for refusing to move. Furthermore, while much has been made of Rokujō's jealousy being primarily based on feelings of disrespect and broken pride, it cannot be neglected that in the most infamous instances of her *ikiryō*'s crimes of possession and murder, the scenes depicted are highly erotically charged. The expressions of her anger are emphatically corporeal, and she attacks her victims in physically vulnerable states and in the intimacy of their bedchambers (for example, she attacks Yūgao just after she has had sex with Genji and Lady Aoi during and shortly after giving birth, unmistakable evidence of their sexual union).

Description of the torture that she endures in the play is typical of depictions of fiery hells in Buddhist literature, but it is reminiscent particularly of descriptions of torture in the (menstrual) blood-pond hell, from *The Blood Bowl Sutra* (血盆經 *Ketsubonkyō*).¹⁵ In the play, there is no mention of a blood-pond, but the fire and smoke envelop Rokujō's body transformed into a "giant blood-red lotus" (in both Buddhist and Chinese/Daoist tradition, the red lotus flower symbolizes female genitalia).¹⁶ The association with the sutra is particularly pertinent, as the scripture was aimed specifically towards the redemption of women, just as the blood-pond hell was specifically reserved for retribution of women (for the "sin" of being women). In Japan, the scripture came to be widely used for funerary services by the end of the fifteenth century and was in circulation from at least the early 1500s (Meeks 2020b, 1–2), so at the time the play was written it would have been well-known. The *Blood Pond Sutra* was geared, however, towards the salvation of women, which Rokujō is ultimately denied. No one speaks for her and no compassion is accorded to her. There is only "roaring laughter" as her body turns into a pile of dust. Therefore, as suggested above, her torture in the play seems not to be framed as a salvific process for Rokujō, but as an object (or object) lesson to the *yamabushi*.

7. Watching a lady

In her study of the motif of possession in *Genji monogatari*, Borgen (1997) casts Lady Rokujō as a figure of resistance who uses possession as a way to reinvest both herself and her victims with agency and a voice, and defy the Heian patriarchy that rendered them powerless and mute. Rather than simply being a wanton malicious woman, Rokujō questions and resists the social structure and gender dynamics that keep her oppressed. Representations of evil (魔 *ma*) are often constructed to explain phenomena that disrupt society. Identifying those who disturb social order as evil (usually challengers or defiers of authority) legitimizes the institution seeking to establish and maintain that order. Evil, as Wakabayashi (2012, xvii) notes, in that sense is a "social as much as a religious construct." Rokujō in the *Genji* tradition challenges that order. Can we not say, then, that her punishment in the play is ostensibly for the sin of vanity, but in truth it is for her sexual and

¹⁵ The *Blood Pond Sutra* is an indigenously East Asian (Chinese) sutra (血盆經 *Xuepenjing*), consolidated between eleventh and twelfth centuries, and popularized in Japan from around the early fifteenth century. It depicts a Buddhist hell-realm where women are born to suffer retribution for karma incurred due to their sex, primarily related to pollution caused by menstruation and childbirth (Meeks 2020a, 2020b). For a more extensive discussion on imagery and conceptualization of Chinese Buddhist hells and purgatories, see Teiser (1994).

¹⁶ For more on this topic, see Lopez (2018).

social forwardness, and the audacity to challenge the status quo? Rokujō, having dared to seize power—Bargen (1997, xx) calls it the “woman’s weapon”—in *Genji monogatari*, in the play gets her comeuppance in the eyes of the established Order by being violated in all possible ways—mentally, physically, sexually. She remains a perpetual lesson, but also a source of *schadenfreude* over absolute ownership over her body, her spirit, her voice, and her salvation.

In Buddhist literature and practice, there is a long tradition of using women’s decaying bodies as objects of meditation to teach lessons about impermanence, and the relationship between desire and suffering. Liz Wilson’s (1996) analysis of literary conventions used in Buddhist hagiographic literature shows women frequently represented as objects of meditation whose sole function in the narratives in which they appear is to lead to the edification of the male subjects who observe them. In Theravada hagiographic literature, male protagonists “become Arhats, or ‘worthy ones’ through viewing dead, dying, or disfigured female bodies” (Wilson 1996, 3). Wilson (1996, 11) continues to discuss how Buddhist texts use unconventional literary methods, such as the blending of erotic and repulsive imagery, to suggest “homologies between carnal pleasure and carnage, bedrooms and battlefield, bliss and bondage—homologies to persuade the sensitive reader or listener of the rapacity of the sex act and the perversity of sexual desire.” Female sensuality and physicality/corporeality is contrasted with Buddhist rejection of the material and corporeal desire. In Japan this trope was known as *fujōkan* (不浄観, “meditation on the impurity of the body”), and emphasized the notion of impermanence, and “rather than creating an unambiguous aversion to all forms of sexual and amorous attachment, it leads to an aestheticized rendition of the evanescence of beauty and love” (Pandey 2005, 197). I suggest, however, that the spectacle of Rokujō’s torture is not a somber Buddhist lesson, but a voyeuristic pleasure at her punishment.

A blurring of the line between Eros and Thanatos permeates the entire *Genji monogatari* due to the dominance of the overarching classical literary aesthetic of *mono no aware* (物の哀れ, “sadness of things”), the bittersweet sensitivity to and appreciation of the impermanence of earthly phenomena. In *Genji monogatari*, this often translates to a near-fetishization of dead and dying women. Haunted by the memory of his own fatally fragile mother, Genji is always moved by the beauty of his lovers the most when they are on the brink of expiring; for example, Yūgao’s frail body exhausted (and eventually defeated) by the possession, or his wife Aoi’s physique wasted away both by her own experience of possession and the pains of the difficult childbirth (which in that time would often end up being fatal for the mother). There is an uncanny parallel and odd mirroring in this view of a tortured woman’s body as stirring emotion and arousal, and the aforementioned meditation on women’s decaying corpses.

Shikimi tengu takes this a step further and, in doing so, completely subverts the motif, as it is not Rokujō's decaying corpse that is on display; rather, the entire process of retributive suffering inflicted on Rokujō's body (and spirit) is exposed in what could be viewed as an act of the ultimate humiliation and violation. Therefore, there is an argument to be made here that Rokujō's tortured body is one such object of meditation, especially considering that the entire event is observed by the *yamabushi*. As concerns the structuring of the scene and the fact that Rokujō, in the scene, is not a lifeless rotting corpse, but an active animate (if not strictly "living") being, described in her corporeality, with her lush hair, this scene is evocative of a different tradition of men looking at women in premodern Japanese literature, the *kaimami*, or the "peeping through the fence" trope that was mentioned above.

Kaimami represents a very intriguing counterpart to the Western concept of the male gaze, where women are being "hypersexualized" (and fetishized) as "passive subjects and objects" (Mulvey 1975, 13) in that it presents a peculiar structuring of the positionality of the observer, the observed (and the one telling about the observing, namely, the narrative voice describing the scene). Bargaen (2017, 57) notes that "[i]n the paradigmatic form of *kaimami*, a male character secretly observes a female character. [...] In other words, in scenes of *kaimami* the observed female character is perceived through the male character who sees her and also through the narrative voice that articulates his vision." The most provocative instances of *kaimami* come, however, from the classical literature authored by women, where the women appropriate the male gaze, or even themselves gaze at men gazing at them, as well as potentially putting themselves on display to be gazed upon, which automatically denies the men setting the conditions of and having the authority over the gaze. While Bargaen (2017, 66) contends that "[i]n *kaimami*, agency resides mainly—if not entirely—in the observer," there could well be agency provided by knowing or expecting that one is being observed. And speaking of agency, let us also not forget that "gazing" is, in a way, at the basis of the sins for which Rokujō is being punished. Her unseemly desire to see (Genji) during the Kamo festival led to the unfortunate encounter with Lady Aoi and the carriage fight, while her living spirit's presence at (i.e., seeing) Genji's love-making with Yūgao led her to possess and kill the young woman.

Referencing Edith Sarra's research, Bargaen (2017, 59) notes that "[Sarra] has suggested that female Heian authors shifted the focus to the women's gaze by 'eliminating what is arguably one of the distinguishing structural features of fictional tales: the mediating figure of the male character as voyeur.'" In her eponymous study, Sarra (1999) has raised some pertinent questions about women creating "fictions of femininity" through female narrators. She asks, "How do we account critically for the fact that the gaze of the hero in the *kaimami* scene frequently

depends on the mediation of feminine narrators and female authors? Who is looking at whom in these scenes?" (Sarra 1999, 26). While the playwrights of Noh were uniformly male, we can recognize the possibility that they have, even if unwittingly, adopted what Sarra calls the "fictions of femininity," or perhaps even appropriated them. In this sense, the very fictional feminine then presents an agency in which the imaginary, "fictional" feminine, created by women themselves, is taken as the "true" feminine.

As expounded above, *kaimami* presents itself as gazing with overtly erotic connotation, so how do we square this with what is going on before the *yamabushi*'s eyes in *Shikimi tengu*? If we look closely at the description of Rokujō's torture, there is a strong undertone of eroticism in the way her torture is presented and in the language used to describe it. Her body is rubbed; Tarōbō coils her hair (a symbol of female beauty and sexual allure) around his hand, and pulls her head back, as he raises an iron rod (a phallic object) towards her; the fire consumes her body transformed into a "huge flaming lotus red as blood," which, as pointed out earlier, was a known metaphor for female genitalia. In order to understand how the torture section in *Shikimi tengu* can be read as an erotic scene, and how Rokujō's and Tarōbō's interaction can be read as an erotic encounter undergirded by desire, it is necessary to disentangle the imagery utilized. To better clarify just how this imagery indeed alludes to an erotic vision, I will draw again on Rajyashree Pandey's discussion to elucidate the coded language referring to the female body, sexuality, and the eroticism utilized in premodern Japanese literature.

8. A lady's body

Given the generic conventions of both Noh and *monogatari* (物語, "tale") as well as classical and medieval Japanese poetry, it is clear why explicit expressions of sexual desire and indulging in it would not be displayed. Pandey (2017, 33) notes that the "decorum" of courtly literature, to which *monogatari* and much of the poetry referenced in Noh belongs, did not mean that there is no sexual activity taking place, but rather that the depictions are given in a literary idiom of ellipsis. Addressing the concept of the body specifically, Pandey (2017, 13) states that "[i]n a courtly text such as the *Genji*, for example, the aristocratic body is imagined as a phenomenological entity whose presence is felt, not through elaborate descriptions of its physical appearance but rather through its stylized, performative modes." She further notes that the depictions of corporeality were presented differently depending on the genre and the literary convention. Namely, while courtly literature "observed a certain decorum and restraint," genres such as *setsuwa* depicted baser aspects and bodily functions, such as sex, eating, defecating, etc. (Pandey 2017, 13). Relying on the principle of *yūgen*, Noh had a clear affinity with

the courtly sensibilities, but the “new” (*shinpū*) Noh was responding to more popular tastes. I am not suggesting that *Shikimi tengu* was necessarily written the way it was because of or in order to cater to those tastes, but rather that due to the ongoing innovation within the genre, the convention became liberated (or, at least, started to move away) from the said “decorum.”

Given that the site of the torture as well as of erotic arousal is Rokujō’s body, it is important to unpack both how body and the workings of the body as a source of arousal were understood in premodern Japanese literature. As mentioned earlier, we are urged to rethink the idea of the body as an object of erotic desire. Pandey (2017, 1) has suggested that in *monogatari* there was “barely anything like body” but rather a conglomerate of shadowy qualities in its place. That is not to say that references to and images of the body (and bodies together) and corporeality were wholly absent, but rather that they were represented metaphorically through subtle and sophisticated poetic imagery. She writes: “Desire in Japanese texts [...] needed to be disentangled from modern discourses of sexuality, which assume that it emanates from an individual subject, who is constituted through his/her sexual identity” (Pandey 2017, 8). Sure enough, in the Buddhist worldview, rather than thinking of individual bodies and privileging their corporeality therein, there was a holistic view of a mind-body complex which extended beyond the flesh-and-bone and sex as a fluid category.

The body we encounter in the East Asian tradition is not an anatomical entity made up of flesh, bones, and muscles. Furthermore, its materiality already carries within it the psychological dispositions and mental attributes that go into the formation of the body and personhood. Even the physical substrate of the body, which we assume to be universal, is itself historically variable. (Pandey 2017, 13)

In the case of Noh, the body was always shapeshifting, a body of transformation: a body which appears in its corporeal and ghostly, literal and symbolic, and performative (both literal and conceptual form). *Shikimi tengu* capitalized on all these conceptualizations. Additionally, rather than privileging the idea of an embodied self, there was a reliance on the Buddhist concepts of emptiness (無 *mu*; Skt. *śūnyatā*) and non-dualism (不二 *funi*; Skt. *advaita*),¹⁷ within which the subjects (as well as subject/object dichotomies) always coexist in the mutual process of becoming. They depend on each other for a shared kind of subjectivity, i.e., the

¹⁷ The Doctrine of Emptiness, one of the central Mahayana Buddhist concepts expounded in the *Perfection of Wisdom* (Skt. *Prajñāpāramitā*) sutras and by the Mādhyamaka (“Middle Way”) school, posits that all phenomena are “empty” of any self-nature. As an extension and further expounding of this doctrine, the concept of non-dualism posited that due to phenomena being empty of self-nature, any distinctions between them are erased. Both concepts were well-known to have influenced and been cited in Noh plays.

subject and the object are ultimately inseparable and indivisible, at least within the moment of interaction where they always constantly mutually produce each other.

While acknowledging this very salient characteristic of Buddhist understanding of the body and the self, however, it is important not to fall into the trap of summarily dismissing any individual corporeality of desire. Objects of desire are more than just a product of an amorous atmosphere prompting the characters' urges and feelings along. It is difficult to imagine, for example, that Rokujō's desire and anguish would persist so continuously, steadfastly, and single-mindedly if she was just "in love with love," so to speak. Genji is the object of her desire and she goes to unimaginable lengths to thwart as many of his love pursuits with other women as she can by literally physically eliminating the objects of his desire (their bodies, if you will). The desire is always a desire for "something," and while it is worthwhile to reconceptualize what that "something" is, it cannot be so diffuse as to be rendered meaningless.

Let us, finally, examine how the body of Lady Rokujō in *Shikimi tengu* is constructed as the body of desire through coded language and visual clues. In the exchange between Rokujō and Tarōbō cited above, her torture is depicted in emphatically corporeal terms, allowing for the more straightforward language in line with the new style. There are repeated references to her body: "(my) body" (御身 *onmi*), "entire body" (五体 *gotai*), "mind-body" (心身 *shinshin*), "form" or "shape" (形 *katachi*, 姿 *sugata*), and acts performed on it (enforced swallowing, rubbing, coiling, and pulling of the hair). Moreover, the body being rubbed, pulled, and tugged, takes the form of the red fiery lotus, which, as noted earlier, is known to symbolize female genitalia. At the same time, the playwright employs well-known erotic imagery drawing on the symbolism of classical poetry and *monogatari*. Rather than, say, voluptuous curves or smooth silky skin, it was a woman's hair and robes that "constitute[d] radically alternate forms of embodiment," and operated as "potent sites for the generation of erotic and affective feelings" (Pandey 2017, 33). In classical poetry, imagery of hair is frequently utilized as a trope through which women articulate feelings of sexual pleasure and longing (Tonomura 1994, 147–151; Pandey 2017, 60). In the case of *Genji monogatari*, Pandey (2017, 60) writes:

As with other markers of beauty, hair [...] is described in highly stylized terms, for it is taken for granted that a woman of distinction is likely to be blessed with long, lustrous hair. It is when hair deviates from the norm, in situations that are unusual or out of the ordinary, as in childbirth, tonsure, or death, that it becomes particularly charged with erotic significance.

And in the case of Lady Rokujō, what could be more out of the ordinary, hence more erotically charged, than the hair attached to her body tortured in hell, as the monstrous Tarōbō coils her lush locks around his hand as he raises his rod towards

her, while the entire scene is awash in the glow of the red fiery lotus? Through such clear and recognizable visual clues, Rokujō is transformed into an object of desire, as her torture is presented as an erotic spectacle for the *yamabushi*. The lens of object and subject position is inverted, however, as she is conscious of the eyes that gaze at her. Recalling Sarra's (1999) "fictions of femininity" and the workings of *kaimami* as a kind of gaze with an ambiguous and fluid subject/object positionality, Rokujō's torture could be read as one such "invited" gaze. In fact, tracing the narrative thread starting with the *Genji*, the entire Rokujō narrative is an exercise in subjectivity; she demands Genji's attention, she is not submissive and when she does not get that attention, she exacts her gruesome revenge. It is this, taking the subject position or daring to claim it for herself, that lands her in hell.

9. Conclusion

Shikimi tengu represents an excellent example of the intertextuality of Noh drama through its interplay of the two main and several supporting narrative frameworks. Placing a famous literary character (Lady Rokujō) within the context of a seemingly unrelated plot trope (stories about *tengu*) and then unraveling the intertwined hidden narrative threads brought into the shared structure, unlocked a repository of plentiful storylines, background content, and characterizations. This, in turn, created a powerful symbolic language which could be used to address broader religious and social issues in unexpected ways. We see how both Rokujō and *tengu* are constructed as multifaceted signifiers that question and subvert generic conventions and allow for a multiplicity of readings. *Shikimi tengu* was well positioned to enact the new strategies, being created in the moment of shifting dramatic conventions which provided novel ways for its characters to interact through innovative role distribution. This broadened the interpretative scope of both the religious and social underpinnings of these narrative traditions, but at the same time complicated the project of Noh as a salvific ritual.

As we have seen, *Shikimi tengu* is a play that inverts several well-established and recognizable plot tropes. It uses these inversions as a discursive strategy to subvert the expected development rooted in the convention, such as relationships established by traditional role distribution, the religious goal and achieved through mobilizing those relationships, the final outcome for the protagonist expected of the denouement presented, namely a Buddhist lesson for the observer of the female protagonist's painful retribution, and the nature of this retribution itself. Furthermore, the scene of her torture, while depicting excruciating pain, offers a tantalizing and arousing view to the *yamabushi*. While her female sensuality and corporeality is supposed to bring about rejection of the material and corporeal desire, it instead seems to elicit a voyeuristic pleasure at the punishment that

she gets. In this reading, *Shikimi tengu* ultimately challenges and subverts both the exercised Noh's theatrical conventions and the salvific project of its ritual and textual underpinnings, and in turn broadens the interpretive scope of the narrative, performative, and poetic expression of the genre, opening up new venues of looking at the tradition as a whole.

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THE BODY AS LENS AND TESTIMONY: THE BODILY EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE SONG STORIES OF TRAVELING TO FOREIGN LANDS (960–1279 CE)

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This paper focuses on “Gao Yan,” a classical short story describing an eventful foreign journey in the Song period, to explore how the body displays information about foreign lands and the potential socio-cultural factors that form such bodily perceptions. First, the body is a lens for perceiving the “abnormal” environment through various sensory impressions, including climate, foreigners’ body odor, and observation of customs. Second, the body functions as a testimony of suffering by displaying physiological changes such as scars, injuries, and complexion. Third, the growing consciousness of the Central Lands in the Song period is key to shaping these corporal experiences; this implies a set of cultural concepts and resonates with the prevalent anxiety regarding the Sino-barbarian dichotomy, stressing the Central Lands’ moral-cultural superiority. Apart from seeking novelty, bodily experiences play an essential role in fictional narratives which transform the strange world into an understandable order based on Confucian orthodoxy.

Keywords: classical Chinese short stories, bodily representation, the Central Lands, travel to foreign lands, multisensory experience

1. Introduction: the overlooked representation of foreign travel in classical short stories

This chapter mainly focuses on “Gao Yan” (高言), a classical short story documented in *Lofty Debates Under the Green Window* (青瑣高議 *Qingsuo gaoyi*, hereafter as *Lofty Debates*), in order to explore the exotic experience and reaffirmed cultural identity demonstrated through multisensory perception during the Song period (960–1279 CE). By examining a narrative corpus that has so far received sporadic

attention, this chapter aims to elucidate the body's role in delineating foreign lands and discover the potential social-cultural concerns presented through the fictional journey; thus, it contributes a case study from the context of premodern Chinese fiction to current research on the representation of the body and travel.

Many scholars have noticed that due to the growth in international exchanges and geographical knowledge, as well as the improvement of infrastructures and individual mobility, narratives about travel in the Song period experienced an unprecedented development in genres and content (see, e.g., Hargett 1985; Zhang 2011). Existing research centers on official domestic travels (宦遊 *huan you*), which are mostly documented as travel essays or diaries of boat trips; while another growing body of research addresses records of foreign lands, especially embassy accounts and entries on commercial products. In contrast to the traditional preference for "stability," "movement" is a noticeable dimension of the Song society. The extensiveness of the travel category featuring interpersonal relationships in encyclopedias (類書 *leishu*), as well as strange encounters in stories as part of everyday knowledge, indicate the prevalence of travel in the Song everyday life and culture (Wu 2007, 23–73, 121–131).

Among the vast literature produced in the Song period, however, a certain number of classical short stories also present travel experiences in foreign lands, but these have been long ignored by both literature and history scholars. This oversight may be partly due to the ambiguity—both in content and genres—of fictional journeys, which either deviate from the precondition of authors' genuine experience for travel writing, or swing between simple records and crafted literary works. This does not mean that these represented travels are not worthy of investigation. Instead, they present particular concerns about imagining others and world-making by illustrating the wandering experiences and the corresponding mentality of travelers. The Song short stories provide a new perspective to understand how people conceived foreign travel and the surrounding world in a descriptive and popular context, as well as how a Chinese elite integrated the uncertain heterogeneity, caused by mobility, into the conventional world order. The representation of travel experiences and the accompanying knowledge is never limited to one genre or one perspective, but is a complex phenomenon with various forms and purposes in the same culture.

Lofty Debates and *Record of the Listener* (夷堅志 *Yi jian zhi*, hereafter as *Record*) are the two important story compilations that document the largest number of extraterritorial travel experiences in the Song period. The former is a novel collection from the Northern Song era, edited and written by a lower-class scholar, Liu Fu (劉斧, 1040–after 1113 CE); the latter is a very large compilation of strange tales and anecdotes by the prominent officer Hong Mai (洪邁, 1123–1202 CE) from the Southern Song dynasty. Notably, both collections reflect the tendency

of popularization in Song novels; this indicates the early confluence of the classical tales (傳奇 *chuanqi*) and vernacular stories (話本 *huaben*) (Li 1992, 39–45). Hidetaka Otsuka particularly highlights *Lofty Debates* as reflecting the emergence of a new type of popular encyclopedia (通俗類書 *tongsu leishu*) that compiles various fiction and trivial affairs of everyday knowledge (Otsuka 2011, 93–107). Compared with the extensive but repetitive seafaring events documented in *Record*, there are only two stories about overseas travels in *Lofty Debates*: “Wang Xie” (王榭) and “Gao Yan”; by comparison, they present more elaborate travel experiences with detailed sensory and psychological portraits. “Wang Xie” is a derivative of the traditional motif of the fairyland (仙鄉 *xianxiang*), which intentionally fabricates an accidental journey to the Kingdom of Swallows by incorporating the utopian scenery as the spring of peach blossoms and the biological nature of animals (Huang 2007, 167–188). In contrast, “Gao Yan” presents a distinctly realistic concern through extraterritorial knowledge and a continuous comparison of the homeland with foreign lands. It enacts a morality play that reconstructs the comprehensive superiority of the Central Lands (中國 *zhongguo*) through a journey in the farthest known places. This chapter takes “Gao Yan” as the main primary source, given its contemporary worldview and details on travels, while using stories in *Record* as a necessary reference to examine the narrative features and the potential issues arising from these fictional journeys.

2. “Gao Yan”: a fictional journey around the world in the Song era

“Gao Yan” is found in the third volume of *Lofty Debates*, with a subtitle that summarizes the storyline. The story consists of three parts; the first is a brief portrait of Gao Yan, a lower-class intellectual who constantly complains that he deserves greater respect but unfortunately lives at the wrong time. Because he has impetuously murdered a friend, he has no choice but to flee to foreign lands; but when the new emperor issues an amnesty, Gao Yan returns to the capital and confesses the journey to his intimate friend. The second part is Gao Yan’s statement about this grand journey, which takes twenty years and spans “ten thousand li” (萬里 *wanli*) from the northernmost to the southernmost limits of the known world. He first escaped to the northern nomadic realm on horseback and married a barbarian woman. Suffering from this harsh life, he escaped again to Guangzhou, where he traveled to Arabia (大食 *Dashi*) on gigantic vessels with sea merchants. By hitchhiking with merchant ships sailing among ports, he visited several kingdoms scattered among the southern seascapes, including *Dashi*, Linming (林明國), and Riqing (日慶國). Here, Gao Yan not only heard rumors about strange islands, including the Al-Wakwak Island and the Land of Maidens, but he also remarried with another foreign woman. When he abandoned his family and returned to

the Central Lands alone, his wife tore their child into pieces. After returning, Gao Yan expresses his deep regret and henceforth re-embraces every convention in the motherland with heartfelt admiration. The final part is the sympathetic comment that summarizes this journey as having been “degraded” due to an unforgivable moral mistake, i.e., a cultivated person should always behave as a cautious and refined scholar, not a gallant knight errant who acts recklessly and driven by emotion.

Two noteworthy features of this text are the following. First, “Gao Yan” is an elegantly styled tale in the form of official biographical historiography. It exemplifies the Song classical tales’ feature of fusing various genres, including historiography, poetry, and commentary (Cheng 1999, 5). However, it seems to lack an obvious historical prototype, which is different from many Song tales that focus on historical figures—especially female celebrities, such as “The Anecdotal Biography of Yang Taizhen” (楊太真外傳 *Yang Taizhen wai zhuan*), “The Biography of Lüzhu” (綠珠傳 *Lüzhu zhuan*), and “The Anecdotal Biography of Li Shishi” (李師師外傳 *Li Shishi wai zhuan*). It is difficult to verify how “Gao Yan” was created, due to the minimal external information about whether the stated author Liu Fu acted mainly as an author or an editor, as well as whether the travels were mostly based on personal experience or second-hand sources. A possibility is that Liu Fu did not personally engage in overseas journeys, but gathered various information to fabricate this story—similarly to Hong Mai, author of *Record*.

Second, the journey of “Gao Yan” presents an apparent realistic concern, which is different from the previous transcendental and religious interests. There are no personal encounters with any supernatural beings, including gods, spirits, or immortals. All suspicious events are skillfully presented as hearsay from local people. Although the displayed worldview is not an accurate geographical description, it carefully confines the travel scope to a realistic background, especially the nautical transportation to Arabia and the climatic features of the nearby area. This reveals the worldview of a Song literati, where the northern land is occupied by powerful nomadic tribes, whilst the vast southern sea region is dotted with various wealthy kingdoms. The narrative specifies that the historical sailing route from Guangzhou to the Arabian Peninsula provides possible trans-shipment ports for further transfers to the other parts of the world; this is mostly consistent with descriptions of other convincing geographical records, such as *Representative Answers from the Region Beyond the Mountains* (嶺外代答 *Lingwai daida*) and *A Description of Barbarian Nations* (諸蕃志 *Zhu fan zhi*). Merchant ships sailing in the Arab world provide the possibility to access the mysterious lands recorded in ancient classics. The descriptions of the foreign land is not fully original, but mostly assembled and reorganized from several older pieces of literature, such as *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經 *Shan hai jing*) and *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang* (酉陽

雜俎 *Youyang zazu*). The author seems to keep a cautious distance from these narratives of mysterious lands, and has found a reasonable way to embed them into the world map as extensively as possible. Another similar expression in “Gao Yan” is the realistic marriages with local women. This story stresses how a scholar states his foreign experience; thus, the portrayal of women mainly exemplifies the experience of living in foreign lands, not the traditional romance between a talented scholar and an ideal noble or immortal lady.

“Gao Yan” is, of course, not the first fictional journey in premodern Chinese literature, as a similar theme appears in other genres, such as “Far Roaming” (遠遊 *Yuan you*) and “Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease” (逍遙遊 *Xiao yao you*) in the Warring States period (476–221 BCE). Etymologically, the keyword *you* (遊, “travel”) refers to a transcendent quest among spaces while holding a fluttering flag, and long-distance travel is regarded as a process of self-transformation. In the context of Chinese fiction, a journey is usually associated with a pilgrimage which either focuses on the progress of transition, or presents the vivid scenery of other realms through the testimonies of travelers (Gong 2003, 183–214). The distinctiveness of “Gao Yan” lies not only in the large-scale extraterritorial journey, but also in reflecting the knowledge and aesthetic interests of the Song context. The early Tang tale, “A Travel to the Cave of Immortals” (遊仙窟 *You xian ku*) (ca. 658–730 CE), may reveal the changing narrative tendency from a transcendent utopia to genuine social life, by portraying a scholar’s visit with sing-song girls in a brothel as a playful excursion with immortals (Chen 2002, 194). It is rare to see a story like “Gao Yan,” which fits the foreign adventure into the realistic and educational concerns; this contrasts with the previous focus on a scholar’s occasional encounters with immortal beings during their inland travel, as a spiritual quest or a religious trial.

The genre in Western literature that most closely aligns with “Gao Yan” may be the “imaginary voyage,” which is a narrative of a fictional journey to demonstrate a utopian or political satire. According to Paul Arthur (2010, 1), this is a marginal and complicated literary classification, overlooked by scholars; it is a strange marriage of romance and history that “reflect[s] and exploit[s] a particular moment in the history of maritime exploration.” It usually depicts a populated southern world for cross-cultural encounters, by intentionally delineating the edges of the known world, in the form of a genuine travel account (Arthur 2010, 1–18). The imaginary voyages in the Western tradition are not entirely compatible with Chinese novels in the developmental period and the intention of conveying philosophical discourse. However, Arthur’s (2010) study reminds us that while examining those fictional journeys, which are easily misrepresented as belonging to a single category, a comprehensive and historical perspective helps us to interpret their imaginative effect on readers, especially the cultural climate of the era in which they were produced. A fictional journey such as “Gao Yan,” which deliberately

addresses specific opinions through travelers' various overseas experiences, appeared in the twelfth century, which is earlier than the Ming-Qing novels such as *Journey to the West* (西遊記 *Xi you ji*), *Eunuch Sanbao's Voyage to the Western Ocean* (三寶太監西洋記 *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji*), and *Flowers in the Mirror* (鏡花緣 *Jing hua yuan*). Although the large volume and writing techniques of vernacular novels had not yet developed in this period, the Song stories depict an imaginable foreign world by applying detailed sensory descriptions and referring to various known resources.

How should one interpret stories such as "Gao Yan," which present a realistic tendency and potential cultural concerns in the form of foreign travel? The traveler's body, as represented in texts, could provide a basis for examining the interplay between outside environments and internal perception. In travel writing, it is also the presence of a physical body behind the narrative voice that insists on consistency and guarantees the authenticity of travel accounts (Helmers and Tilar 2005, 267–276). The exotic customs are undoubtedly the eye-catching spectacle of those stories; nevertheless, it is the traveler's body that shapes the flesh and blood of unknown faraway lands, and thus constitutes the distinctive travel impression. The physical experience of "Gao Yan" does not belong to a prominent individual, such as authors of travel essays and embassy accounts, but a normal male body, through which the protagonist presents a more universal and intuitive perception. Such bodily experience manifests not only a private sentiment, but also a convincing commonality for readers who have never been or cannot be there.

Given the body's fundamental role in both fictional journeys and travel writing, this chapter draws on research on Chinese fiction and travel history for its methodological framework to contextualize "Gao Yan"; it also applies body-related history to discuss notable keywords and descriptions. According to body-thinking in the East Asian context, the "body" is a relational embodiment which is deeply immersed in the social-cultural context, and presents four types of functions, namely, politics, social norms, spiritual cultivation, and metaphor. Such a body is usually incomplete and needs the guidance of a superior organ (heart) or external regulation to accomplish perfection—namely, a process of "cultivating oneself" (修身 *xiushen*)—to transform a body into an organism with both physiological and moral agency to practice value judgments (Huang 2007, 187–218). Regarding the confluence of bodily history and cultural studies in the Chinese context, "the embodied experience" (身體感 *shentigan*) and "visualization" (遊觀 *youguan*) are the two notable concepts that help to realize a dynamic equilibrium between the body and environment. Namely, "the embodied experience" highlights the body's functions not only in generating multiple sensorial combinations to create order in the outside world, but also in presenting a specific cultural cultivation through everyday practices, such as "vital energy" (氣 *qi*) and "deficiency" (虛 *xu*) (Yu 2008,

15, 23). "Visualization" is a multilayered term that proposes visibility as an essential body technique to constitute the aesthetic and religious ways of seeing, from external excursions to opening the inner self (Liu 2009, 19–32). Prior research on Chinese fiction also exemplified how the body functions as a thematic metaphor that resonates with the space construction. For example, a unity of body and mind through the practice of inner alchemy-refinement is represented in *Journey to the West* (Liao 2014, 99–133), while the ill and exhausted body undergoing medical treatment is employed as a metaphor for the declining nation in the late Qing period (Guan 2013, 83–118). Although there has been scarce analysis of travel experiences in classical Chinese novels, the above-mentioned research on literary motifs and the bodily concept provides an extensive basis for interpreting these Song classical short stories.

To better illustrate how bodily perception underlies Gao Yan's journey, this chapter will discuss the different dimensions of the body as follows: (1) the body as a lens to constitute foreign lands through travelers' sensory impressions; (2) the body as a testimony to demonstrate unusual experiences through travelers' physical transformations; and (3) the potential social-cultural context that breeds the above-mentioned bodily representations.

3. The body as a lens to perceive strange foreign lands

This section will illustrate the three prominent features of foreign lands observed in "Gao Yan." The summary stated by Gao Yan is an outline that concisely shows how sensory experiences constitute his travel impression:

I escaped for over twenty years and experienced the farthest countries in person. I traveled among rivers and mountains, living quietly among the water and grass. Every misery such as bitterly cold, scorching, starvation, and suffering, were put all upon me.

奔走二十年，身行至者四國。溪行山宿，水伏蒿潛，寒熱饑苦，集於一身。
("Gao Yan," 438)

By outlining cold and warmth, and a large-scale sense of climate, which is followed by the inner painful feelings such as hunger and suffering, the protagonist sets the tone of the journey, which is exhausting as well as uncomfortable.

The first impression is the uncomfortable climate in different regions. This is not an accurate measurement of temperature, humidity, or wind speed, but a comprehensive and general impression originating mainly from sensations on the skin. It is usually presented as the preliminary observation of a new space, with the term terrestrial *qi* (地氣 *dìqì*) used to introduce a region through the sequence of "climate-crop-harvest times" or "growing season-lifestyle." The northern land

is described as freezing cold and barren: "There were yellow sands spread all over ten thousand miles and no plants could grow: The terrestrial *qi* was severely frozen and grass could only burgeon after May" (黃沙千里，不生五穀。地氣大寒，五月草始生) ("Gao Yan," 436). In contrast, the terrestrial *qi* in Dashi Arabia was "extremely scorching and crops were reaped twice per year" (地氣大熱，稻歲再熟) ("Gao Yan," 437). Such a substantial description, which associates climate with agriculture, may stem from the intuitive interest in the region's natural environment from a person who comes from an agricultural civilization that values the land's productivity.

Interestingly, terrestrial *qi* could be simply explained as an environmental feature, but it is also an old term that had been applied in philosophical or political theories such as *The Book of Rites* (禮記 *Li ji*) and *Masters from Huainan* (淮南子 *Huainanzi*) since the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE) to determine the innate inferiority of foreigners. By claiming the environmental determinism through which the imbalanced *diqu* leads to the moral and physical inferiority of barbarians, which is inborn and uneducable, scholars proposed different foreign policies, such as delegitimizing Chinese rule over foreign lands in the Han-Tang period, and disempowering foreign rule during the Southern Song (Yang 2016, 390–412). Nevertheless, the link between the influence of the terrestrial *qi* and the innate essence of foreigners seems to be quite loose in "Gao Yan," as the text presents the above-mentioned sequence only to contour the natural environment of a region. "Gao Yan" frequently uses generic words such as "people" (人 *ren*) and "king" (王 *wang*) to refer to foreigners with different statuses, and traditional words for "barbarians," such as *man yi rong di* (蠻夷戎狄), are not used. The text tends to take the concept of the terrestrial *qi* to frame the foreign world, then supplements it with overall bodily impressions and known geographical information. Both "extremely cold" and "extremely scorching" are intense physiological feelings, which express not only the easily understandable information of temperature, but also the excess beyond normal range by the adverbs of degree. This emphasis on excess indicates the deviation from the conditions to which the traveler is accustomed, and greatly influences the habitability and the lifestyle in foreign lands, which is revealed in the subsequent change of focus from climate to land use. The perception of the climate reflects a surrounding world that is vastly different from the familiar Central Lands, i.e., the cold north is extremely uninhabitable, while the warm south presents exotic products and lifestyles that help people cope with the heat.

The second feature is the body odor of foreigners, an olfactory prejudice that associates this physical feature with cultural discrimination. Gao Yan particularly underscores the intolerable smell of his wife, who is a native of the northern land: "Although my wife is young, she reeks of a smell mixed with raw meats and goats. She is so smelly, greasy, and filthy that I could not bear to stay close to her" (妻年雖

少，腥羶垢膩，逆鼻不可近) ("Gao Yan," 436). Four bodily impressions are combined to emphasize the offensive smell of his wife, namely, "stink" (腥 *xing*), "gamy" (羶 *shan*), "filthy" (垢 *gou*), and "greasy" (膩 *ni*). Literally, *xing* means the stench of fish or blood, while *shan* indicates the odor of goats. Both of them refer to the stench of beasts and are attached here to the other two critical comments on terrible hygiene. Gao Yan's unpleasant experience not only originates from the bodily traits of his spouse, but also his impression of the nomadic lifestyle. As Classen has observed, olfactory symbolism often functions as an expression of otherness to classify or identify groups. At least in the West, foreigners, women, and nature are usually labeled as "others" by their odors, which represent not only "savagery" to "civilized" humans, but also contrast with the refreshing fragrance presented through what is regarded as "cultivated" or "controllable" (Classen 1992, 133–166). Since ancient China, body odor has also been stereotyped against foreigners by the Han Chinese, as expressed extensively in strange tales and traditional medicinal records. The study by Chen Yinke (1982, 140–142) also indicates that the modern term *huchou* (狐臭, "a fox-like body odor") implies a philological transformation from a specific reference to the strong armpit odor of foreigners to a general body odor of people, from the time of the increase in intermarriage between the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups.¹ Gao Yan's emphasis on the stench and filthiness of his wife also inherits this conventional disgusted expression of separating others by exaggerating the intolerable body odor of foreigners; this draws a line between the spouses.

Finally, the third feature is the visualized portrayal of foreigners. Although numerous stories have raised the foreigner issue in the Tang period, they mostly focus on male foreigners who visited the Central Lands such as monks, magicians, and merchants, rather than foreign natives. In terms of characterization, "Gao Yan" provides not only a group portrayal of foreigners with a certain exoticism, but also images of common folk in real life. This reflects the author's pragmatic interests, including how to make a living abroad, and different laws and lifestyles practiced in other lands, such as a legal system which is similar to the "an eye for an eye" code of justice. It describes how to mitigate the scorching heat by thickly coating houses with lime and channeling water over roofs to make waterfalls and a cool breeze ("Gao Yan," 437). It particularly highlights the brutality and belligerence of foreigners. For example, Gao Yan criticizes the folkways of Riqing through a series of unequivocal and aggressive judgmental words:

¹ This could be broadly regarded as a phenomenon in medieval China since the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties (220–589 CE), especially the Upheaval of Five Barbarians (304–316 CE) and the establishment of the Tang empire. The sources that Chen applies to observe the linguistic transformation are the medical records from the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) to the Song dynasty.

The people of Riqing are without any etiquette and are the meanest and filthiest people I have seen so far. People act violently and follow the rule of superior brutal force. Even women slaughter other people on every occasion. There is no legalized punishment. If someone is sentenced as guilty, the king destroys his or her home and occupies all property with other people.

無禮儀亂雜，最為惡穢。爭鬪好狠，婦女動即殺戮。無刑罰，犯罪，王與人共破其家而奪之。（“Gao Yan,” 437）

“Gao Yan” also displays a textual spectacle of the grotesque bodily traits of other races, from rumors heard during voyages, including the dwarf pygmies, a tree growing little children, and “The Land of Maidens.” These had captured the conventional imagination of foreigners since *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. The above-mentioned folkways and abnormal physical appearances of other races are presented in visualized descriptions to display a heterogeneous world outside the Central Lands.

Foreign women are the group that notably reflects the above-visualized portrayal of foreigners, showing different concerns from previous love affairs between male literati and women. The female characters in Chinese classical novels usually present certain desirable characteristics such as beauty, wealth, or divine power. Women in other realms, such as immortal lands, particularly hold a prestigious or transcendent social status as princesses, dragon ladies, immortals, or goddesses, who either fulfill the protagonist’s wishes or meet the criteria to be an ideal spouse. “Gao Yan” presents foreign women in two ways: one is the protagonist’s marriages with two foreign wives, who lack attractiveness but have a close interaction with Gao Yan; and the other is the exotic hearsay about “The Land of Maidens” which embodies a curious imagination about the other gender. Gao Yan’s first wife is a northern barbarian woman with an unbearable body stench; while the second is a local woman in Riqing who brutally tears her son apart. This description of his second wife is adapted from the motif of “island women” (海島婦人 *haidao furen*) which originated from Buddhist scriptures; this was expanded through further real-life experiences and outsider protagonists such as merchants or travelers during the Song period, to demonstrate the fearsome and unknown overseas world (Zhang 2016, 93–98). Gao Yan’s marriages are more like a random and dispensable means of life support, and a closer look at the folkways reveal certain undesirable features of foreigners.

“The Land of Maidens” is a matrilineal society situated on an isolated island, where women live independently from men by practicing an unusual method of reproduction. This self-sufficiency seems to abandon the regular constraints of class, and women conceive their pregnancy through a series of spontaneous actions without the collaboration of other people:

There are stones of infants and milk, the pond of birth, and the wall of expecting pregnancy. Women go there to swallow the stones, drink the water, and gaze at the wall. Soon they become pregnant and every newborn is without exception a baby girl.

有胎乳石，生池、望孕井，群女皆往焉。咽其石，飲其水，望其井，即有孕，生必女子。（“Gao Yan,” 437）

“The Land of Maidens” is a universal motif that embodies their location on the southern periphery of the known world, and imagines childbearing as a sympathetic ritual to resonate with Mother Nature instead of sexual intercourse (Wang 2008, 120–125). Despite the differing details, and the potential geographical locations such as Sulawesi, Yunnan, or Australia, most records of “The Land of Maidens” in Chinese literature feature primitive and highly repetitive images of a remote area, and portray the alien bodies of foreigners as similar to the feather people and large-eared people described in *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Lu 2005, 1–15). By criticizing the violent and savage behaviors of people that the traveler has intimately encountered, as well as displaying the abnormal physiological features of other races in mythic rumors, “Gao Yan” presents the overall strange impression of foreign women through different layers.

From the climatic differences felt through the skin to the unbearable body odors, and from the close observation of foreigners to the hearsay about strange races, the traveler’s body plays a fundamental role in gathering external information through various senses, thereby shaping their specific impression of foreign lands. Such an impression does not just stem from a biological reaction, but from the interaction of physical, social, and cultural factors that leads the traveler to focus on differences in etiquette and lifestyle, and thus express negative or maladaptive evaluations.

4. The body as a testimony of suffering to display worrying physiological signs and traumatic experiences

The bodily symptoms of travelers function eloquently to manifest not merely a growing sense of physiological disharmony, but also a critical, harsh moment in life. These symptoms also imply certain criteria that were regarded as “normal, healthy, and natural” by contemporary people, such as being able-bodied, having a glowing complexion, and a body with vital energy and blood. What happened to travelers could be thereby easily distinguished as an abnormality, and the cause was usually determined as maladjustment to an uncomfortable and unsafe foreign environment. The following section will focus on major physical symptoms in stories, to discuss the effects of foreign journeys on the body.

The first apparent physiological feeling is exhaustion due to the hardship of journeying across land and sea. Gao Yan's travel is far from a relaxing tour, but an arduous trudge as an escaping criminal; this can be observed through several repetitive words about moving hurriedly, such as "travel" (行 *xing*), "rush" (奔走 *benzou*), and "scurry" (奔竄 *bencuan*). Such weariness or uneasiness usually emphasizes the first-hand hardship of trudging found in the travel literature, with involuntary purposes such as exile, war, and diplomatic missions (Gong 2023, 232–234). Despite presenting various foreign spectacles, the journey of Gao Yan is caused by compulsion and intrinsically lacks a concrete destination. His aimless fatigue is not in the service of either a spiritual challenge or a religious quest as in previous stories, but he is simply stranded abroad due to being deprived of a legitimate social identity.

Second, the withered countenance (枯 *ku*) is a sign of an unhealthy physique in stories. This is a common Chinese medicinal concept, using the analogical system between plants and the human body to indicate an emaciated, dried-up, and gloomy appearance. While Gao Yan lived in the northern land, he had to work ceaselessly to secure the minimum requirements for survival in the barren land. One day, he was frightened by his "withered and dull" facial hue reflected through the water:

Day after day, I mowed grass in the sand with my foreign wife and dug out wild mice for the whole day. What was the meaning or pleasure of this kind of life exactly? When I saw myself through the water, I could not help but run away in fright. It looked as if a ghost appeared out of the water, whose expression is so withered and dull.

徒日逐胡婦刈沙草，掘野鼠，生奚為也！或臨野水自見其形，不覺驚走，為鬼出於水中，枯黑不類可知也。（“Gao Yan,” 436）

Both “withered” and “dull”—words used in this panic-stricken realization—are common warnings of malnutrition and poor blood circulation, based on the empirical summary of visual observation. Moreover, the text links these two facial signs with “ghost” to stress the scary and non-human-like appearance gained from struggling in an unlivable land. Kuriyama has illustrated the expressiveness of facial hue in the Chinese medicinal concept, which not only reflects bodily changes but also mirrors feelings and inclinations. Gazing at facial hue (望色 *wangse*) is a fundamental diagnostic method that first takes into account the color and luster of a face, and then utilizes botanical analogies to figuratively describe the metabolism of the body (Kuriyama 1995, 205–234). “Withered” exhibits a shrinking of one's vitality due to lack of nourishment and “dull” signposts one's unhealthy countenance. The dramatic shock from the transformation in his own appearance and the consequent self-evaluation as “ghost-like” implies the traveler's maladaptation to the foreign land.

A similar description of a “withered” body is documented in *Record*, which depicts a sea merchant family from Fuzhou drifting to the ghost island. The environment seems to be similar to the familiar Chinese society, but the residents not only “look bizarrely withered and haggard, but also poorly and indecently dressed” (形軀枯悴，生理窮窶) (*Record*, 1239). The sea merchant family later finds out that all these islanders are starving ghosts yearning for the random feasts of the dharma assembly. More worryingly, the health condition of this family is radically deteriorating due to living among ghosts and inhaling their breath (鬼氣 *guiqi*):

[The merchants] have lived in the ghost kingdom for several years. The reeking and vapping breath of ghosts was so unbearable that the father and the older brother died. The youngest son is the only survivor.

居數年，不堪鬼氣薰蒸，父兄皆死，唯幼子存。(*Record*, 1239)

This story also applies the withered appearance and the associated image of “ghosts” to present an unusual and tormented body, which tangibly manifests the negative influence caused by foreign environments. Moreover, it goes beyond a metaphorical expression as “ghost-like” and becomes a precondition of the otherworldly landscape. The breath of ghosts constitutes the vital characteristic of the foreign space and is specified with two terms, namely, “reek” (薰 *xun*), and “steam” (蒸 *zheng*), i.e., a moisturized warm air with an aggressive smell.

The *qi* presented in this story is neither an ambivalent airy element, nor an invisible internal feeling that stimulates emotional turbulence. Instead, the text attributes to the *qi* a material and perceptible form as an indigenous essence, so that people can distinguish its humidity, temperature, and smell. This pervasive harmful air permeates the land and creatures, while also functioning as an observable feature to indicate the inwardness of both the residents and space. Elizabeth Hsu has illustrated the bodily ecology functioned by *qi* (氣) and *xing* (形) by examining several early Chinese medicinal texts. The condition and the equilibrium of *qi* are manifested through the various visible outward forms, which shelter the inner flowing *qi* and resonate with the natural environment, including wind and the four seasons (Hsu 2009, 103–124). Such a warm and dangerous atmosphere also reminds readers of the notorious miasma (瘴 *zhang*), a prevalent endemic disease in tropical and subtropical areas as understood by northern literati; it symbolizes fear, anxiety, and foreignness, but is possibly curable with appropriate healing (Yang 2010, 163–192). When travelers visit this land by mistake, they are forced to experience a slow soaking and all-pervasive deterioration. Although the reeking and vapping air from all around them corrupts the travelers’ bodies, after leaving the ghost land to receive appropriate nursing it is still possible to make a full recovery. The complexion of the surviving son changes then tangibly from withered to rosy glowing, a sign of sufficient

vitality and blood circulation, described as “the gradual recovery of a normal, human-like complexion” (漸復人色) (*Record*, 1239).

In contrast to the reversible complexion, scars or severed limbs indicate the most traumatic and indelible experience inscribed on travelers’ bodies. In “Gao Yan,” the traveler does not experience violence in person during the journey, but witnesses fighting and slaughter among foreigners as a bystander. However, the reason of his traveling stems from extreme violence, as he had stabbed a friend to death out of rage. Gao Yan is not essentially a victim, but a fugitive perpetrator who has committed a homicide.

There is an extensive description of torture and ferocious conflicts in *Record*. A story notes that a sea merchant living in Mingzhou is captured and enslaved by local islanders after the shipwreck. Whenever islanders hold a banquet, they use red-hot iron chopsticks to scald his thighs and watch him crying as public entertainment. The text depicts the visual shock of legs full of scars and scabs in the end by using oracle bones as the main image; an ancient Chinese tool that manifests prophecies by observing crisscrossing cracks caused by burning tortoise shells or animal bones:

The merchant was trapped on the island for three years and finally got a chance to escape by hitchhiking a ship. [It is witnessed that] His burned thighs looked as if they were tortoise oracles.

凡留三年，得便舟脫歸，兩股皆如龜卜。(Record, 86)

In a series of stories about giants, the injured body also functions as eye-catching evidence of adventures. The stories usually involve a group of sea merchants who have lost their way after storms, and struggle to escape by fighting with giants living on unknown islands. One story mentions, for example, that a giant pierces a merchant’s shoulder with a colossal finger and binds him to a tree to cook him alive. The merchant “desperately endures the pain” (忍痛極力) and successfully escapes by chopping off the giant’s finger, which is as huge as a wooden or steel rafter to support roofs (*Record*, 249–250). Another tale describes a group of seamen hastily breaking free of a raging giant by chopping his arm off with sharp axes, and preserving it with salt as a trophy:

The amputated limb of the giant was over five feet long. The seamen salted it, bringing it back for display to other people.

臂長過五尺，舟中人涖之以鹽，攜歸示人。(Record, 416)

Although the description of the feelings of the sufferers is limited to sketching the intensity of pain and the variety of injuries, pain and violence are widely represented in these fictional journeys to dramatize the unknown and danger of faraway lands. The scars inscribed on travelers’ bodies, the bloody limbs left

in battles, and the prevalent but inexpressible pain, form the climactic moment of such represented travels through various sensational and horrendous bodily images. The end of these conflicts often highlights a body which cannot be restored to health. As the wounded body stops bleeding and is thickly covered by new tissue over time, the closed but permanent physical mark also symbolizes the completion of the journey and the irreversible bodily transformation.

The above-mentioned bodily signs are not a simple change of appearance, but are linked to internal organs, mentality, and external influences. From one's complexion to the scarred body, the corporal representation is predominantly a visualized portrayal that reveals observable criteria. Both travelers with exhausted and injured bodies, and the foreign landscape presented through various sensory impressions, indicate the body's key role in shaping and conveying a rare experience—such as traveling to foreign lands—that usually lacks a familiar context and relies instead on concrete descriptions of personal perceptions. The bodily experience of travelers thus establishes a connection between individuals and other people, thus facilitating the imagination of foreign realms and empathy toward travel events.

5. The consciousness of the Central Lands: the core of shaping travel experiences?

The body is the natural and intuitive organism for presenting travelers' experiences, as it blends with environmental stimuli and physiological reactions. As shown by the previous discussion, these foreign travels are apparently neither pleasant nor safe. This begs the question: what underlying factors shape such consistent opinions on traveling among foreign lands? The final exclamation by Gao Yan provides some clues:

I was lucky to survive and to re-experience the cultural atmosphere of the Central Lands. During this journey, my heart was illuminated out of self-awareness. I could revisit not only the cities and chariots but also the relics of previous sages. I could enjoy wearing fine silk clothes, and tasting cuisines again. If someone spits on my face, clutches my throat, or beats my back, I would bend my head to tolerate such disgrace and not dare to hurt people anymore.

以逃死，幸得餘息，復見華風。間心自明，再遊都輦，復觀先子丘壠。身再衣幣帛，口重味甘鮮。有人唾吾面，扼吾喉，拊吾背，吾且俛首受辱，焉敢復賊害人命乎！（“Gao Yan,” 438）

By contrasting two types of actions, Gao Yan enthusiastically expresses his joy at returning to the motherland. The first is the comfortable and highly developed

lifestyle of the Central Lands, including sightseeing, tasting cuisine, wearing fine silk clothes, and revisiting the conventional legacies built by Confucius's masters. The second is various physical humiliations such as spitting, clutching, beating, and bending his head to beg for a chance to stay in the homeland. Similar declarations also appear in his complaints about life in the North: "At that time, I yearned to be a dog living in the Central Lands, but this dream never came true" (吾是時思欲為中國之犬，莫可得也); "I pondered that I would live in the Central Lands just for a single day, rather than living in such a place for a thousand years" (吾自思：此活千百年，不若中國之生一日也) ("Gao Yan," 436). To stay in the homeland, Gao Yan would rather disgrace himself by tolerating rude transgressions of physical boundaries. His return involves performing a series of cultural activities with a body that is now re-immersed in familiar social norms, to express his recognition of the social norms and etiquette of the Central Lands.

It is worth noting that *Zhongguo* (中國) or *Hua* (華), the term that refers to the Central Lands, appears several times in "Gao Yan" and may reveal multifaceted meanings. First, the Central Lands inherit the cognition of the cosmological and political center; at the same time, the term refers to a political entity, a state that is differentiated from its neighbors. This conventional term is often mentioned or listed together with other kingdoms in "Gao Yan." The traveler's interest in pragmatic matters, from natural resources to law systems, also echoes the pragmatic awareness of political boundaries that have gradually arisen through frequent interactions with foreign kingdoms. The Song imperial court had long-term military disputes with Khitan in the north, but it also created economic prosperity through overseas trade in the south with Sanfoqi (三佛齊, i.e., the Srivijaya empire), Champa, and the Arabsphere. Such multistate complexity, as well as the flourishing foreign Muslim community in Guangzhou and Quanzhou, show the multi-dimensional significance of international affairs from the ninth to fourteen centuries. This was an enduring phenomenon, spanning from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period to the Song dynasty and the Mongol Yuan period.

Secondly, the self-image of the traveler based on living in the Central Lands leads to a sense of orthodoxy that is based on the traditional cultivation of the scholar. There is no specific explanation for the philosophical root of "Gao Yan." Nevertheless, through the theme and the applied language, it is clear that the bodily engagement of "Gao Yan" is neither Taoist transcendence nor Buddhist abstinence, but is more akin to the Confucianism practiced by ordinary literati. For example, it utilizes the form of historiography, stressing the cultural activities, and mentions repetitively the expectation of "the Central Lands," the "gentle scholar" (士君子 *shi junzi*), and "the manifestation of righteousness" (明道 *ming dao*). Moreover, the Confucian context of "Gao Yan" is also presented in its realistic tendency and the contrast between the "normal" Central Lands and the "abnormal" kingdoms that surround them. "Gao

Yan" embeds suspicious or surreal information through opening phrases such as, "I heard from someone" (聞 *wen*) to distinguish between hearsay and first-hand experience. What happened in foreign lands is usually regarded as excessive and abnormal by Gao Yan, in contrast to his life in the Central Lands. The word *zhong* (中) not only means "center," but also implies a set of cultural principles, including moderation (中庸 *zhongyong*), achieving balance (中和 *zhonghe*), or the right way (中正 *zhongzheng*). In the story these concepts foreshadow a warning sign that the traveler's life in foreign lands is, both geographically and culturally, a destined deviation from elite cultivation.

Considering the basic self-discipline and opinions on travel of an ordinary Chinese scholar may help us understand a story such as "Gao Yan," which presents obvious value judgments and perceptions. These include cherishing the body that is received by one's parents and represents the outset of self-cultivation, and the discouragement of long-distance travel without a concrete destination. For example, "While your parents are alive, you should not go too far afield in tour travels. If you do, your whereabouts should always be known" (父母在, 不遠遊。遊必有方), as stated in *The Analects of Confucius* (論語 *Lunyu*, 1979, translated by Lau, 54–55); and "Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them" (身體髮膚, 受之父母, 不敢毀傷), as specified in *The Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經 *Xiao jing*, 1879, translated by Legge, 466). By contrast, the travel motivation and wandering experience of Gao Yan are a violation of classic Confucian principles. Interestingly, Gao Yan's physiological state is closely linked to his mentality. He is so withered and weary during his guilty exile that he barely recognizes himself. When he is pardoned and can return to live openly in the Central Lands, he finally regains comfort and harmony.

Moreover, the emphasis on moral-cultural superiority and drawing boundaries between the self and others is not an isolated case, but may resonate with the prevalent Sino-barbarian dichotomy (華夷之辨 *hua yi zhi bian*), which highlights how the moral and cultural discrepancy results in an irreconcilable separation. International politics, with the Central Lands surrounded by powerful neighboring states, challenged the imagined world order in the Song dynasty (see, e.g., Rossabi 1983; Ge 2011). Although it is still under discussion whether the Song period can be contextualized as witnessing a burgeoning of "nationalism," and how "ethnicized orthodoxy" transformed into "ethnicized moralism" (Yang 2019),² it is undeniable

² Yang proposed the reinterpretation of Sino-barbarian dichotomy by examining the works of Guwen (古文) scholars and *Daoxue* (道學) philosophers, including Han Yu (韓愈), Shi Je (石介), Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修), and Liu Chang (劉敞). Yang also illustrated the gradual formation of "Chineseness" based on morality and culture, which mainly appeal to the self-practice of Chinese elites, while not excluding or re-educating other ethnic groups (Yang 2019, 74–97).

that many Song scholars attempted to discover the origin of their anxiety and self-doubt about being marginalized and challenged by other powerful states. Many signs of political debates and philosophical trends in the Song dynasty have shown that “the resistance to foreign civilizations is most commonly manifested in the elaboration and overrated exaggeration of the inherent culture” (Ge 2011, 47, 59). This chapter does not intend to further discuss the conceptual transformation and knowledge formation of “the Central Lands” or *Tianxia* (天下, “all under heaven”), but proposes that these shifting concepts may shape the fundamental order of “Gao Yan” and other stories depicting overseas events. Paying attention to their applied language and allusions—in other words, how they elaborate known sources to frame a story—may be helpful in contextualizing those texts which seem to be overly obsessed with knowledge. Depicting the overseas experience is neither a cliché nor a superficial entertainment born from curiosity; rather, it consciously fabricates a series of comparisons between “the Central Lands” and “the other lands” to reveal a common concern among intellectuals in a specific period.

It is not uncommon to find depictions of exoticism and even xenophobia in premodern Chinese fiction, and some of the stories express a distinctive eeriness by depicting unusual body experiences. By analyzing “Hu Daoqia” (胡道洽) and “Shirenjia” (士人甲), the two strange tales in *Stories of Darkness and Brightness* (幽明錄 *Youminglu*) (ca. 420–479 CE), Xie Mingxun (2003) elucidates the anxious social atmosphere regarding foreigners’ invasion, as revealed in the novel’s motif of “changing into a barbarian” (化胡 *hua hu*). Whether by vilifying a foreign physician as a wild fox, or by presenting a dramatic embarrassment by forcefully replacing a reborn scholar’s feet with the ugly hairy feet of a foreigner, both stories exhibit critical hostility mixed with teasing, and vigilance toward foreigners through parodying, or by combining animal-like physical forms with such characteristics as stench and hairiness (Xie 2003, 45–69). Instead of imagining the transformed body parts of a foreigner, “Gao Yan” presents a comprehensive depiction of, and comparison with surrounding lands. It also applies authentic bodily perceptions and convincing knowledge as building blocks to elaborate the world-making, which consists in neither a single landscape nor a stable center decorated with faraway peripheries, but rather a dynamic travel route presented through large-scale mobility. The travelers’ movements and transportation, and their feelings and reactions to foreign spaces, inject fresh and perceptible information to form a sharp contrast between the overseas and domestic worlds. Similar phenomena related to alertly defending and distinguishing the Chinese identity are also revealed in the emerging system of colloquial novel during the Song Dynasty, especially the historical topic of “Three Kingdoms” (三國 *sanguo*), which emphasized Han-Chinese orthodoxy (Ge 2011, 61). Together, these cases indicate that the cultural psychology regarding foreign culture has always been a minor

but enduring issue in Chinese fictional writing, developing different concerns and schemes with the times.

It should not be forgotten that the travel motivation of Gao Yan is to evade justice by escaping abroad. He is a murderer who has neither a choice nor a place in the Central Lands—until the new emperor's amnesty. This overseas journey can be paraphrased as the bitter result of leaving the homeland. Every land he visits reveals various deficiencies or excesses, and every foreigner he meets presents more or less certain moral deficiency, including brutality, voracity, and lack of proper education. Gao Yan himself belongs to the ranks of immorality, but is fortunate enough to restore his identity through the rare mercy shown by the celestial son. All the detailed travel and sensory experiences are summarized as a restated reprimand of the Confucius scholar's teaching, which is clearly illustrated by the commentator:

Gao Yan is self-conceited and proud of his talents, killing someone while acting on impulse out of drunkenness. He fled to the ghost land, where was bitterly cold and nobody lived there. He struggled, barely searching grass and water to survive, even hunting mice for food. How could he still regard himself as human in such a living condition? It is a great blessing that he has survived the wandering and avoids the death penalty, such a chance to reclaim his humanity is only one in ten thousand. If scholars and gentlemen read this story, they should keep it in mind as a precept.

恃其才，卒以凶酗而殺人害命，其竄服鬼方，苦寒無人境，求草水之一飲，捕鼠而食，安敢比於人哉？得生還以為大幸，偶脫伏屍東市，復齒人倫，亦萬之一二也。士君子觀之，以為戒焉。（“Gao Yan,” 439）

This comment discloses the main theme of moral teaching in the story. That is, the wandering across foreign lands should be regarded as a vivid punishment for the impertinent and guilty traveler. In the commentator's view, Gao Yan is almost degraded as “non-human” since he commits a murder, and either the death penalty or straying outside the Central Lands is the unavoidable punishment, until the rare pardon. “Gao Yan” mainly emphasizes the necessity of self-discipline to avoid painful wandering, rather than the unknown danger represented by faraway lands and peoples, which is manifested through the traveler's heartfelt expression based on concrete perceptions and experiences. According to the traveler's statement, traveling in faraway lands is an accumulation of agony, whilst returning is always a godsent blessing.

6. Conclusion

This chapter focused on the text of “Gao Yan” to discover how bodily experiences constitute the representation of overseas journeys and the potential concerns they express. Such overlooked fictional journeys should not be regarded as isolated cases, but as one of the interwoven links between the expansion of long-distance travel and the established culture, expressed in the languages of the body and the Other. Different from the supernatural motifs usually associated with immortal lands, stories such as “Gao Yan” depict the extraterritorial world and travel routes in a more realistic way, to present a worldview blended with textual sources and geographic knowledge. There is also a shift in perspective from the transcendental encounter of the scholar’s romance to a suffering Chinese male traveler’s perception of living in foreign lands, by presenting a group portrait of foreigners with various customs and physical features—especially the image of foreign women. Apart from seeking novelty, bodily experiences play an essential role in these short stories of overseas travels, which transform the foreign lands into an understandable order based on Confucius’s orthodoxy. As a result, a body constantly influenced by travel makes what happens in foreign lands more concretely perceptible. Meanwhile, a body cultivated by a specific social and cultural norm also constitutes an organic device to perceive and interact with a strange environment. Such descriptions can be placed in the broader context of how Chinese intellectuals constitute their identity and their relationship with neighboring states and foreigners, as well as how fictional writers express this concern through deliberate fabrication. “Gao Yan” elaborates on concerns about morals and the world order based on Sino-centrism by depicting the different sensory perceptions of the physical and mental imbalance due to wandering in foreign lands, and the harmony experienced after returning to the Central Lands. Through examining a representative imaginary journey in the Song period, this chapter attempted to expand the analysis by combining the body concept and travel culture to interpret how fictional works embody sensory details and overseas experiences.

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PART IV

BODIES, GENDER, AND IDENTITIES IN VISUAL ART AND CINEMA

ARCHAEOLOGY AND ONMYŌDŌ: HUMAN-SHAPED RITUAL OBJECTS ASSOCIATED WITH PURIFICATION RITES AND CURSES

Marianna Lázár

This chapter examines human-shaped effigies (*hitogata*) and a unique type of ritual pottery characterized by human faces (*jinmen bokusho doki*) from ancient Japan in the context of *Onmyōdō*, a tradition of blending elements from Daoism, esoteric Buddhism, and Shintō. *Hitogata* were used in purification and exorcism rituals by ritualists, acting as symbolic surrogates to absorb and remove defilements, thus restoring harmony. Based on specific archaeological finds, historical records, classical literature, and secondary sources, the study explores their origin, characteristics, and function in both state and private rituals. Additionally, *jinmen doki* are examined for their role in roadside rituals and spirit pacification, connecting the living with the spiritual realm. The research investigates their iconography, distribution, and ritual use, reflecting continental cosmological beliefs and *Onmyōdō* practices. By exploring the similarities and differences between these objects, the paper demonstrates their significance in ancient ritual practices, many of which were conducted by *onmyōji* practitioners.

Keywords: *Onmyōdō*, *onmyōji*, human-shaped effigies (*hitogata*), ritual pottery (*jinmen doki*), purification rites, curses

1. Introduction

Onmyōdō is a traditional Japanese esoteric cosmology that originated from a blend of Daoist, Esoteric Buddhist, the native Shintō tradition,¹ and folk beliefs.

¹ As the indigenous “religion” of Japan, Shintō can be understood as a multifaceted assembly of beliefs, practices, attitudes, and institutions that express the Japanese people’s relationship with nature, their ancestors, and their lifecycles. Numerous deities (神 *kami*), including natural forces and clan ancestors, were worshiped in ancient Japan. The oldest type of Shintō

Starting from around the 6th century, many ancient Chinese practices, and beliefs formed the basis of what we now recognize as *Onmyōdō*. This became deeply interwoven with Japanese culture and spirituality, fully establishing itself around the 10th century as an elaborate system of divination and ritual practices centered around the concepts of *yin-yang* (陰陽)² and *wuxing* (五行, “Five Phases”),³ serving as a guiding force in both the personal and political-ritual spheres of ancient Japan. Practitioners, known as *onmyōji* (陰陽師, “*yin-yang* experts”), were responsible for performing various rituals aimed at ensuring harmony between humans and the spiritual forces of nature. The ancient Japanese imperial court frequently employed *onmyōji*, among other religious practitioners, to perform rituals for protection against epidemics, natural disasters, and political turmoil.

In this chapter, after giving a brief introduction on the development of religious practices in ancient Japan, highlighting the intense contact with Korean kingdoms and Tang China, I explore the question of what connection can be drawn between ancient Japanese purification rites, exorcism, cursing rituals, and *Onmyōdō* rites. I examine ritual *hitogata* (人形, “human-shaped figurines”) and *jinmen bokusho doki* (人面墨書土器, “ink-painted pottery with human face,” hereafter as *jinmen doki*) from the Asuka (538–710), Nara (710–794), and Heian (794–1185) periods, focusing on the origin, characteristics, function, distribution, and possible usage of these ritual objects, using an interdisciplinary approach. I will explain how they were used as a medium for transferring one’s impurity, to pacify an angry spirit, to heal an ill person, to curse someone, or to protect someone from a curse. I also discuss the extent to which these objects were related to certain ancient rituals and beliefs of *Onmyōdō*.

My research is based on specific archaeological finds, excavation reports, historical records, law books, liturgical sources, classical literature, and provincial gazetteers from the Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods, as well as secondary sources. *Kojiki* (古事記, *Records of Ancient Matters*, 712), *Nihon shoki* (日本書記, *The*

ceremonies that could be called religious were dedicated to agriculture and kami worship, and always emphasized ritual purity by cleaning practices. The concept of purification (祓 *harae*) in Japan has deep roots in old Shintō beliefs.

² *Yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) define the universe as the interaction of polar opposite but complementary forces. *Yin* is the female, cold, dark, passive power, while *yang* represents masculinity, light, and warmth. The interplay of the two forces makes up *chi* (氣, or 氣 *ki* in Japanese), the material principle governing the universe (Inada 2003, 42–43).

³ *Wuxing* explains the interactions and relationships created in phenomena that consist of fire, water, wood, metal, and earth and lead to life, death, change, and rebirth. It was combined with the *yin-yang* theory during the Spring and Autumn period (approx. 770 to 481 BCE) in China and was developed during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) into a comprehensive and logical view of the cosmos called *yin-yang wuxing* (陰陽五行), which could be applied to every field of human society (Inada 2003, 68–77).

Chronicles of Japan, 720), and *Shoku nihongi* (続日本紀, *The Continued Chronicles of Japan*, 797) are not only reliable historical records of the rise and decline of Japan's new *ritsuryō* (律令)⁴ order that regulated imperial rites, but they are also a major source of information on epidemics in early Japan. Because of their detailed provisions, *Taihō ritsuryō* (大宝律令, *Taihō Code*, 701),⁵ its revised version *Yōrō ritsuryō* (養老律令, *Yōrō Code*, 757), and *Engi shiki* (延喜式, *Regulations and Laws of the Engi Era*, 927), a compendium of rules and procedures for implementing penal codes, administrative codes, and supplementary laws, are valuable sources concerning all matters related to aristocratic government, such as imperial rules and regulations concerning regular annual ceremonies, and their ritual implements used between the 8th and 10th century.

The majority of the secondary sources I consulted offer an introduction and analysis of *ritsuryō* rituals of ancient Japan and early *Onmyōdō* practices until the end of the Heian period, including early *Onmyōdō* divinatory techniques, developing and declining *ritsuryō* religious practices, linkages between ecology and religious institutions, and ritual objects (e.g., Kaneko 1988; Shinkawa 1999; Como 2009, 2012; Farris 2009; Hosoi 2020). Ritual pottery decorated with ink writings and specific designs are extensively dealt with in Hirakawa's (2000) monograph, in which the author expressed his view that some of these objects, excavated from the remains of ancient villages, and their motifs or inscriptions could be associated with early *Onmyōdō* beliefs. During the last two decades, a number of studies, such as Yamaguchi (2000) and Minami (2005), published in the journal *Mokkan kenkyū* (木簡研究, *Research on Wooden Tablets*) have analyzed *hitogata* effigies and inscribed wooden tablets recovered from ancient capital sites. *Hitogata* and their malevolent purposes were also examined by Mizuno (1982) and Helfenbein (2017). Inscribed clay pots or wooden tablets (with or without a human face), as well as their possible connection with different continental and Japanese religious practices, such as syncretic *Onmyōdō* rituals, were exhaustively studied by Masuo (1996), Onizuka (1996), and Monta (2011).

Furthermore, numerous archaeological research reports have been published in Japan in the last 40 years, documenting *hitogata* and *jinmen doki* finds in detail. In this chapter, by examining the data from both older and recent excavation reports, archaeological news, and the characteristics of wooden tablets and ritual pottery housed at prestigious Japanese museums (e.g., The Niigata Prefectural

⁴ The *ritsuryō* system refers to the governmental structure and operation defined by *ritsu* (律), the criminal code, and *ryō* (令), the administrative and civil codes, of 8th century Japan.

⁵ It was the first officially promulgated set of legal codes at the end of the Asuka period which contained both penal and administrative laws. It was modeled after the civil and penal codes of the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907) and contained new provisions for the priesthood of local cults and practices.

Museum of History, Kyōto City Archaeological Museum) and research institutes (e.g., Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties), I introduce the similarities and differences of the most representative finds and discuss the extent to which *hitogata* and *jinmen doki* were related to certain syncretic rituals and beliefs of *Onmyōdō*.

2. The development of religious practices in ancient Japan

Since the beginning of the Asuka period (538–710), when Buddhism and Confucianism were introduced to Japan from China, a stream of continental ideas and values began to weave its way into Japanese society. During this period, the first Japanese state, Yamato, was transformed into a centralized, strictly organized *ritsuryō* state based on the Chinese Tang model, and actively assimilated legal, administrative, and social systems, as well as culture from China. From the middle of the 6th century, early Buddhism in Japan developed a complicated fusion with Chinese cosmological traditions, such as the combined *yin-yang wuxing* system, Daoist thought, and indigenous Shintō beliefs, resulting in a combinatory system between the foreign astral deities, buddhas, and the native *kami* that grew out of their cultic interactions and their mutual transformations.

Many cultural and religious influences during the Asuka period originated in China but were adapted in the Korean kingdoms of Baekje or Goguryeo before reaching Japan. We know from the detailed entries in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki* chronicles that Korean and Chinese monks, craftsmen, physicians, and scholars who arrived in Japan in the 6th and 7th century helped accelerate the diffusion of continental political, cultural, and religious norms as service groups and immigrant lineages (Kurano and Takeda 1971; Sakamoto 1994). Moreover, imperial Japanese envoys who visited Tang China, came back to Japan with Chinese cultural knowledge, and introduced new religious traditions and cultural elements of the Tang period. Continental cults, deities, and cosmological elements were never clearly separated from either Shintō cults for local deities or esoteric Buddhist tradition. They can only be detected in ancient ritual practices, material evidence, official documents, and narratives (Kaneko 1988, 199; Masuo 1996, 78).

Especially between the late 7th century and the early 8th century, during the reigns of Tenmu (天武天皇, r. 673–686), Jitō (持統天皇, r. 686–697), and Monmu (文武天皇, r. 697–707), the Chinese festival calendar, divinatory techniques, Daoist elements, and the *yin-yang wuxing* cosmological concept had a significant influence on the state-building and emerging syncretic religious culture of the Japanese imperial court. The early Japanese court employed various strategies to legitimate the emperor or empress, including many that linked royal virtue to divinity, purity, health, and long life. Tenmu was the first Japanese emperor who claimed to be

the heir of the sun goddess Amaterasu, making him the descendant and representative of one of the most important deities of the Shintō pantheon, which also meant that the emperor's laws are laws of a "living god." By trying to monopolize a scientific system of knowledge, such as a variety of folk beliefs under the general rubric of Daoism, calendrical, medical, and divinatory science, as well as the *yin-yang wuxing* system and astronomy, Tenmu set in motion a grandiose project, adapting foreign practices to suit the court's social and political circumstances. He believed that this complex, systematized knowledge—gained from Buddhist monks and scholars of Korea—would be helpful in state-building, divination, and performing rituals to display the meaning of his divine rule, setting himself apart from former rulers. In other words, he actively utilized religion, philosophy, and scientific knowledge from China to justify his position as a supreme ruler of Japan (Ooms 2009).

From the late 7th century, state ceremonies had to be conducted meticulously according to the *Taihō ritsuryō* and *Yōrō ritsuryō*. Formal annual court events, such as the *Ōharae* (大祓, "Ceremony of Great Purification") rite, the *Michiae no Matsuri* (道饗祭, "Rite of Roadside Offerings") rite, or the *Chinkonsai* (鎮魂祭, "Festival to Appease the Spirit") rite, became part of the administrative calendar of the Japanese government (Ooms 2009).

People living in ancient times on the Japanese islands feared supernatural powers and attributed misfortune, illness, and disasters to impurities, pollution and defilements, angry supernatural entities, and even curses of malicious people. With the introduction of Buddhism during the Asuka period, additional layers of interpretation were added to the understanding of pollution and disease. Buddhist teachings framed suffering, including illness, as the result of karmic retribution or cosmic imbalance, further reinforcing the need for ritual acts of purification to restore health. Calamities were also interpreted as "disturbances" in the *yin-yang wuxing* system. For example, Emperor Tenmu's reign in the Asuka period was marked by natural disasters and prolonged dry periods which often made the emperor seek the support of supernatural powers through rituals in an attempt to appease dangerous supernatural entities,⁶ restore the balance of the *yin-yang*, and put an end to these calamities.

Officials called *onmyōji* began to appear around the late 7th century, after the *Onmyōryō* (陰陽寮, "Bureau of Yin-Yang") was established during the reign of Tenmu. The bureau oversaw divination,⁷ observation of the sky (astrology),

⁶ In ancient Japan, the line between angry spirits, dislocated or disease-bearing *kami*, demons, and ghosts were never clearly drawn, but all dangerous supernatural entities were in need of pacification and propitiation (Como 2012, 46).

⁷ When an accident or strange incident occurred at a public institution, such as a government office, shrine, or temple, they would use their skills to determine the significance of that

calendar-making, and timekeeping. Early *onmyōji* diviners were Korean or Chinese learned monks, who were forced to abandon their status and to return to the secular world to enter the administration as officials, since the *Sōniryō* (僧尼令, “Monastic Rule for Monks and Nuns”) of 701 forbade Buddhist monks from performing divination.

Established in the early 8th century, the government office *Jingikan* (神祇官, “Department of Divinities”) also included diviners and ritual specialists and managed a wide range of activities. It oversaw Shintō-related affairs at court, provincial shrines, state-sponsored purification rites, as well as coordinating the ritual practices in the provinces with those in the capital. *Jingikan* employed ritualists from Japanese and immigrant aristocratic kin groups, such as the Nakatomi, Mononobe, and Fumi clans (Como 2009, 92–94).

3. Purification rituals and *Onmyōdō* rites in ancient Japan

Continental rites of purification and exorcism constituted a major force in the development of the religious traditions of ancient Japan. Protective ceremonies were held regularly in Yamato Japan from the late 7th century at the corners of imperial palaces, capitals,⁸ the most prestigious Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples, crossroads, along main highways (leading from Kyūshū to the Yamato plain), and at locations along rivers and ditches in provincial headquarters.

The practice of purification, exorcism, healing, and cursing involved the use of ritual objects, such as human-shaped effigies, wooden tablets with incantations, inscribed pottery often decorated with human faces, model ovens, small skewers, and figurines of horses, cows, and chickens. These ritual objects worked according to Chinese conceptions of spirits and the logic of transference and ritual body substitution. *Migawari* (身代わり, “body substitution”) with material surrogates was considered an important way to safely communicate with the divine (Kaneko 1988; Como 2009, 33).

Archaeological finds of the above-mentioned ritual objects are gradually revealing how ritual procedures spread from the capital to the provinces, closely following the example of *ritsuryō* institutions of the center. Moreover, as Como (2012, 48) has noted, they highlight the degree to which urbanization and construction

event for the realm. In ancient Japan, *onmyōji* and esoteric Buddhist priests used *rikujin* (六壬) divination, a type of board divination that was most commonly used from the 8th until the 16th century and was modeled on methods practiced during the Chinese Sui (581–618) and Tang dynasties (Trenson 2012, 108–110).

⁸ The most notable capitals of the Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods were the Asuka capital (飛鳥京, 672–694), the Fujiwara capital (藤原京, 694–710), the Heijō capital (平城京, 710–740, 745–784), the Naniwa capital (難波京, 744–745), the Nagaoka capital (長岡京, 784–794), and the Heian capital (平安京, 794–1180).

technologies from the late Asuka period required the participation of diviners and ritualists familiar with continental practices for pacifying spirits and manipulating the balance of *yin-yang* in each location.

Although traditionally, court-sponsored purification rituals were performed by ritualists and immigrant diviners of the *Jingikan*, from the Nara period, Buddhist monks, *onmyōji*, and other kinds of practitioners regardless of their ethnic backgrounds could also achieve the same role, using their special knowledge and skills (Ooms 2015, 54–55). If there were disturbances in the *yin-yang wuxing* system, or, in other words, any crises in the Japanese islands, *onmyōji* would have been called to restore the balance of *yin-yang* by performing purification rituals with special spells, movements, and ritual objects. Moreover, from the late 8th century, new elements of esoteric Buddhist astrological and divinatory practices also influenced *Onmyōdō* and its rituals (Monta 2011, 6).

Onmyōji were allowed to perform different court-sponsored purification ceremonies from the Nara period, such as the *Ōharae* rite and the *Michiae no Matsuri*. The *Ōharae* rite was designated by the *Taihō ritsuryō* as a twice-yearly state ceremony from 703, but it was first introduced to the nation in 676 by Emperor Tenmu, referred to as *Daikaijo* (大解除, “Great Exorcism”). It was conducted by the sea at Naniwa. Nara and Heian period *Ōharae* rites were also performed on special occasions at various administrative levels, when it was requested by the emperor or empress, such as when moving to a new imperial palace, before important state ceremonies, or after epidemics or natural disasters. From the 8th century, two separate rituals were performed during *Ōharae* at the imperial court. A *kami*-related one was conducted by a Nakatomi ritualist, and a Chinese, Daoist-influenced one, was performed by immigrant diviners or ritualists (Ooms 2009, 56). According to the rules of *Taihō ritsuryō* and a passage from Book 1 of *Engi shiki*, during the first court ritual, princes and high officials in the capital gathered in front of the Suzakumon gate,⁹ and a Nakatomi ritualist read a prayer, so evil was cast out from the realm. A full liturgy is provided in Book 8 of *Engi shiki*, where the Daoist-influenced part of the *Ōharae* ritual is called *Yamato Kawachi no Fumibe no Harai* (東西文部祓, “Purification Rite of the Fumibe from Yamato and Kawachi”). This rite was performed specifically at important shrines for court and nation on the last days of the 6th and 12th lunar months of the year. It was a ritual in which diviners from the Fumi clans of Yamato and Kawachi provinces offered *hitogata* effigies and a ritual sword, then chanted a liturgical text in Chinese (Bock 1970, 88–89). The liturgy is particularly notable for its strong connection to foreign spirit pacification rituals, which are based on

⁹ Suzakumon (朱雀門) was the main gate at the center of the south end of the outer enclosure that surrounded the imperial palace compound at Heijō and Heian capitals. It was named after the Guardian of the South (朱雀, “Vermilion Bird”), one of the four mythical guardians in East Asian cosmology.

Chinese astrological and calendrical concepts, such as the Queen Mother of the West. Moreover, it refers to Japan as to a mythical location far east of China, a Daoist paradise inhabited by flying immortals (Como 2009, 94).

Another popular purification ritual was the *Michiae no Matsuri*. Although being a regular part of the court's ritual calendar in the capital, it was also held against infectious diseases, demons, and malevolent deities along the main highways of Yamato. *Michiae no Matsuri*, like the *Ōharae* rite, was performed on the final days of the 6th and 12th months of the year. During the ceremony, supernatural entities were offered a substitute body, given food offerings and animal hides of cows and boars, and admonished not to return (Como 2009, 30). The first mention in historical records of this ritual presumably conducted by *onmyōji* as envoys from the capital is from the *Shoku nihongi*. It records an account of the rite in the 7th year of Tenpyō (735), providing insight into the state's response to a smallpox outbreak which was one of the most significant epidemics during the Nara period. It originated in Dazaifu, Kyūshū, later spread to the capital, and devastated the population of Japan. In response to this crisis, measures were taken by the government to save the lives of the people through medical and spiritual treatment. These included offering rites to the deities within the jurisdiction of Dazaifu, conducting sutra recitations at temples, distributing food and medicine, and issuing directives to perform the *Michiae no Matsuri* purification rite in various provinces from Nagato Province eastward (Aoki et al. 1990, 293).

Since epidemics in the Nara and Heian period spread quickly along major transportation corridors and crossroads leading to the capital,¹⁰ it is not surprising that purification rites, such as the *Michiae no Matsuri*, came to occupy such an important position among 8th century court rituals. Due to a variety of factors, however, this ceremony gradually disappeared during the mid-Heian period.

Throughout the Heian period, widespread concern over pollution and disease stimulated the emergence of new ritual forms and divinatory practices aimed at the prevention and removal of a variety of crises. From the 9th century, new ritual forms incorporating more esoteric Buddhist and *Onmyōdō* elements emerged, and ritual implements underwent a transformation (e.g., reduction in quantity, lack of standardization). Historical sources and narratives attest that the imperial court pursued multiple ritual strategies: from the production of effigies and talismans offered by *onmyōji* to elaborate Buddhist ceremonies with sutra recitation, a multiplicity of procedures catered to the needs of all levels of Japanese society.

¹⁰ Since travelers and construction workers were easy targets for robbers and prone to starvation, large numbers of corpses are believed to have littered the roads and rivers of early Japan. Moreover, the close association between crossroads and spirit pacification was almost certainly related to the belief that demons traveled along the roadways of the land (Como 2009, 33, 47).

During this period, *Onmyōdō* spread through private *onmyōji* beyond the confines of *ritsuryō* state institutions in the Heian capital, and aristocrats started consulting *onmyōji* privately for managing the affairs of their daily lives, such as determining and prescribing taboos, exorcism, recovery from illness, and even cursing (Shigeta 2012, 68–69; Yamashita and Elacqua 2012, 81–83). From the late 10th, early 11th century, *onmyōji* could compose new, or reuse old prayers of popular purification rites, and could formally perform purification and protection spells against curses in various headquarters of the country. Popular purification ceremonies, such as the *Ōharae* ritual, the *Michiae no Matsuri* rite, and other private rituals of *onmyōji*, started to show more diversity in the countryside and in provincial capitals (The Niigata Prefectural Museum of History 2020, 40–41).

4. *Hitogata*: human shaped effigies of ancient Japan

From about the 7th century, the practice of purification and cursing involved, among others, the use of *hitogata* figures. In addition to the native customs,¹¹ the origin of human-shaped effigies used in *ritsuryō* rituals can also be traced back to ancient China. Human-shaped wooden tablets unearthed from Mawangdui tombs (馬王堆漢墓) in Hunan province indicate that remarkably similar effigies already existed during the western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) (Minami 2005, 2).

Hitogata that were created between the Asuka and Heian periods in Japan have the physical features of either a man or a woman. They are made of flat or thick material with cuts made on the left and right to represent the head, shoulders, arms, legs, etc. In ancient times they were made of silver, wood, rice straw, or miscanthus reeds. The intentional selection of specific types of wood for use in purification rituals can be traced back to ancient China, where supernatural powers were attributed to certain types of wood. From the Nara period, the wood material for making *hitogata* was usually *hinoki* (檜, “cypress”),¹² *momo* (桃, “peach”),¹³ or *sugi* (杉, “Japanese cedar”). For wooden dolls, a thin or thick board was typically cut or carved to express a certain body type, and a face was drawn in black ink

¹¹ Japanese people inhabiting some of Japan’s main islands in the middle Yayoi period (approx. from the 10th century BCE to the middle of the 3rd century CE) seem to have used carved, doll-like wooden figures in rituals, especially in the Kinki region. In the Kofun period, terracotta clay figures arranged on and around the mounded tombs of the Japanese elite were made as funerary objects.

¹² Revered for centuries for its beautiful, durable wood, and the fragrant essential oils, its use as construction wood is attested in the *Kojiki* chronicle. It has been used in Shintō ceremonies and purification rituals since ancient times, to build shrines and temples, and to construct fragrant tubs for bathing.

¹³ Peaches were claimed to ward off evil spirits in China. In the *Kojiki*, creator deity Izanagi no Mikoto successfully repels his ogres pursuers by throwing three peaches at them.

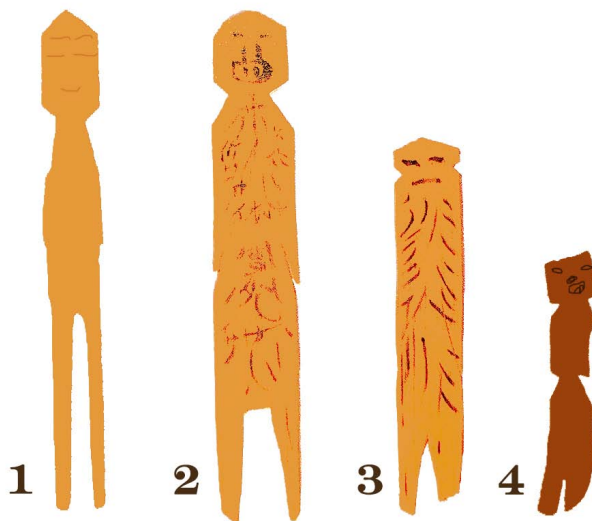


Figure 1: Thin plates of wooden hitogata effigies from Heijō Capital and Heijō Palace sites
(7–8th century, housed at Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Nara)
(1) 24.5 cm, (2) 15.5 cm, (3) 11.5 cm, (4) 8 cm

(Source: *Digital illustration made by the author based on photos taken by Zsófia Imai at the special exhibition History of Shintō Purification at Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, May 20–July 9, 2023*)

to copy a person's facial features. Smaller body parts could be made separately of wood or paper. Rarely, some *hitogata* were carved out to show a man's face and neck only, with specific facial features drawn in black ink. Among the *hitogata* figures excavated to date, there is a wide variety of facial expressions, ranging from simple engravings or drawings to bizarre demon-like faces. In a few cases, names are also written on the body of the human-shaped item. Effigies with particularly frightening faces might portray an angry *kami* (Kaneko 1988, 199). *Hitogata* figures that we know of range in length from 5 to 119 centimeters, but the average size is about 17–18 centimeters.

Depending on their purpose, these items could be cast into water, burned, cut, or a person could also hit a nail into the figure. *Hitogata* were used in three ways. They were used at court-sponsored purification ceremonies (such as *Ōharae* rite) as a simple substitute figure. In this case, impurities and sins of the aristocrats were transferred to the carved effigy by blowing their breath to the figurine or touching it, then a prayer was chanted, after which *hitogata* were cast into a body of water to float away.

They also served as a substitute figure into which demons, angry spirits, or the epidemic deity (疫病神 *yakubyōgami*) move during religious ceremonies, such as

roadside rites or private rituals of purification and healing. The *hitogata* did not represent the disease-bearing or an angry spirit itself, but rather temporarily incorporated the defilement that had been transferred onto it. While a ritualist recited prayers, demons and mischievous deities were offered a substitute human body, given food or other offerings, and admonished not to return (Como 2009, 33).

A *hitogata* could also function as a substitute for a certain person, for whom a fatal curse (魘魅 or 厭魅 *enmi*) was offered. This is a unique function of the effigies, because curses are not the result of divine anger, but a choice of mortal humans. The earliest record of cursing practices in Japan exists in the *Nihon shoki* from the year 587, however, the record is not specific regarding the exact methods used (Sakamoto 1994). Within the *Yōrō ritsuryō*, the sections *Zokutōritsu* (賊盜律, “Penal Laws of Theft”) and *Myōreiritsu* (名例律, “Terminology of Precedents and Laws”) define cursed *hitogata* in the following way: the hands and feet of the figurine would be bound, the chest and the eyes would be stabbed through with angular nails (Mizuno 1982, 43). By the end of the Heian period, the use of cursed figurines became so favored that prayers against fatal curses were included in imperial ceremonies and private *onmyōji* rituals as well.

In the case of cursing practices, *hitogata* seem to have been used as a singular piece in the Nara and Heian period, usually with a name written on them (e.g., the name of officials, nobility, or members of the imperial court). However, when conducting exorcism or healing, *hitogata* were combined (e.g., using two or four figures), and the malevolent deity’s name was written on the pieces (Kaneko 1988, 199–200). It should be pointed out here, that by this time, the native *kotodama* (言霊, “word spirit”) concept, a belief that mystical powers dwell in words and names, already existed in Japan. Written characters were also believed to have a supernatural power in Chinese Daoism and Buddhism: *fulu* (符籙, “talismanic script”)¹⁴ and written *mantra*¹⁵ or *dharani*¹⁶ were used as part of exorcistic and healing rituals. Especially within the Chinese-influenced ritual context, the identification of the cursed Japanese person by name was important to gain control over them.

In 729, Emperor Shōmu (聖武天皇, r. 724–749) banned the use of *hitogata* for curses and introduced laws to punish those accused of performing maledictions with them. The *Shoku nihongi* recorded several crimes of curses after the practice had become a criminal offence, proven by several archaeological finds from the Nara period. Despite the prohibition, the tendency to put a curse on someone

¹⁴ *Fulu* is the term used for Daoist incantations and magic symbols written or painted as talisman by Daoist practitioners.

¹⁵ *Mantra* is a sacred utterance, a sound, a syllable, a word, or group of words believed by practitioners to have religious, magical, or spiritual powers.

¹⁶ *Dharani* are protective Buddhist chants, mnemonic codes, incantations, or recitations.

did not diminish in the old capitals. In the Heian-period narrative tale *Shōmonki* (將門記, “Record of Masakado’s Life,” 940s), we can read about how the central government ordered the making of a *hitogata* to curse Taira no Masakado (平將門, 903–940), the samurai leader of the first recorded uprising against the Heian court. The wooden figure, which had the physical features of Masakado, was placed under an *onmyōji*’s divining board during the ritual, while presumably performing magical steps (反閉 *henbai*) with the effect of subduing evil spirits and awakening vital forces (The Niigata Prefectural Museum of History 2020, 37).

Ritsuryō rituals involving *hitogata* seemed to have been fairly standardized by the 8th century, and by the 9th century, the ritual system no longer appeared to be regulated. From about this period, *hitogata* were presented to the court by an *onmyōji* each month for the performance of a purification rite called *Nanase no Harae* (七瀬祓, “Purification of the Seven Brooks”). During this rite, the emperor would first breathe onto seven *hitogata* on an auspicious day, then stroke the objects. Heian aristocrats or an *onmyōji* would then take the paper figures to seven waterways and float them away, removing defilement from the emperor and court (Lomi 2014, 277–278).

One of the first mentions of *hitogata* used at roadside rites for spirit pacification is from the *Hizen no Kuni no fudoki* (肥前国風土記, “Gazetteer of Hizen Province”) that documents a tale from a time before the introduction of the *ritsuryō* system (Akimoto 1958).¹⁷ Legend has it that there was an angry deity in the upper reaches of the Saka River in Kyūshū that allowed half of the travelers to live but killed the other half. Ōarata, an ancestor of the leader of Saka region at the time, carried out a divination, and learnt that there were two female chiefs from clans that did not show allegiance to the ruler of Japan, but as priestesses, they advised Ōarata to extract clay from the village of Shimota and create human-shaped and horse-shaped effigies, and if Ōarata offered them to the malevolent deity, it would be appeased. When Ōarata followed the instructions, the deity was pacified (Akimoto 1958, 392). *Hitogata* was supposed to be a substitute body and an offering created from the soil of the village where the angry deity resided. The narrative clearly shows connections to continental rites of spirit pacification, but also suggests that local practitioners already had some kind of understanding of those practices before the introduction of the *ritsuryō* system. Spirit pacification rituals were acknowledged religious practices for rural clans of Kyūshū and they involved religious practitioners of local folk beliefs.

¹⁷ *Fudoki* manuscripts are ancient records on culture, folklore, geography, and oral tradition concerning the old provinces of Japan. The gazetteers’ compilation was ordered by Empress Genmei in the Nara period. One of the most substantial ones which have survived is the *Hizen no Kuni no fudoki*, containing historical, cultural, and geographical records about the Hizen province, which was located in the area of present-day Saga and Nagasaki prefectures.

An illustrated book called *Juso hendōkō daiji* (呪詛遍道功大事, “Encyclopedia of Curses and Pilgrimages”)¹⁸ from the 16th century explains how to break free from curses with *hitogata*. In one example, instructions are written as follows: after making paper dolls with magic spells and the lattice shaped 井 symbol, one should chant these spells and keep praying to the river stream, then throw the dolls into the river so the curse one received will be returned to the person who put it on them. This source also mentions that *kuji* (九字) practices are an important part of the purification ritual, especially when *hitogata* figures or other magical items are used at the same time (The Niigata Prefectural Museum of History 2020, 76).

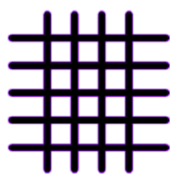


Figure 2: The *kuji* symbol

(Source: An illustration made by the author)

The 井 symbol is an abbreviation of the *kuji* symbol which has five horizontal and four vertical lines (see Figure 2). The original *kuji* symbol is first introduced in *Baopuzi* (抱朴子, “The Master Who Embraces Simplicity”), a Chinese Daoist text, as a protection spell against misfortune. There are five *yang* syllables and four *yin* syllables in the spell. How the *kuji* arrived in Japan in the late Nara or early Heian period is still a matter of debate, however, the early *kuji* chant was probably a simple prayer, then mutual influences of *Onmyōdō* and esoteric Buddhism helped this practice develop into a new Japanese system, with many variations. Magical symbols were created for expressing the practice in a simple form, such as the 井 symbol. Since the late Heian period, this system can be found extensively not only in *Onmyōdō* and esoteric Buddhist materials, but also in *Shugendō* (修験道, “Way of Shugen Practice”)¹⁹ and *Ryōbu Shintō* (両部神道, “dual Shintō”)²⁰ (The Niigata Prefectural Museum of History 2020, 76).

¹⁸ This book is in the collection of Tōno City Museum (遠野市立博物館) in Iwate Prefecture. The author and the compilation date are unknown.

¹⁹ *Shugendō* is the name given to a Japanese religious tradition based on ancient Japanese mountain cults, which took shape at the end of the Heian period under the influence of esoteric Buddhism, Daoism, and old Shintō beliefs.

²⁰ *Ryōbu Shintō* is a form of Shintō that took in elements of esoteric Buddhist practice from the Shingon sect (真言宗).

The distribution range of these items extends from the Akita Castle site (秋田城跡) in the north to the Dazaifu site (大宰府) in the south, encompassing over 100 locations, mainly crossroads, highway areas, and riverside locations of old capital sites and provincial headquarters of the Asuka, Nara, and Heian periods. Most effigies used for harming a person were discovered only in old capital sites or in their agglomeration, indicating that their use could be related to the imperial court. The earliest discovered cursed *hitogata* was recovered from a well of the Heijō capital site and has the name “Sakabe □ken” (坂部□建)²¹ written on either side of the torso. It is a male figurine which was made of Japanese cypress. Both the chest and the eyes of the effigy are pierced through with angular wooden nails. The position of the wooden nails corresponds to the descriptions of cursed effigies in two sections of the *Yōrō ritsuryō* (Mizuno 1982, 33, 43).

In contrast, the wooden figurine found in Nara at the eastern main canal of Heijō Palace is unmistakable evidence for the use of healing figurines in the 8th century. This eleven-centimeter *hitogata* dated to the first half of the 8th century and bore several ink marks around an eye. The writing on its back says, “the left eye became ill on this day” (左目病作□今日□) (Helfenbein 2017, 19). During another discovery from the Nara period, more than two hundred wooden *hitogata* were excavated just outside Mibu Gate (壬生門) leading into Heijō Palace, lying in a ditch along Nijō Avenue (二条大路). Yet another eight *hinoki* pieces were found at the same Heijō capital site, along the Horikawa Canal. Three of them are nearly one meter tall (Nara Kokuritsu Bunkazai Kenkyūjo 1983, 22–24). Considering the placement of these examples, archaeological data suggests that these figurines might have been used by an *onmyōji* during the *Michiae no Matsuri* rite in the latter part of the Nara period.

Archaeological finds from the Heian period in Kyōto also reveal the characteristics and highlight the function of *hitogata* used from about the 9th century. Many recovered figurines seem to have been cursed objects. For instance, a pair of *hitogata* were excavated in 2004 from a well of the Ukyō district of the Heian capital, presumably representing court nobles from the 9th century. The smaller figure (height 16.5 cm, width 2.5 cm, depth 1.5 cm) resembles a woman with her hair styled into a bun called *zujō ikkei* (頭上一髻).²² Its nose, mouth, eyes, eyebrows, and nipples are carved and painted. The bigger doll (height 23 cm, width 4 cm, depth 2.5 cm) resembles a nobility with both a mustache and a beard, sporting an *ebōshi* (烏帽子, “crow cap”)²³ on his head. A hole is carved out from his stomach.

²¹ The symbol □ is used in this chapter for the parts that cannot be deciphered.

²² It was a popular formal hairstyle for Japanese noble women from the Nara period, influenced by Chinese court fashion.

²³ A type of black-lacquered court cap worn only by men of a particular social status, originating during the Heian period.

The hands of both dolls are tied behind their backs, and on their chests, there are names written in two vertical lines in black ink. The bigger doll bears the name Fujii Fukumaro (葛井福万呂) on the left side of the chest; the other figure's inscription says Hinokuma Ako (檜前阿古) (Kyōtoshi Maizō Bunkazai Kenkyūjo 2004, 10–11). Fujii Fukumaro might have been the descendant of immigrants who settled in Kawachi province: several members of this family lived and worked in Ukyō district as lower-class officials.



Figure 3: Cursed male figure excavated from the Ukyō district of the Heian capital site (wood, early Heian period, housed at Kyōto City Archaeological Museum)

(Source: Digital illustration made by the author based on reports of Kyōto City Archaeological Museum)

Wooden figures also keep becoming known throughout the countryside, places that might have been district headquarters of ancient Japan. The *hitogata* (height 17 cm, width 3.7 cm, depth 0.3 cm) excavated from the Iba site (伊場遺跡) in Shizuoka prefecture is from the Nara period and bore the name Wakayamatobe no Kotojime (若倭部小刀自女), complete with some other characters suggesting her illness. It appears to be an effigy that prayed for Kotojime's recovery (Hamamatsushi Shimin Bunkazaika 2019, 15). Another peculiar looking pair of *hitogata* was found at the Kadoya site (角谷遺跡) in present-day Fukui prefecture, among other typical Nara-period ritual objects (Mikatachō Kyōiku Iinkai 1991). One piece has an oval head and thick body carved out of a 20.7 cm long wood stick; its legs are relatively thin

and pointed. Slightly below the neck, there is a hole on the body carved through the side. This hole could indicate that originally, arms were attached to the body as early as in the 8th century. The other figurine is an even bigger 21.6 cm long wood stick with a head carved on both ends, and the eyes, nose, and mouth also carved. On the head, an *ebōshi*-like simple carving suggests to us that this person was a nobility. Based on the much simpler carving style and facial features of these figures, they seem to have been made earlier than the 9th century pieces from the Heian capital site (Fukuiken 1993).

It should also be noted that several collections of wooden charm tablets (呪符木簡 *jufu mokkan*) were often excavated together with similar looking wooden *hitogata* figurines (Masuo 1996, 78). The oldest dated item (length 21.6 cm, width 3.9 cm) is from the 7th century and was excavated from Kuwazu site (桑津遺跡) in Ōsaka (Masuo 1996, 80). *Jufu mokkan* from the late Heian period have standardized expressions and symbols, while *hitogata*, in contrast, lacked standardization in this period. Although these inscribed tablets were usually not figurative items, they were used in purification rituals as talismans created by *onmyōji* or Buddhist monks. Spells and auspicious characters were drawn on them in a similar way to how they were on Chinese Daoist talismans. Expressions or auspicious characters, such as the pentagram (五芒星 *gobōsei*)²⁴ or the abbreviated *kuji* symbol, can also be found on inscribed ritual pottery recovered from the same excavation sites, however, to my knowledge, no *hitogata* figure with a pentagram or *kuji* symbol has been discovered yet (Monta 2011, 8).

5. *Jinmen doki*: ritual pottery decorated with a human face in ancient Japan

Jinmen doki, that is, reddish-brown, or grayish orange pottery²⁵ decorated with human faces painted on their exterior surfaces with black ink were also important objects linked to epidemics and purification. First, the study of *jinmen doki*, however, needs to be situated within the context of research on inscribed ritual pottery of ancient Japan. Hirakawa (2000) has noted that the practice of inscribing motifs or characters on ritual pottery is believed to have originated in ancient China, then

²⁴ The pentagram is presumably a representation of the ever-changing material forces of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water (*wuxing*) and originates in East Asia as a symbol of the supernatural world (Monta 2011, 6). In Japan, the symbol was also the seal of Heian-era *onmyōji* Abe no Seimei (安倍晴明, 921–1005).

²⁵ Evolved from earlier pottery traditions, haji ware (土師器 *hajiki*) is a type of unglazed pottery that was produced in Japan from the Kofun period (around 3rd to 7th centuries AD) until the Heian period. It was fired at relatively low temperatures, and was made for everyday and ritual purposes as well.

it was incorporated to the early ceremonies of the *ritsuryō* state, with its earliest appearance dating to the mid-7th century in the Fujiwara capital. In China, from at least the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE), pottery scripts and oracle bone inscriptions were used as written elements of divination on topics, such as illness and death, sacrifices, agricultural forecasts, and war, consulted with the deities. Moreover, with ritual pottery utensils, the living could make offerings to the angry spirits in order to appease them. The inscribed ritual pottery of ancient Japan also had major ritualistic significance. Among these decorated objects, *jinmen doki* is considered to have played a central role in the healing and purification rituals until the end of the 10th century.

These vessels were produced using local coarse clay and hand-built or wheel-thrown techniques, depending on the period and region. The faces are often schematic and stylized, exhibiting regional variations in style. The brush strokes vary widely, from the very skilled to the poor, childish doodling. Expressions are usually humorous, sad, or ghastly in appearance, but there are also examples in which the face is not entirely drawn, but rather a symbol of a beard, nose, oblique lines, or ripples are painted on the surface. Eyes are typically almond-shaped or simple slits, sometimes outlined in bold strokes. The mouth is depicted with simple horizontal lines, sometimes with slight curves to suggest expression. Eyebrows are usually included as additional details. The human faces were sometimes accompanied by inscriptions and motifs. From the late Nara period, the inscriptions became more elaborate, sometimes including prayers, invocations, or references to auspicious motifs and syncretic Shintō, Buddhist or Onmyōdō deities.

The face(s) could represent a deity or a person who is sick or “impure.” They are typically painted on the center or upper part of the vessel, either near the rim or on the body. The number of faces on one vessel ranges from one to as many as eight, but two are the most common. These items were mostly used in multiples, not as a single unit. They are between about 8 and 30 centimeters in height and each of them have different shapes, inscriptions, and decorations (Kaneko 1988, 204).

Although there is a great deal of debate about the native origin of *jinmen doki* in general, Kaneko (1988) has suggested that *jinmen doki* might have an early artistic connection with half-realistic caricatures (戯画 *giga*) painted in ink on different surfaces by carpenters in the late Asuka and Nara period. Some of the earliest and most renowned caricatures were drawn on the wooden ceiling of the Main Hall of Hōryūji temple (7th century), and on the lotus pedestals of the wooden statues of Brahma and Indra deities in the Main Hall of Tōshōdaiji temple (8th century). According to local Buddhist traditions, these humorous pictures of men are thought to be representations intended to ward off evil spirits (Kaneko 1988, 204). Based on written records and archaeological data, the proto-*jinmen doki* presumably appeared in the Fujiwara capital in the late 7th century and, at first, they

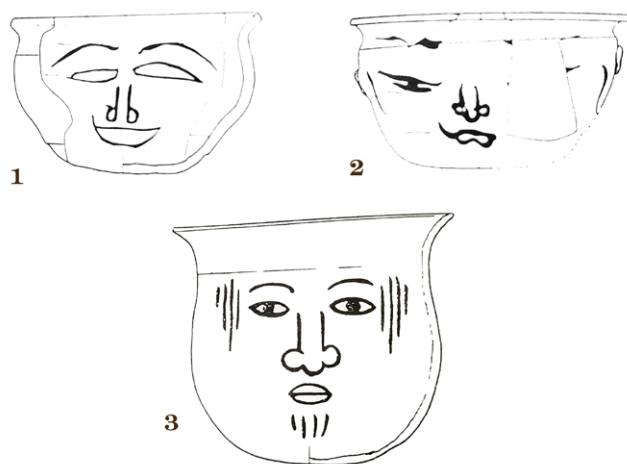


Figure 4: *Jinmen doki* from Heijō capital site in Nara (1, 2) and Mizue site in Saga (3) (Nara period, in the collection of Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)

(Source: Digital illustration made by the author based on figures of Kaneko (1988, 96, 101–102))

were used only for preparing food offerings at western and southern locations. The standard version of *jinmen doki* appeared in the early 8th century. This was a *ritsuryō* ritual implement in which diseases or impurities were transferred, sealed, and washed away along with the breath of the sick person. It could also be broken at the conclusion of the ceremony, symbolizing the destruction of the impurities (Kaneko 1988, 204). By the late 8th century, an advanced type of earthenware was established and not only spread throughout the entire capital, but also to outer provinces as well, with a pressed mold on the bottom and traces of rolled clay cord on the outside, as archaeological findings seem to confirm. They were presumably produced by dedicated craft workshops in different provinces (Onizuka 1996, 29).

The function of the most advanced *jinmen doki* has been recorded in the Heian period liturgical sources as well. In Book 1 of the *Engi shiki*, for example, there is a passage (四時祭大祓条, “Great Purification Rite of the Festivals of the Seasons”) about the offering of two *jinmen doki* in a purification rite in 927 (Bock 1970). *Seikyūki* (西宮記, “Record of Court Practices”), an exemplary book on Heian rituals, reports that Emperor Murakami blew his breath three times onto this crucible (Kaneko 1988, 204). Additionally, *Majinai chōhōki* (呪詛重宝記, “Manual of Magical Rites,” compiled by Kikuya Kihei in the 18th century) describes an early, possibly Heian-period ritual, where the number of hungry spirits is determined according to the Chinese zodiac sign of a long-term patient. For each hungry spirit, a paper

talisman with a demon is drawn by an *onmyōji*, placed alongside a *hitogata* figure, and accompanied by the same number of rice cakes. During the ritual, the talismans and rice cakes are placed in an inscribed earthenware vessel—possibly a *jinmen doki*—and carried away by the river (Onizuka 1996, 20).

More than 2,500 pieces of *jinmen doki* have been excavated in the Japanese islands in the last 40 years, mostly from beds of streams, drainage ditches, sewers, wells, or ruins of rural houses. Broken pieces were mostly found in Nara and Kyōto prefectures in old capital sites, Akita, Iwate, and Niigata prefectures, and a few in the Kantō region and Kyūshū area as well. The earliest examples of *jinmen doki* were recovered from Fujiwara capital sites. 8th century artifacts were distributed across various Heijō capital sites, including the Maekawa site (前川遺跡) and Kujō Avenue (九条大路) area in the south, the Suzaku Avenue (朱雀大路), and by the end of the Nara period, the roadside ditches on the eastern side of the Heijō Palace (平城宮). In the Heian capital, findings have been detected in the areas surrounding the Eastern and Western Markets (東市・西市), close to main avenues (Onizuka 1996, 23–28).

Based on recent excavations in ancient capital sites, it is evident that *jinmen doki* and *hitogata* figurines do not necessarily accompany each other at the same time and location. For instance, no *jinmen doki* have been found within the Fujiwara Palace area in the Fujiwara capital and in the Nijō Avenue area of Heijō capital close to the Imperial Palace, in contrast to the many *hitogata* figurines found in the same areas in the Asuka and early Nara periods. Additionally, only a small number of inscribed potteries have been discovered so far around the ruins of Naniwa palace in Ōsaka. However, excavation at the Hieda site (稗田遺跡)²⁶ of the Heijō capital from the late Nara period has yielded about 100 items, mainly *jinmen doki* and *hitogata* figurines (Onizuka 1996, 28). Archaeological data suggest that *jinmen doki* are observed together with *hitogata* from the mid-8th century onward. The incorporation of standard *jinmen doki* into *ritsuryō* rites in the capitals most probably occurred later than that of human-shaped figurines.

In eastern Japan, during the excavation of the Shōzaku site (庄作遺跡) in Chiba prefecture, 123 pieces of *jinmen doki*, dated to the Nara and Heian periods, were unearthed, and most of them contained short ink-painted inscriptions. The contents of such inscriptions are diverse, including the names of persons or deities, simple words suggesting *kami* worship, and motifs indicating syncretic Shintō, esoteric Buddhist, and *Onmyōdō* beliefs (Monta 2011, 6). Judging by characters and symbols, such as 火 (*hi*, “fire”), 竈神 (*kamadogami*, “hearth deity”), the pentagram, or the *kuji* symbol, inscribed *jinmen doki* from this site were presumably used to offer food to the hearth deity among commoners to avoid misfortune. It is

²⁶ Hieda was a local purification river in which the inhabitants of the Heijō capital floated objects downstream to ward off illnesses and calamities.

important to note that the god of earth in early *Onmyōdō* belief, Dokujin (土公神), was also worshiped as the hearth deity in rural areas of eastern and north-eastern Japan from the Heian period. The deity was believed to move from one place to another around the estate depending on the season. If any digging or construction was made during the season when it was dwelling in a specific area of the home, there had to be special rites to appease the deity beforehand. If the deity were appeased, it would bring good fortune and health to the family. Presumably, the clay pots offered to the hearth deity were made from the same soil where the house itself was located (Yokohamashi Rekishi Hakubutsukan 2012).

Based on archaeological records, it can be concluded that there were three kinds of symbolism in religious services connected with *jinmen doki*: (1) to keep the plague, sickness, or other impurities away, (2) to be used in a purification ritual, and (3) to appease the *kami* by offering food to them on special occasions, while at the same time, being a mediator between the local *kami*'s world and the human world.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of ancient Japanese religious practices, particularly in the context of *Onmyōdō*, while highlighting the significant roles of *hitogata* effigies and *jinmen doki* vessels. The investigation began by situating the development of these practices within the historical background of Japan's interaction with Korean kingdoms and Tang China. This cultural exchange highly influenced the Japanese religious landscape at the time, incorporating elements of Daoism, Buddhism, and Shintō into the native folk practices, ultimately forming the basis for *Onmyōdō*.

The key contribution of this study is the comparison between *hitogata* effigies and *jinmen doki* vessels in terms of their characteristics, distribution, functions, and roles. Both reveal the ritualistic efforts to interact with spiritual forces, whether in personal purification of the ruler of Japan or the broader scope of protecting communities, such as the imperial court, the capital, or rural provinces. The examination highlights how *hitogata* served as symbolic surrogates for individuals, facilitating the transference of defilements, while *jinmen doki* probably functioned as both surrogates for spirit pacification purposes and as mediators between the living realm and the local deity's supernatural realm, especially in the context of appeasing the hearth deity in rural areas of ancient Japan. Since ritual pottery is made by firing the very clay that comes from the land where the hearth deity lives, *jinmen doki* vessels can also play a kind of mediating role, with the same aim at spirit pacification.

Furthermore, the study delves into *Onmyōdō*'s complex symbolism, focusing on Chinese chants, Daoist talismans, and the *kuji* and pentagram symbols utilized for spirit pacification and protection. Notably, while *hitogata* effigies did not bear the *kuji* and pentagram symbols, other ritual objects excavated from the same locations, like *jufu mokkan* tablets and *jinmen doki*, did. The absence of these symbols on *hitogata* suggests that their power derived not from Daoist or Buddhist symbols but rather from the written incantations on them and from the ritual actions performed by an *onmyōji*, emphasizing the effigies' role as direct surrogates for the individuals they represented.

In sum, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the symbolic and ritualistic dimensions of *hitogata* effigies and *jinmen doki* vessels. It underscores their importance in the broader religious and cultural practices of ancient Japan, illustrating how *Onmyōdō* integrated diverse continental ritual elements into a developing Japanese spiritual system. This interdisciplinary examination contributes to our understanding of the complex interplay between material culture and esoteric ritual practices of ancient Japan.

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THE SHINY BODY OF THE GOOD SOLDIER: IDENTITY AND THE CORPOREAL IN SHEN JINGDONG'S ART

Giorgio Strafella

Like several other young Chinese artists between the mid-1980s and the early 2000s, Shen Jingdong experimented with conceptual and performance art before achieving critical and commercial success with paintings and sculptures. In Shen's paintings since the early 2000s, the bodies of people and animals turn into shiny, smooth, and bright-colored "characters" inhabiting empty spaces. In recent portraits by Shen, the smooth surface of these bodies and faces is often damaged by wounds and violence—both represented in painting and physically enacted on the canvas. This chapter examines Shen Jingdong's early conceptual and performance works in relation to the origins and transformations of his portrait paintings. Drawing also on Sinophone art criticism, intellectual history, and interviews with the artist in his studio, this chapter argues that Shen's early conceptual and performance art not only prefigured the language and iconography of his portraits, but also introduced two key themes that underpin them, i.e., the transmutation of the body and the issue of personal identity. As a result, the fragile and increasingly tortured bodies of Shen's characters come to represent extensions and evocations of the artist's avant-gardist experimentation. This study contributes in this way to our understanding of Shen's art while shedding light on the legacy of post-Mao avant-gardist trends in contemporary Chinese art.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese art, performance art, simulacra, soldiers, Songzhuang

1. Introduction

Several Chinese artists who experimented with performance art between the 1980s and the early 2000s later established themselves on the scene of contemporary

Chinese art through less ephemeral artistic languages. For instance, Geng Jianyi (耿建翌, 1962–2017) and Zhang Peili (张培力, b. 1957)—before becoming well-known for their paintings and video artworks respectively—together realized the performance artwork *Wrapping: King and Queen* (包扎—国王与王后, 1986) in Hangzhou by tightly wrapping their bodies with newspapers and ropes and remaining bound in this state for about one hour. Earlier that year, Ding Yi (丁乙, b. 1962) had joined Qin Yifeng (秦一峰, b. 1961) and Zhang Guoliang (张国梁, b. 1963) for a performance artwork entitled, *Fabric Sculptures* (布雕, 1986), in which they cloaked their bodies in yellow fabric in public places; today Ding Yi and Qin Yifeng are well-known for their abstract paintings. Wu Shanzhuan (吴山专, b. 1960) also adopted the language of performance art before becoming known for paintings and installations that explore the post-socialist intersections of politics and business by focusing on the written language. Wu reflected on the everyday reality of commerce and consumption in such early examples of performance art in China as *The Action with Big Yes and Big No* (大是大非行为, 1985) and *Big Business* (大生意, 1989), among other works.

It will come as no surprise that artists who have dedicated their career to re-inventing the boundaries of artistic practice from an avant-gardist perspective were also among the first in China to adopt the language of performance art, which RoseLee Goldberg (2009, 7) described as an “execution” of conceptual art. Most studies dedicated to these artists, however, overlook the connection between their performance and conceptual art projects and their more “collectable” artistic production.¹ This chapter will explore this connection with respect to the art of Shen Jingdong (沈敬东, b. 1965), an artist whose paintings since circa 2006 are integral to artistic research that started with conceptual and performance art that revolved around the issues of identity and the corporeal.

In its exploration of Shen Jingdong's art, this chapter puts forward three main arguments. First, it elaborates on the above-mentioned connection between Shen's early works of conceptual and performance art and the approach to the corporeal displayed in his paintings. Second, this chapter argues that Shen's paintings engage with key topics in the Chinese intellectual and cultural discourse by addressing the issue of social identity and the corporeal and their complex evolution in post-reform China. Finally, the chapter employs Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum to interpret the transformation undergone by the human body in Shen's portraits. It suggests that Shen's paintings of porcelain (self-)portraits constitutes a second-order simulacra through which the artist distances himself and the audience from the suffering and violence of corporeal reality. Through a discussion of these points, this chapter aims to make a two-fold contribution to the study of intellectual and artistic life in contemporary China. It demonstrates

¹ Exceptions to this include, e.g., Cacchione (2017) on Zhang Peili.

how a closer look at experimentation with performance art by Chinese artists can shed new light on their more recent and “traditional” (or, commercially viable) work. Moreover, it demonstrates the advantages of collocating Chinese visual art in relation to the intellectual and cultural trends of their epoch—especially when we take into account relevant texts from contemporaneous Sinophone art criticism and wider intellectual discourse.



Figure 1: Shen Jingdong, *Hero Series No. 2*, oil on canvas, 2006

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

A distinctive feature of most of Shen Jingdong’s paintings since the early 2000s is the portrayal of shiny, bright-colored, rounded, over-lit bodies of people (and animals) at the center of an empty and flat background. Seemingly gentle and harmless even when carrying a firearm and donning a military uniform, these characters are usually portrayed while staring ahead with dot-like eyes, their thin-lipped mouths either forming a friendly but restrained smile, or closed in an expressionless horizontal line. Ever since Shen Jingdong developed this language in the early 2000s, a wide range of subjects have undergone this transformation in his paintings, including Chinese deities, art critics, rabbits, birds, fellow contemporary artists like Fang Lijun (方力钧, b. 1963) and Ai Weiwei (艾未未, b. 1957), children, ballerinas, many Communist Party personalities including Mao Zedong and Gao Gang (高

岗, 1905–1954), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *petit prince* and his fox, the presenters of China's official evening news television program, the notorious British criminal Charles Bronson, the artist's own friends and family, and even the deer from the seventeenth-century ink-on-paper painting *Deer and Pine Tree* (松鹿图) by Bada Shangren (八大山人, 1626–1705). The artworks by Shen that inaugurated this artistic approach—artworks that arguably constitute his most critically-acclaimed as well as most personal paintings—are portraits of a People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldier. As discussed later in this chapter, the soldier is the protagonist of a series of paintings named, *Hero* (英雄, 2003–2007) (see, e.g., Figure 1) and the subject of a series of homonymous busts realized in ceramic and fiberglass from 2003 onwards. This character has since evolved and multiplied across a variety of artworks.²

Shen Jingdong's recent art is frequently discussed in Chinese art magazines and journals, widely exhibited in the country and abroad, highly-priced at auctions and galleries, and collected by the National Art Museum of China as well as by celebrities like Chen Kun (陈坤, b. 1976) and Zhang Ziyi (章子怡, b. 1979). It therefore may come across as just as "mainstream" as contemporary Chinese art can be, and antipodal to the iconoclastic and anti-establishment avant-gardist movements of late-twentieth-century mainland China. Shen himself seems to poke fun at the commercial appeal of his art with the art installation *Xiaodong Kiosk* (小东售货亭, 2017), a wooden structure akin to a souvenir kiosk that the artist has filled with small-scale reproductions of his paintings and sculptures, including printed pillows, mugs, and plastic toys.³ Nevertheless, as this study will show, Shen's conceptual and performance art not only prefigured the language and iconography of his paintings, but also introduced two key themes underpinning them, i.e., the transmutation of the body—the annihilation of its fleshy reality, to borrow Baudrillard's words,⁴ and the issue of personal identity in society.

The following section will focus on the beginning of Shen Jingdong's career to show how those conceptual and performance art projects provide essential background to understand his art. The subsequent section will examine some of Shen's most significant paintings, particularly the *Hero* series and the *Bound-up* series (包扎, 2012–today). It will also discuss the artworks related to the forced relocation of the artist from Songzhuang (宋庄) Art Village in 2017 and reveal how the artist continues to draw on the language and history of performance art for the creation, modification, and presentation of his paintings.

² See section 3.1 of this chapter on the genesis and style of these paintings.

³ On one side of the kiosk Shen has painted a circled "demolish" character (拆), a familiar sign in urban China as it indicates that a building is destined to be demolished and its occupants expelled from it. This is a reference to the fate of Shen's studio in Songzhuang, discussed in section 3.2 of this chapter.

⁴ See Baudrillard ([1976] 2017, 93) and further in this chapter.

2. Shen Jingdong's early conceptual and performance art

Shen Jingdong's first name was chosen by his father, an art teacher in an elementary school, to signify *jing'ai Mao Zedong* (敬爱毛泽东), or "respect and love Mao Zedong" (Wu Hong 2021a, 141).⁵ Encouraged by his family, the young Shen started drawing and exhibiting at an early age. In a recent interview Shen recalled how his grandmother bought him a notebook after other boys had bullied him, so that he would stay at home and draw instead of going outside (in Miss Lu 2020). Art became a form of escapism. A similar relation binds Shen's art to his beloved hometown of Nanjing, known for its rich cultural heritage as the "capital of six dynasties," but also for the tragedies of its twentieth-century history. "Nanjing is a city where it is so easy to get sad," he would write when describing the motivation behind the collective art project, *Hundred Years, Hundred People, Hundred Family Names* (百年 百人 百家姓, 2000; see Shen 2000b). For Shen, the bright and happy face of his art represents a way to exorcise the traumas of that ever-present history (Shen 2023b), and perhaps the agony of human history in general.

After studying art at Nanjing's Xiaozhuang Normal School and working as an art teacher for several years, Shen was admitted to the School of Arts of Nanjing University, where he majored in block printing. Upon his graduation, the 26-year-old Shen was recruited by the PLA and assigned to the renowned Frontline Modern Drama Troupe of the Nanjing military region to work as a stage designer; he would remain in the army until 2009. While he eventually grew unhappy with army life for not being able to fully dedicate himself to his own art, Shen's job afforded him a great deal of time to make art and curate exhibitions, and came to constitute an experience that set him apart from other artists (Miss Lu 2020; Shen 2023b).

2.1 The surname projects

Shortly after joining the army Shen Jingdong developed three projects that focused on the themes of identity and the human body.⁶ He begun working on the first of these projects, *Hundred Family Names* (百家姓), in 1994. While the project ended in 1999 with a collective exhibition he curated, i.e., the above-mentioned *Hundred Years, Hundred People, Hundred Family Names*,⁷ recently the artist has been working on a series of paintings also entitled *Hundred Family*

⁵ All translations from Chinese are by the author unless otherwise specified.

⁶ The third collective project, which will not be examined here on account of space constraints, is *One Hundred Artists Tell Their Stories* (一百个艺术家讲自己的故事, 2001–2003; see Shen 2003a). The exhibition dedicated to this project was held in Nanjing in 2003. Shen describes these three projects as a "trilogy" (Shen 2003b).

⁷ Held in Nanjing first and then in Shanghai, the exhibition was curated by Shen Jingdong and opened on December 30, 1999 as a way—Shen wrote—to commemorate the end of the century (Shen 2000b).

Names (2020–today). As part of that early project, Shen Jingdong realized several paintings and installations, including a 1995 triptyc—also entitled *Hundred Family Names*—consisting of eighty-four paintings (i.e., twenty-eight in each panel) in which as many surnames are painted in thick strokes of varying shades of gray over gray backgrounds (see, e.g., Wu 2021a, 76–77).

For the project that led to the collective 1999 exhibition Shen Jingdong invited a hundred artists to each contribute an artwork of any kind—sized twenty-eight by forty centimeters—that portrayed their own surname. Shen emphasizes how the key aspects of this project were “the process and its participatory, interactive, and playful nature” (Shen 2000b). Art critic Chen Xiaoxin (陈孝信, b. 1943) writes in his preface to the catalog of the exhibition that Shen’s project constituted a “conceptual art activity” that employed Chinese surnames as an “entry point” (Chen 2000). Surnames, argues Chen, not only represent the accumulation of Chinese experience and culture, but also a mark of identity (身份烙印) engraved into the psyche of every Chinese person (Chen 2000). Shen believes that surnames represent a reminder of our origins and ancestry (Shen 2023b), pointing at the roots of our personal identities. Surnames, he once wrote, remind us of the eternal questions: Where do we come from? Where are we going? (Shen 2000b).

The artworks created in response to Shen Jingdong’s invitation included oil and ink-on-paper paintings, video artworks, and “readymade” photographs that repurposed existing objects or writing—e.g., a character on a cup, a sign, a window frame, etc.—to represent each artist’s surname (Shen 2000a). Artists from all across the country participated in the project, including Zhu Zhengeng (朱振庚, 1939–2012), Shang Yang (尚扬, b. 1942), Chen Xinmao (陈心懋, b. 1954), Guan Ce (管策, b. 1957), Wu Gaozhong (吴高钟, b. 1962), Huang Yan (黄岩, b. 1966) and Wang Guofeng (王国锋, b. 1967), among others.

Shen Jingdong’s own contribution to the exhibition is striking in its resemblance to the paintings of the *Hero* series. It is neither a painting nor a soldier, however, but the photograph of a toy called Knowledge Bear (识字熊, i.e., literally, “character-recognition bear”; the names in English and Chinese are written on the toy itself; see Figure 2). The educational toy consists of a yellow bear-shaped frame with round features, black dots for eyes above a line that describes a smile. Enclosed inside the plastic bear is a card with the artist’s surname written in red; in the background of the photo, we see what appear to be the lockers of a kindergarten decorated with children’s drawings. In her essay on a recent solo exhibition of Shen’s paintings, *The Beautiful Fairy Tales* (London, 2020), Wenny Teo perceptively observes how “the luminous viscosity of the paintwork [in Shen’s paintings] serves to further the sense of artificiality, so much so that the figures come to resemble the cheaply mass-produced



Figure 2: Shen Jingdong, *Shen*, installation and photography, 1999

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

plastic toys that are made in China and sold at an inflated price throughout the world" (Teo 2020, 56). That early conceptual artwork, entitled *Shen* (沈, 1999), not only points at a specific toy that may have inspired the style of *Hero* and subsequent paintings, but also suggests a deeper interpretative dimension to Shen's subsequent art—a dimension that has to do with identity and self-representation. This chapter will show how this dimension resurfaces again and again in Shen's *Hero* series and other works.

For the ongoing series of paintings entitled *Hundred Family Names*, which he started in 2020, Shen Jingdong aims at realizing an individual, small-scale painting for each of the over five-hundred Chinese surnames included in the homonymous classic compiled during the Song dynasty (960–1279). At a time of my first visit to his studio in Yanjiao (燕郊; Hebei province) in 2023, approximately a hundred of such paintings had already been completed. The series adopts the style of his post-*Hero* portraits, this time applying it to Chinese characters. Shen breaks the character of each surname into lines and dots and turns these



Figure 3: Shen Jingdong, *Shen (Hundred Family Names)*, oil on canvas, 2020

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

into brightly colored, balloon-like, three-dimensional objects that he casts against a neutral, cement-like background that recalls the hues of the above-mentioned tryptic from 1995 (see, e.g., Figure 3). Because the artist often breaks the constitutive strokes of the characters into smaller segments, and sometimes merges strokes together, painting each of these new shapes in very distinct colors, the painting turns these common characters into unfamiliar collections of shapes that have lost their calligraphic cohesiveness or "bone structure," sometimes to the point of rendering the surname almost illegible.⁸ If one's surname represents

⁸ The characters are painted according to their "traditional" or non-simplified form (繁体字). In this form, for example, the surname Sun (孫) is composed of ten strokes. In Shen Jingdong's painting of this surname (Sun, 2020), this character is divided into twelve shapes, one of which actually merges two strokes. As if to emphasize how this process results in rendering

a symbol of one's roots and identity, then Shen's new paintings point at these becoming increasingly ambiguous and fragmented as they undergo a seemingly playful metamorphosis into shiny toys.

2.2 Faces, bodies, identities

In 1999 Shen Jingdong begun working on a second collective project, this time to gather self-portraits from a hundred artists. The resulting exhibition in Nanjing, *100 Artistic Faces*⁹ (100个艺术家面孔, 2001), saw the participation, among other artists, of Shang Yang (尚扬, b. 1942), Huang Yong Ping (黄永砵, 1954–2019), Li Luming (李路明, b. 1957), Song Yongping (宋永平, b. 1961), Cheng Yong (成勇, 1961–2014), Zhang Dali (张大力, b. 1963), Song Dong (宋冬, b. 1966), and Yang Jinsong (杨劲松, b. 1971); the self-portraits of Slovenian artists such as Petra Varl (b. 1965), and Metod Frlic (b. 1965) were also featured.

In his octopartite commentary to the exhibition, Shen Jingdong explains his goal in facilitating this collective project:

The face is one of the most distinctive symbols of what is innate in a person. I consider the style that emerges when an artist engages in artistic creation as constituting their second face, because when I think of an artwork, I think of the artist themselves. Now I have this weakness: When I look at an art catalog, I first look at the photo of the artist and then at the artworks. So this time I have combined the two into one—the artwork, i.e., the second face, with its creator, i.e., the first face. The result is both the artwork and the artist themselves. (Shen 2001b)

Shen also cites here the portraits that had the strongest influence on his art. As a child, he writes, he marveled in awe at the larger-than-life portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao (Shen 2001b). As to more recent portraits that inspired him, Shen cites *Father* (父亲, 1980) by Luo Zhongli (罗中立, b. 1948), Geng Jianyi's *The Second State* (第二状态, 1987), and the *Large Portraits* series (大肖像系列, 1993) by Zhou Xiping (周细平, b. 1953). While the above-mentioned artworks by Luo and Geng are discussed in most histories of contemporary Chinese art (e.g., Lu 2013), it is worth mentioning a few details about Zhou's art. Zhou Xiping was a member of the New History Group (新历史小组) in Wuhan, which was responsible for group performance artworks such as *Disinfection* (消毒, 1992). His

the characters harder to read, the first three paintings in this series present an arrangement of numerous "deconstructed" surnames and random shapes that fills the entire canvas, the surnames almost dissolving into the disorienting accumulation. Shen has also experimented with hiding messages in these seemingly random accumulation of shapes.

⁹ This is the English title on the cover of the exhibition catalog (i.e., Shen 2001a). The Chinese title could be translated as *Faces of a Hundred Artists*. The artist has followed-up on the 2001 exhibition with two more iterations of the same project, one in 2011 and the latest in 2021.

Large Portraits series of paintings comprises several portraits of CEOs and business owners painted against a neutral background. Each painting—which may equally evoke the portrait of a political cadre or a magazine cover—is accompanied on the canvas by their name, the name of their company, a vacuous slogan (e.g., “innovating products is a necessity of the times”), a telephone number, and the characters of “large portrait” in red. The *Large Portraits* series, among other art by Zhou (e.g., *Rules of Transaction*, 交易规则, n.d.), commented in this way on the increasingly blurred line between the political leadership and the economic elite—and between art, propaganda, and advertising—in China’s post-reform era.

In his commentary to *100 Artistic Faces*, Shen observed how a self-portrait used to represent the most meaningful work in an artist’s career. In today’s world of material abundance and spiritual paucity, however, showing off has become commonplace, and the expression of gravity in the self-portrait of a contemporary artist is actually hilarious (Shen 2001b). Evoking the Confucian *Classic of Filial Piety* (“Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them”),¹⁰ Shen (2001b) concludes: “Today we have made a mess of the faces that our parents gave us. What are we going to mess up tomorrow?”

Most of the portraits included in the catalog of *100 Artistic Faces* are photographic artworks, many of which consist of variously altered or manipulated images, e.g., by means of photomontage, overpainting, and so forth. Shen Jingdong’s own contribution, entitled *Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform* (穿老军装的自拍像, 1997), is a close-up photograph of the artist as he stares expressionless at the camera while in front of a blue background. The photograph resembles the type used for identification documents and for official portraits of party cadres. The viewer could believe the photo to be one of such portraits if it weren’t for the anachronistic clothing, unlikely to be Shen’s real uniform, which introduces an element of ambiguity in this otherwise ordinary portrait (Lü and Shen 2008; see also in the next section on this artwork).

Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform had previously been the protagonist of another participatory art project by Shen Jingdong, *Inviting the Audience to Pose with My Work* (请观众与我作品合影, 1997). Here I employ the term “participatory” with reference to Bishop’s (2012) and Harvie’s (2013) theorization of a range of contemporary art practices where the artist involves the audience in the making of the artwork, thus turning its members into their central artistic “material.” After realizing a very large print of the above-mentioned self-portrait for an exhibition, Shen took photos of himself (in civilian clothing) and several members of the

¹⁰ *Classic of Filial Piety* (孝经), Chapter 1, “The Scope and Meaning of the Treatise” (开宗明义). English translation from Legge (1879, 466).



Figure 4: Shen Jingdong, *Inviting the Audience to Pose with My Work No. 3*, performance and photography, 1997

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

audience as they stood next to it, turning this activity into what may be described as a work of performance art.

Inviting the Audience to Pose with My Work was featured in a book on "behavior photography" (行为摄影)¹¹ in China edited by critics Luo Qi (洛齐, b. 1960) and

¹¹ "Behaviour photography" is how this Chinese expression is translated in the English title on the cover of the book. The Chinese term translated here as "behaviour" (行为) renders the English "performance" in the standard Chinese phrase for "performance art" (行为艺术). The Chinese term (and its translation), therefore, arguably highlight the connection between this type of photography and performance art.

Guan Yuda (管郁达, b. 1963) (see Luo and Guan 2000, 82–85). The artworks they chose to collect under this category may be collectively described as examples of conceptual photography that draws on performance art. Most of these works show the artist or other individuals performing or posing *for the camera*, and often place a particular emphasis on the bodily dimension of the image. This reflects what Guan Yuda will later describe as a corporeal trend in Chinese culture at the turn of the century (Guan 2005). Notable examples featured in Luo and Guan's book were, for instance, Huang Yan's *Chinese Landscape* (中国山水, 1999) and Song Yongping's *My Parents: New Life* (我的父母—新生活, 1999). Other works by Shen Jingdong that could be described as "behavior photography" include *Catching the Bad Guy* (抓坏人, 2002), a photomontage in which a uniform-wearing Shen Jingdong points a rifle towards a worried-looking Shen Jingdong in civilian clothes; and *Riding Beijing's White Mule* (骑上北京的白骡子, 2004), a photograph from a performance artwork in which a semi-naked Shen rides a white mule indoors while writing calligraphy (see Wu 2021a, 147–149; Shen 2023b).¹²

In the early 2000s China boasted a vibrant performance art scene that was increasingly attracting the attention of critics and collectors, even if only thanks to the controversy it occasionally stirred (Berghuis 2004; 2023, 8). Nonetheless, performance art continued to occupy the margins of the art world, as it was intrinsically ill-suited for the emerging market for contemporary Chinese art, and largely frowned upon by local art institutions and audiences alike (Lu and Sun 2006, V). By participating in that scene through performance artworks like *Shave Shave Shave* (刮刮刮, 2002), Shen opened a new dimension in his reflection on the relationship between art and the artist's body and identity (see Figure 5).

During *Shave Shave Shave*, the hair on Shen Jingdong's naked body is thoroughly shaved off with razor blades by others. The fifteen-minute video of the artwork begins with these four lines showing across the screen:

I scraped off my hair with a blade
because I could not bear to peel off my skin
I have used art to record my life
slowly my art has become my autobiography.

(Shen 2002, 00:46)¹³

¹² The latter work evokes a legendary episode from the history of Mount Tai (泰山). Emperor Gaozong (高宗, 628–683) of Tang (唐, 618–907) was persuaded by empress Wu Zetian (武则天, 624–705) and the powerful governor of Yizhou (益州) to travel to the sacred mountain on the back of a white mule, even though mules and donkeys were considered more appropriate for low-ranking officials than for an emperor. This attracted ridicule on Gaozong and exposed his feebleness. At the end of the journey the mule, of which they had not taken good care, died. Gaozong posthumously appointed it "General White Mule" and had a tomb built for the animal (Xiao 1932, 43).

¹³ Original text: 我用刀刮去我的毛 / 因为我舍不得剥去我的皮 / 我用艺术记载着我的生活 / 慢慢



Figure 5: Shen Jingdong, *Shave Shave Shave*, performance and photography, 2002

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

The performance took place on a sun-bathed rooftop, where the artists changes position—now sitting on a chair, now laying face-down on the floor—but always appearing motionless. After the procedure, Shen Jingdong stands nude and hairless as the luminosity of the video increases and the screen fades to white, as if the artist's body had become overwhelmingly bright.

Shave Shave Shave shares key characteristics with celebrated Chinese performance artworks from the 1990s and 2000s, such as works by Yang Zhichao (杨志超, b. 1963) (e.g., *Hide*, 藏, 2002), Zhang Huan (张洹, b. 1965) (e.g., *65 kg*, 65公斤, 1994), and He Yunchang (何云昌, b. 1967) (e.g., *One Meter Democracy*, 一米民主, 2010), to name but a few. Such characteristics include the passivity of the action enacted on the artist's naked body by others and the modification or endangerment of the body through the action. With *Shave Shave Shave* Shen Jingdong appears to provide an answer to the question he had asked at the end of *100 Artistic Faces* (see above). That is, after experimenting with one's face, it was time to "mess up" with the hair and skin which—like our surnames—remind us of where we came from. Art critic Wu Hong (吴鸿, b. 1968) similarly conclude that this artwork—not unlike the *Hero* series—stemmed from Shen's long-standing anxiety and inner conflict about his own identity as an artist and a soldier (Wu 2021b, 21).

的 我的艺术便成了我的自传. For the video recording of *Shave Shave Shave*, Shen Jingdong collaborated with above-mentioned artist Cheng Yong and film director Xu Xin (徐辛, b. 1966).

Around the same time that he begun working on the soldier figure portrayed in *Hero*, Shen Jingdong realized another work of performance art that epitomizes the “corporeal turn” in his reflection on the relationship between identity and artistic self-expression. For *Resume on the Back* (背上的简历, 2003) Shen had a summary of his educational and professional experience written in yellow on the skin of his back in both Chinese and English. *Resume on the Back* joins other performance artworks of those years that used “corpography”—to adopt Bachner’s (2014) term—to reflect on the relationship between the corporeal materiality and social identity of the individual. According to Bachner, corpographies in Chinese performance art foreground the negation and erasure of the body while, at the same time, they make signification dependent on an organic medium that is subject to decay and death – thus creating a paradoxical connection between textuality and corporeality (Bachner 2014, 40–42). Such artworks include, for instance, the mid-1990s series *Tattoo* (纹身) by Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰, b. 1969), *Iron* (烙, 2000) by Yang Zhichao, and Zhang Huan’s *Family Tree* (家谱, 2000).¹⁴

Resume on the Back also suggests an affinity between Shen’s research and the art of Zhu Fadong (朱发东, b. 1960), which often engages with issues of identity, its manipulation, and its disappearance under the action of political and economic forces. While Zhu’s artistic research on these issues later found expression in photography and painting (see, e.g., his *Model* and *Celebrity* series, 2001 and 2007 respectively), it started with performance artworks such as *Missing Person Notice* (1993) and *This Person Is for Sale* (1994). For the latter work, which extended over a year’s time, Zhu wore a worker’s blue clothes with a sign on his back that read, “this person is for sale, price negotiable” (此人出售, 价格面议), thus “essentially offering himself up to society [...] to transact a symbolic value exchange” (Lü 2013, 668).¹⁵ By turning his body into a breathing and walking resume, Shen advertised his very flesh for employment, this time—as the addition of the English text suggests—with an eye to the international market. If works like Yang Zhichao’s *Iron* and *Suntanning* (晒, 2000) may have foregrounded “the working of state power” on people’s bodies through “corpographies” where writing becomes “an instrument of subjection,” as Bachner (2014, 39) claims, then Shen’s *Resume on the Back* comments on the commodifying power of the market on an artist’s body and identity.

3. Artist versus hero

One could argue that most of the artworks by Shen Jingdong discussed thus far in this chapter are centered around the identity and the body of the artist, more than

¹⁴ On body art by, e.g., Yang Zhichao, see Strafella and Berg (2023a, 2023b).

¹⁵ It is worth noting that Shen Jingdong is a friend of Zhu Fadong’s and has collected his work.

on those of Chinese people and humanity in general. While they may speak to issues that are arguably relevant to the latter, too—from our relationship with our roots, to the body politics of post-socialist China—these artworks primarily contribute to an artistic meta-discourse on the predicament of the artist in post-Mao China.

Shen himself notes how the issue of identity (身份 and 身份认同)—particularly, one's individual identity and status in society—was widely debated in Chinese cultural circles when he began working on the *Hero* series (Shen 2023b). Nanjing-based scholars Zhang Guangmang (张光芒, b. 1966) and Tong Di (童娣) have argued that much of the intellectual and literary debates of the 1990s and early 2000s revolved around the issue of identity. According to Zhang and Tong (2009) and Du Kun (2014), this occurred in response to an increasingly market-oriented and globalized society, a feeling of marginalization among intellectuals, and a shift in importance from national or collective identity to individual identity (自我认同). As an example of intellectual debates of this kind, Zhang and Tong (2009, 97) cite the discussion on “the spirit of the humanities” (人文精神讨论). This debate spread nationwide in the mid-1990s and revolved around the question of what role Chinese intellectuals could and should play vis-à-vis the party-state and the socialist market economy, and therefore represented an instance of intellectual meta-discourse (Strafella 2017, 145).

3.1 *Hero and Little Porcelain People*

The genesis of the *Hero* series not only helps us understand how these portraits relate to Shen Jingdong's conceptual and performance art, but also how they address the issue of identity and its corporeal dimension. At the time, a military-themed drama set in the 1950s was being shot at Shen's work unit and actors were wearing uniforms from that era, so he also donned one such uniform and took a photo of himself (Lü and Shen 2008). That was the origin of *Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform*, a sort of Ur-image to the *Hero* series. Shen then experimented with turning that photograph into painting; it is not unusual for Chinese performance artists who were trained at art schools to turn photographs or stills from their performance artworks into paintings, drawings, and even sculptures (see also in the next section). In an early example of a painting based on *Self-Portrait Wearing an Old Military Uniform*, entitled *Self-portrait* (自画像, 2002; see Wu 2021b, 173), the subject has maintained the facial features of the artist while his skin, eyes, and uniform are still of distinct and realistic colors. In a second stage, Shen Jingdong turned that portrait into a fiberglass sculpture (i.e., *Hero*, 英雄, 2003). At this stage, the facial features of the artist dissolve into the *Hero* character, giving him—or them, as their gender is a moot point henceforth—an “Everyman quality” (see also Bloch 2019, 65; Zhu [2006] 2014). Having then fired and painted the character into a porcelain sculpture, Shen proceeded to paint it on canvas (i.e., Figure 1).

Also because of this creation process, the hero's facial features and clothes are almost entirely of the same color—except for badges and insignia. More importantly, the matter of their body and uniform has also become homogeneous, equally smooth and shiny under neon-like, cold, intense lighting. Writing on the work of Camille Renault (1866–1954), Jean Baudrillard described this French sculptor as having attempted to “capture the world as God had left it (that is, in its natural state), to eliminate all its organic spontaneity and replace it with a single polymorphous material: reinforced concrete” (Baudrillard [1976] 2017, 73). Similarly to Renault's concrete, porcelain constitutes Shen Jingdong's *mental* substance that allows him to order and separate the phenomena of the world at will (see Baudrillard [1976] 2017, 74). As a result, the *Hero* paintings come to represent a second-order simulacrum. Absorbed into a single substance, the real is liquidated for a fairy tale.



Figure 6: Shen Jingdong, *Little Porcelain People No. 4*, oil on canvas, 2003

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

Around the same time as he worked on the fiberglass sculpture, Shen realized another series of paintings where bodies are first (mentally) turned into rounded porcelain sculptures and then rendered by brush with oil colors on canvas. The series entitled *Little Porcelain People* (小瓷人, 2003) comprises four paintings, each depicting a porcelain sculpture that shows two figures on a leaf-shaped support having sex in various positions (e.g., Figure 6). In paintings of this series, the male figure sports a long queue similar to the one that men had to wear during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), while

the female character has her hair collected in a high bun (高髻). Erotic figurines much like those portrayed here by Shen appear to have been mass produced in China from the late Qing period until as recently as the 1980s. Similarly to what occurs in the *Hero* paintings, the corporeal reality of the subject is twice removed—first the representation of the scene in porcelain objects, and then by Shen's brush on the canvas. In *Little Porcelain People*, the distance between the living referent and its twice-removed representation in the painting contrasts with the intensely corporeal nature of the activity in which the figurines are engaged. These paintings also compel the viewer to notice a constant in Shen's works from this period onwards, namely, the immobility of his characters. Whether they are represented in the act of reading, playing the trumpet, jumping or dancing, their shiny bodies and uncomfortable smiles appear suspended outside time and space.

Shen Jingdong's paintings of military characters as over-lit porcelain sculptures create a stylistic contrast with portraits of PLA figures in paintings from the socialist era (1949–1978). Shen himself was trained by art teachers who imparted to him the techniques of socialist realism (Shen 2023b). The intense use of shading and shadowing that is characteristic of socialist realist painting is so different from *Hero*, that the latter could be seen as a repudiation of that tradition. Nonetheless, Shen is adamant that his portraits are not meant as a mockery of those figures, or indeed of communist ideals, and that his paintings from *Hero* onwards have more to do with the influence of consumer culture than with political rhetoric (Zhang 2018; Shen 2023b). Art critic and scholar Gao Ling (高岭, b. 1964) also maintains that Shen's paintings do not negate the ideals of China's socialist past—a time when the image of the PLA serviceman was venerated as a symbol of the People's Republic and closely identified with Mao's regime (2008, 6). To Gao, Shen's paintings of “porcelain people on canvas”—as Gao describes the *Hero* portraits—signal the decline of the ideology that conferred a halo of heroism to the PLA soldier and cipher a shift to a new ideology with its cartoon-like, fragile, and more ordinary-looking idols (Gao 2008, 6–7).

Shen Jingdong's paintings of serviceman (and servicewomen) may echo the Maoist narrative of soldiers as lovable (可爱) heroes, which—as Shen once noted—contrasted with ancient images of warriors as devils and monsters (Lü and Shen 2008, 88). Incidentally, the word 可爱 is also Chinese for “cute,” a theoretical category that has been employed by Stallabrass (2020) and Teo (2020), among others, to interpret Shen Jingdong's art. Official party discourse has long referred to soldiers as “the most lovable people” (最可爱的人), an expression originating from a 1951 reportage by journalist Wei Wei (魏巍, 1920–2008) that extolled acts of sacrifice by members of the People's Volunteer Army during the Korean War.

Despite the difference in style, it is possible to identify parallels between the socialist-era iconography of military heroes and Shen Jingdong's *Hero*. One is

particularly reminded of a series of propaganda posters by Xu Jiping (徐寄萍, 1919–2005), entitled *The Young Heroes' Scrolls* (青年英雄屏, 1958). The lower part of each scroll shows the hero in action during their extreme act of sacrifice for the motherland and communism. The upper part of the scroll is occupied by a portrait of the hero, looking forward with a calm expression, against an empty background – a funeral or commemorative portrait of sorts.¹⁶ Socialist-era narratives may well have a connection with the nameless protagonists of the *Hero* series—particularly the well-known story of Lei Feng (雷锋, 1940–1962), which Shen mentions as an influence (Lü and Shen 2008, 88) and whom he has portrayed in several works (i.e., Lei Feng, 2011).

According to art critic Zhu Qi (朱其, b. 1966), who has studied the art of Shen Jingdong since the early days of *Hundred Surnames*, Shen attempts with *Hero* to break away from the binary of propaganda art versus the satirical re-purposing of propaganda art (Zhu [2006] 2014). Zhu Qi is alluding here to the Political Pop trend in contemporary Chinese painting, a trend that gained considerable attention in China and abroad during the 1990s thanks to the works of such artists as Wang Guangyi (王广义, b. 1957) and Yu Youhan (余友涵, b. 1943) (cf. Li 1993, xix–xxii). Instead, Zhu Qi contends, Shen paints his PLA heroes as devoid of any sense of sublime or loftiness, thus making them both more ordinary and more universal (Zhu [2006] 2014). However, one could argue that the colors of the earliest paintings in the *Hero* series suggest a more complex, if subtle relation between the character and the political context. In early *Hero* portraits such as the one reproduced in Figure 1, the body and clothes of the soldier-hero have been homogeneously subsumed into a porcelain simulacrum that is painted entirely in yellow and red—i.e., the dominant colors of the emblems and flags of the Chinese state, party, and army. This further emphasizes the conflict between the creative identity of the contemporary Chinese artist, defined by their defiance vis-à-vis established artistic ideas and institutions, and the role of the soldier, whose identity is dependent on their selfless service to the party-state.

Finally, among the sources for the idea behind his uniformed characters Shen Jingdong also cites the protagonist of the Czech literary classic, *The Good Soldier Švejk* (*Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, 1921–1923) by Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923), whom he knows through the 1956 film adaptation directed by Karel Steklý (1903–1987) (Wu 2021b, 23; Shen 2023b). According to Wu Hong's interpretation of the affinity between Shen's heroes and Hašek's anti-hero, the dark satirical effect of Josef Švejk's story derives from the fact that the more Švejk tries to

¹⁶ See, e.g., Dong Cunrui (董存瑞, 1958), <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-162>. On ancestor portraits in Chinese tradition, see, e.g., Olivová (2022). A discussion of the connections between Shen Jingdong's portraits and the tradition of Chinese portraiture—including the use of clothing and costumes—is outside the scope of this study.

behave like a good soldier, the more the absurdity of the category of “good” in his topsy-turvy world becomes apparent (Wu 2021b, 16). The image of Shen’s heroes might remind some of Švejk as portrayed in the illustrations of Hašek’s novel by Josef Lada (1887–1957), or the collage re-interpretation of these by John Heartfield (1891–1968). While Shen was not familiar with Lada’s work when he painted *Hero*, the actor who played Švejk in Steklý’s film, Rudolf Hrušínský (1920–1994), is said to have gained weight for this film so that his countenance would resemble that of Švejk in Lada’s illustrations.



Figure 7: Shen Jingdong, *Bound-up No. 1*, oil on canvas, 2012

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

3.2 From the *Bound-up* series to new performances

Around 2011 Shen Jingdong appears to manifest growing unease with the immaculate surface of his heroes. In a series of paintings entitled *Split* (裂, 2011) and other works from the same period, Shen’s military heroes are portrayed

on canvas as variously cracked, chipped and broken, revealing their nature as lifeless porcelain sculptures. In 2012, he introduces a figure without uniform—or indeed any individual feature—whose head and body are wrapped in white bandages with red stains. The *Bound-up* series portrays this figure in various activities—most notably, in combat poses similar to those of Xu Jiping's heroes (compare, e.g., Shen's *Bound up No. 2* and *No. 3*, and Xu's *Huang Jiguang*, 黄继光, 1958).

When read against the background of Shen Jingdong's career, references in *Bound-up* to Chinese and foreign performance artworks become evident—from the above-mentioned *Wrapping No. 1: King and Queen* by Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili, the performance work by Concept 21 (观念21) on the Great Wall in 1988, and *One Meter Democracy* by He Yunchang, to *3rd Action* (3. Aktion, 1965) by Rudolf Schwarzkogler (1940–1969). “The act of wrapping the body in white bandages”—as Carlos Rojas (2011, 157) observed—“was a recurrent theme in performance art in China in the 1980s, connoting among other things an image of bodily wounds or scars.” According to Rojas (2011, 157), such works posed the question of what it means to be human in contemporary China. As if to emphasize the link between his wounded characters and performance art, in 2012 Shen Jingdong modified three works he had originally painted in 2008 in the style of the Hero paintings. The 2008 paintings depict the performances *Catching the Bad Guy*, *Shave Shave Shave*, and *Riding Beijing's White Mule*, and are entitled, respectively, *Memento 2001* (纪念 2001), *Memento 2002* (纪念 2002), and *Memento 2005* (纪念 2005). In 2012, Shen added bandages and blood stains on the body of the portrayed subjects. These paintings and their subsequent modifications show that Shen has not renegaded or forgotten his most avant-gardist work, and underscore its continuing relevance for Shen's current artistic research.

Since around 2012, Shen has enacted the violation of his painted surfaces as well as of the bodies in his portraits in various ways, as if to return to that original determination to “mess up” one's concept of identity through interventions on the body and its image. In a series of artworks entitled *Suture* (缝合, 2018)—which, together with *International Joke* (国际玩笑, 2018), probably constitutes his darkest art to date—Shen painted stitched-up cuts across a canvas where he had previously painted a blue bandaged figure. An even more violent transformation of Shen's art was enacted through a collaboration between Shen and the Chinese-American artist Jon Tsoi (蔡江, b. 1958). For a joint project by Shen and Tsoi entitled *Headless and Heartless* (无头无心, 2016), several paintings from Shen's *Bound-up* series were printed on canvases before Tsoi slashed them with a blade, and then bound and tied up pieces of the cut-up canvases with white gauze bandages (see, e.g., *New Bound-up No. 1*, 新包扎之一, 2016).

During the last few years, Shen has also carried out performance artworks during his exhibitions, both outside and within the exhibition spaces. These works involve the artist intervening on his own body, his portraits, and the spaces of galleries and museums. For instance, during a 2019 show, Shen had his semi-naked body covered in stickers that read “Shen Jingdong was here” while standing at the center of the gallery. Stickers were also left by the artist and his associates to adorn surfaces across every city where the show was exhibited.¹⁷ During the opening of a 2023 solo exhibition in New York entitled *Begin Again*,¹⁸ the artist smeared paint over one of the portraits on view and all over his own face, recording the process with videos and photographs. The Chinese title of this performance work, *Bianlian* (变脸), is a verb-noun construct that literally means “to change face,” but commonly refers to someone suddenly turning hostile or, in theater, to a rapid change in the emotions displayed on an actor’s face—as demonstrated by Shen in photos from the performance. Finally, at the closing ceremony of a comprehensive exhibition of his art entitled, *The Art Journey of a Good Soldier*,¹⁹ Shen lined up a group of uniformed security staff for a performance entitled *Hiring Security Guards* (雇佣保安, 2018). These and other recent artworks show how important it is for Shen to reclaim his own avant-gardist experience as integral to even his most recent art.

Starting from the Hero series up until today, the art of Shen Jingdong has staged an effort to multiply the distance between us and our real bodies and conflicted identities, but also the inevitable return of violence and the corporeal in art as much as in life. Two paintings realized by Shen between 2017 and 2018—two relatively rare examples of art by Shen that depicts an actual event in the artist’s life, other than a performance—best illustrate this tension. On the morning of March 29, 2017, Shen posted on WeChat that his house and studio in Songzhuang was being demolished without prior notice, asking his friends to come out in support of his protest. Shen had moved to Beijing in 2004 and in 2009 had settled in the town of Songzhuang, in the Tongzhou (通州) district on the outskirts of the capital, where starting in the mid-1990s a community of thousands of artists had been gathering also thanks to the encouragement and support of local authorities. After the 2008 Beijing Olympics and especially since 2015, when the transfer of many government departments of the Beijing municipality to the Tongzhou district was announced, a familiar process of

¹⁷ *Shen Jingdong Is Here*, curated by Shen Cen (沈岑, b. 1967), New York, Venice, Singapore, etc., 2019.

¹⁸ Curated by Charles A. Riley II and Lydia Duanmu, New York, 2023.

¹⁹ Curated by Wu Hong, Songzhuang, 2017–2018. The Chinese title of the exhibition, which closely paraphrases the Chinese title of Hašek’s novel, was Hao bing Jingdong cong yi ji 好兵敬东从艺记 (literally, “record of the good soldier Jingdong’s doing art”).



Figure 8: Shen Jingdong, *Just a Game, Just a Dream* (detail), oil on canvas, 2018

(Source: Courtesy of Shen Jingdong)

gentrification accompanied by demolitions and re-development has been taking place. As a result, many artists have been forced to leave Songzhuang during the last few years. As Shen and other artists protested the demolitions, they were thrown to the ground and a few of them were injured. A photograph taken by a bystander during the events of that day shows Shen and another protester being pinned to the ground by security guards with anti-riot forks (防爆叉), an ubiquitous tool of policing in present-day Beijing.

Shen has painted this scene at least twice. In a first, more realistic painting, entitled *March 29, 2017* (2017年3月29日, 2017), the people in the photograph are portrayed as shiny porcelain characters, but with realistic colors. Anonymized and looking like each other, the characters appear still against the background of a semi-demolished wall that alludes to the events of that day. In the second painting, *Just a Game, Just a Dream* (一场游戏, 一场梦, 2018, Figure 8),²⁰ the scene

²⁰ This painting is divided onto two canvases of similar size, both showing security guards with smileys as faces as they hold protesters to the ground with anti-riot forks; the part reproduced in Figure 8 is the right-hand canvas.

has been recreated to take it further away from a realistic portrayal of the violence and brutality of the event. The blue hues, the smiley stickers, the expressionless faces, and an inscription reading, “this is just a game, just a dream” attempt—in vain—to defuse the ignominy of the scene, as if to reassure the viewer (or the painter) that this is but another fairy-tale. They emphasize, in contrast, the degraded condition of the artist and the brutality of the scene. The elaborate candy-colored veil between reality and the protagonists of Shen’s art is broken, and what on the surface appeared as cute, escapist art suddenly becomes protest art and social commentary.

4. Conclusion

Underneath Shen Jingdong’s seemingly joyful and eye-pleasing portraits lie connections to avant-gardist trends in contemporary Chinese art and to wider debates on issues related to identity and the corporeal in post-reform China. This chapter has explored the evolution of these themes throughout Shen’s art, showing how a conflicted reflection on the artist’s identity underpins his early conceptual and performance art projects as well as his recent paintings. The analysis of Shen’s early works of conceptual photography and performance art in this study has revealed the links between those and his subsequent artistic production. Although the discussion of Shen Jingdong’s paintings in this chapter is, by necessity, limited to a small selection of artworks, it has addressed the key turning points in his figurative research, including the landmark *Hero* series and the *Bound-up* series, among other works. While Shen’s art since the mid-2000s has attracted a great deal of critical and commercial attention, turning him into one of China’s most successful contemporary painters, this study has attempted to address the dearth of research into how to place his oeuvre into the artistic and intellectual context of post-1989 China. Finally, this study demonstrated how the experimental years of contemporary Chinese art between the mid-1980s until the early 2000s are crucial to understand the art of the last twenty years, even when the latter may appear much more conventional and congenial to mass consumption.

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YANG FUDONG: IN SEARCH OF THE LOST *YIN/YANG* BALANCE

Christine Vial Kayser

The photographs, videos, and installations of the famous Chinese artist Yang Fudong (杨福东, b. 1971) combine a mastery of light and grain that bears a strong Western influence with a sense of melancholia for the Chinese past. These images have been interpreted as a reaction to the consumerism, individualism, and materialism that have overtaken Chinese culture since the 1990s, when Yang started his career. Critics suggest that the artist is looking for an alternative model based on inner harmony and withdrawal from the world, inspired by the poetic spirit of the literati. Despite the importance and special status of women in his art, his work has been approached as ungendered. This chapter argues that Yang's acknowledged taste for Chinese literati tradition takes onboard an allegiance to the modern Confucian doctrine of the 1990s, in which each gender has a specific social role. I posit that his representation of beautiful women attempts to address the crisis of masculinity in contemporary China, which emerged at a time when the economic power of women was growing, and an affirmative feminist movement was on the rise. I also acknowledge that the prevalence of white and its association with water, snow, and silence in some of the series is a possible indication that the feminine is a way to retrieve a *Yin/Yang* balance, a Daoist concept, also present in New Confucianism. I attempt to trace the intellectual and spiritual genealogy of this apparent contradiction throughout this essay.

Keywords: Chinese contemporary art, Yang Fudong, photography, video art, New Confucianism, Chinese feminism

1. Introduction¹

Photographs, videos, and installations by Yang Fudong have been acclaimed world-wide for their fluid material appearance, their mastery of lightning, their sophisticated composition, and their rich semantic content, mixing citations from Western cinema of the 1960s and a sense of melancholia for the Chinese past. They feature young, elegant men and beautiful, sophisticated, often seductive women, which appear as *femmes fatales*, nymphets, or prostitutes. The characters have an otherworldly presence created by the lack of demarcation between the bodies and the background and a sideward dreamy gaze suggesting a form of aloofness. This aesthetics is deemed to be inspired by the Confucian literati tradition of withdrawal into nature in search of spiritual fulfillment or in opposition to the government of the time. It appears here as a reaction to the frenzied consumerism of contemporary Chinese society, including in the realm of relations between genders.

The current chapter argues that Yang's acknowledged taste for this tradition overlooks the ambiguities of these images, which present the feminine as both desirable and dangerous for the male subject. They contain an implicit allegiance to a modern Confucian doctrine which has been on the rise since the 1990s in mainland China, in intellectual discourse and within the government, with its emphasis on societal harmony, on moral traditional values of sexual restraint and chastity for women, which deem sexuality as dangerous for masculine spiritual energy. I posit that these portraits of women as *femmes fatales* are an attempt to address the crisis of masculinity in contemporary China, which emerged at the same period due to the growing economic power of women and the rise of an affirmative feminist movement. The artist's family context and childhood may also have contributed to this sensitivity, as Yang's father was a member of the military and Yang's primary education took place in a military compound, where he is said to have excelled in "moral conduct, academic studies and physical education" (Roberts 2011, 15).

In other works, such as *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007) and *Liu Lan* (2003), women have a distinctly non-sexual presence and men an androgynous demeanor while the scenery is suffused with white, water, snow, silence, which can be associated with the symbolism of Yin. These series are a possible indication that the feminine is a way to reach an ideal state of life for the

¹ This chapter is a revised version of an article first published in French, "Yang Fudong: le féminin comme nourriture spirituelle et comme menace pour le masculin," *Revue Art Asie-Sorbonne*, April 2023 (<https://creops.hypotheses.org/yang-fudong-le-feminin-comme-nourriture-spirituelle-et-comme-menace-pour-le-masculin-christine-vial-kayser>). Translated and reproduced with full permission.

masculine in the form of a *Yin/Yang* balance that would have more to do with a Daoist spirituality.

Yang Fudong studied at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, and then settled in Shanghai. His career began in the late 1990s, at the dawn of the second phase of Chinese contemporary art, the first phase having emerged in the early 1990s. This second period was heralded in the exhibition *Post-Sense Sensibility* in 1999, curated by the artist Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰, b. 1969), in which Yang's works were first presented. Qiu wrote: "Post-Sense is looking at your aged parents and doubting the purity of your bloodline. Post-Sense is how every person on the street looks uncomfortably similar to you. Post-Sense is Dolly the Sheep and Viagra. Post-Sense is Internet romance" (Qiu 1999). The aim was to depart from the first avant-garde's focus on Chinese politics via a criticism of the Cultural Revolution, to address the current frenzied capitalism modeled on Western values and fill the spiritual and cultural void created by the succession of the Maoist era, the politics of Deng Xiaoping in favor of "getting rich" and the atonement of June 4, 1989. It expressed a longing for a holistic tradition that could address a spiritual crave, together with issues of post-colonialism, globalization, and nationalism. As such, art followed a general intellectual pattern, also found in literature and philosophy, that revolved around the reexamination of Confucianism in the form of a continental (i.e., mainland Chinese) "New Confucianism."

New Confucianism, also called "modern Confucianism," is a somewhat diverse school of thought that emerged in the 1920s in a reaction against the New Culture movement of May 4, 1919, which rejected Confucianism as the basis of Chinese culture and identified it as the reason for its backwardness. In opposition to the May 1919 doxa, it wanted to resist the overthrowing of Chinese philosophical and literary tradition, and preserve its core values of unity between man and nature within the Dao, the concept of vital change as defined in the *Yijing* (易经, *Classic of Change*), and of *wu wei* (无为, "doing nothing"), the practice of a wandering mind. Such is the case with Xu Fuguan (徐复观, 1902–1982) who praised Zhuangzi (Sernej 2020, 174; NG 2003, 219). Most of the exponents of this New Confucianism were republican and anti-communist individuals who fled to Taiwan and Hong Kong in 1949. New Confucianism has been reclaimed since the 1980s, however, by mainland Chinese intellectuals, and then by the Communist Party, taking various forms that are more or less compatible with Marxism. Makeham (2003; 2008), Van Den Stock (2016), Deng and Smith (2018), and Rošker (2020) provide detailed analyses of this complex movement and its precepts. The New Confucianist doctrine differs from the "Neo-Confucianism" of the Song and Ming periods in that it incorporates Western philosophy—from Kant and Hegel to Heidegger and Dewey—in a way that is sometimes syncretic, other times oppositional. It has retained, however, Neo-Confucianist syncretism and an interest in Daoist and Buddhist

concepts—while rejecting their purely transcendental aims (Lidén 2011; NG 2003, 227). It thus helped revive and modernize Daoism and Buddhism (Palmer and Liu 2012; Rošker 2020).

New Confucianism is not a unified doctrine and its precepts hover between idealism and materialism, social disengagement and social consolidation, individualism and collectivism, anti-communism, and neo-Marxism as in the case of Li Zehou (李泽厚) (Chan 2003) and Feng Youlan (冯友兰) (Vandermeersch 2007). New Confucianism in its Marxist undertone is part of the current governmental emphasis on social harmony and Capitalism (or Socialism) “with Chinese characteristics” (see Van Den Stock 2016, 26; Makeham 2003, 2). What the various schools of thought share, however, is support for the patriarchal social order, based on the *qi* of the *Yang* principle. They argue that the May Fourth movement and Westernization in the 1920s, then Maoism and now Chinese feminism, have shattered this order. This aspect of modern Confucianism is overlooked—there is no entry regarding women or the feminine in the indexes of the publications cited above. It is as if the concept of *wenren* (文人, “cultivated individual, scholar”) was not gendered. Some scholars have recently taken on the task of addressing this silence in order to resist Chinese and Western feminists’ criticism (Rosenlee 2006) and allow Confucianism to enter the wider social discourse (Batista 2017).

The aim to rekindle Chinese tradition gave rise in art to different artistic styles and strategies from the kitsch mockery of Shanghainese Xu Zhen (徐震, b. 1977) to the ambiguously exotic and nationalistic works of Qiu Zhijie (see Vial Kayser 2019) and Cai Guo-Qiang (蔡国强, b. 1957), and to the neo-Shamanic/post-colonial/Dadaist art of Huang Yong Ping (黄永砗, 1954–2019), which deeply influenced Yang Fudong. Yang Fudong’s art hovers, with its hybrid aesthetics, in between those trends that evoke the French Nouvelle Vague in as much as the Shanghai film industry of the 1930s, and conveys a sense of melancholy, of the social inadequacy of the characters represented and of the artist himself. Most of those who have written on Yang’s artwork posit that the images act as a buffer from the brutal and dreary contemporary and can be understood in light of the Chinese literati tradition of the Song and Ming periods, i.e., as a withdrawal from the world in search of an inner harmony. Here the word “harmony” acts as a “floating signifier,” as “harmony” is a double meaning word, at times designating harmony with nature and the inner self (in the Buddhist and Daoist sense) and at times Confucian “social harmony,” in which individuals have to give up free will to preserve a functional society based on law and order. This vagueness appeals to Western viewers in search of a distinct, non-materialist, and a-historical philosophy of life. The distinctly Chinese aesthetic of Yang’s works is associated exotically and superficially with a “spiritual” quest, through the neo-orientalist prism of “blandness,” the meditative trend, and the “sense

of nature,” supposedly specific to China (see Gaffric and Heurtebise 2018). The centrality of the masculine in ancient and contemporary Chinese thought, as in Yang Fudong’s work, has been ignored.

I argue here that Yang’s interest in the 1930s, and the sense of threat and unease that runs through his art partake of the moral crisis of the Republican period marked by tensions between a colonial Westernization, the rise of feminist agency in the wake of the New Culture Movement of 1919, and the Chinese values defined by the New Confucianist movement in reaction to the latter.

After presenting the aesthetic analysis prevalent in the criticism of Yang’s artwork from the first series of 2000 *Tonight Moon* and *Shenjia Alley-Fairy*, as well as in the artist’s discourse, I shall undertake to deconstruct his take on the 1930s by looking at the *New Women Series* (2013), establishing a parallelism between Yang’s intention and the social debates of the 1930s on which the series is based, thus illuminating further the embedded conservatism and anxieties hidden under the polish of the pictures dense pixelization, soft lightning, and elegant staging. I shall then propose a reading of artworks in which the feminine figure appears as both a danger to the masculine spirit in a Confucianist manner, and a spiritual treasure to be nurtured as per Daoist belief. This illuminates, in my view, the plastic elements of the *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007), *Liu Lan* (2003), and more recent works such as *The Colored Sky: New Women II* (2014), and *Ye Jiang/The Nightman Cometh* (2011), in particular the semantic of white—the color of death and of the Yin principle. I conclude that Yang’s artworks help establish a link with ancient epics such as the celebrated Qing-era novel *The Dream in the Red Chamber* (红楼梦 *Honglou meng*) by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, 1715–1763) (Cao 2007) and the contemporary cinema of Han Han (韩寒, b. 1982).

2. The reception of Yang Fudong as literatus in *Tonight Moon* and *Shenjia Alley-Fairy*

The artist explains that he received a traditional education (in Yang and Stanhope 2014). His work is influenced by the Daoist/Confucianist doctrine of non-action, or *wu wei* (Lidén 2011): he allows ideas to come one after another, building the narrative of his films over time:

My films do not have a script, plot, or very detailed outlines. Improvisation and adaptability are key to me. This situation is like a botanical garden where all the chi [qi] accumulates. Chi waters the plants and nourishes them. As time goes by, this botanical garden in my heart will then be exhibited. (in Yang and Stanhope 2014)

He is faithful to the notion of the indeterminate at the core of this tradition:

In ancient Chinese painting, there has always been an emphasis on *liubai* [留白] – what's left undrawn on the paper. For me, no matter whether I am making a video or a film, the same idea applies... The undrawn part in a work is there for the audience to engage with, using their imagination for viewing and interpretation. (Yang 2012, 83)

Most critics develop this line of analysis. For example, the Japanese curator Yuko Hasewaga (2006, 78) writes:

His detached point of view and introspective approach is that of the Taoist, who listens intently to his inner voice, reads the flow of chi around him, and lives in harmony with it. One can almost imagine Yang at the center of a frantic maelstrom of change and confusion, the one spot where everything is quiet and still.

References to Zen are also evoked, supported by the fact that Yang kept silent for three months in 1993, during an undocumented performance which he claimed was inspired by Zen Buddhism (Beccaria 2006). The reference to "Zen Buddhism," a practice that has almost disappeared in China but was revived by the New Confucians, is a possible indication of his interest in this philosophy, as is his declared interest in the painter and Buddhist/Daoist painter Shi Tao (石涛, 1642–1707).²

Yet the vagueness of the concept of tradition allows for a somewhat superficial take on his work, of which the reception of *Tonight Moon* (2000, see Figures 1 and 2) and *Shenjia Alley-Fairy* (2000, see Figure 3) is emblematic. *Tonight Moon* (今晚的月亮 *Jin wan de yue liang*) is a video installation comprising a large screen and six small monitors showing young men in a traditional Chinese garden (in Suzhou) playing in boats and meditating while facing the water (Figure 1). The large central screen displays a video of the garden, interspersed with 24 small video screens showing various dystopian images taken from old films. These screens have a disruptive role in the overall harmony inspired by the garden, projecting, for example, two men in briefs who appear to be learning to swim (one the breaststroke, the other the crawl) on a striped mattress surrounded by beach accessories (Figure 2).³

² See Yang's exhibition *Yang Fudong: Endless Peaks* (杨福东: 无限的山峰), ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, November 8, 2020–January 31, 2021.

³ For a full description of this complex work, see Pirotte (2013, 125).



Figure 1: Yang Fudong, *Tonight Moon* (2000), video installation view at *Useful Life – Europalia. China*, M HKA, 2009–2010
(Source: © M HKA)



Figure 2: Yang Fudong, *Tonight Moon* (2000), video installation, detail of the central screen
(Source: Collection M HKA/Flemish Community, photo: M HKA. Courtesy of M HKA)

The installation *Tonight Moon* was presented as part of an exhibition entitled *Useful Life* in Shanghai in 2000, then in Antwerp in 2010, curated by Philippe Pirotte. Pirotte suggests that Yang emphasizes slowness, meditation, and aesthetic research as

a way of resisting the consumer race that has engulfed China. He writes: "The scenes recall the literati paintings of ancient China, made by artists and intellectuals escaping the real world to pursue spiritual freedom by living in reclusion" (Pirotte 2012, 101). He rightly explains that the clumsiness of the characters seeking a stereotyped spirituality is a criticism of the loss of these traditions under commodification.

The title of the exhibition, *Useful Life* (有效期 *Youxiaoqi*) is itself ambiguous because its literal translation is "period of validity" or "expiry date." It connotes the ephemeral and superficial nature of "useful" consumption and production compared with enduring spiritual values. According to Yang, "the characters for 'Useful Life' were a bit like a spiritual wave [...]. The words reflected everyone's attitude at that time [...] when everyone started to do art [...]. They all shared this mood, [and] it was really 'beautiful'" (Lu 2010). The concept of "beauty" is used here in the Confucian sense of the search for harmony and balance between morality and social life. It is a quest for the good through the beautiful, two interchangeable pillars of Confucian spirituality (Fu and Yi 2015).

The artist emphasizes that few artists and intellectuals have achieved this balance, exhausting themselves in feverish activity under social pressure. This exhaustion was already the subject of the film *Estranged Paradise* (陌生天堂 *Mosheng tiantang*, 1998–2002) (Beccaria 2006). The protagonist is a man whose clothing and gestures have the characteristics of a simple, virile, "authentic" masculinity. His engagement with reality, in particular with his elegant, sophisticated, elusive girlfriend, no longer works, and his repetitive attempts to regain her attention distract him from his existential search. The same pattern is at play in the film *The Fifth Night* (2010)⁴ in which clumsy young men, their suitcases falling open, wander around a film studio, fascinated by an elegant but inaccessible woman who ignores them. As the camera spins around her in the manner of François Truffaut's *American Night* (*La Nuit Américaine*, 1973), she seems to play with their desire. Being both seductive and untouchable, she creates a vortex of unfulfilled desires that threatens her suitors. The background music is haunting.

These elements allow me to further differ from Pirotte's analysis of another work in the exhibition, *Shenjia Alley – Fairy* (沈家弄—小仙人 *Shenjia long—xiao xianren*, 2000). Like *Tonight Moon*, this photographic series refers to entertainment, no longer leisure games in a botanical garden, but sexual games. Yang has photographed prostitutes in the warm atmosphere of a Shanghai summer, relaxing in a cramped room overlooking a narrow alleyway, as the title suggests. Their lower bodies are exposed, unclothed, as they lie on mats of newspapers. Beers, cards, and clothes drying form the background of this promiscuous domestic environment. Funny phallic cacti add a kitsch element to this sad, cheap aesthetic. The girl's

⁴ See excerpts on <https://vimeo.com/40177158?login=true>.

faces are rarely visible, while their truncated bodies expose their genitals crudely in the foreground at a short distance (Figure 3), indicating the proximity between the artist's face and the women's bodies. The sleazy picture can also be understood as a warning to the male client that in seeking "heaven," he will find hell. The subtitle *xiao xianren* (小仙人), translated as "fairy," does indeed have the popular meaning of nymphet (young and small beauty) but also evokes female Taoist immortals (仙女 *xiannü*) or *Xuannü* (玄女) a source of revitalization for the (male) spirit, related to the moon (Liu 2016). Often depicted standing, their long robes mingling with the clouds to indicate their celestial nature, these deities have no visible body. Yang Fudong's framing of the sexual parts of the "fairies," in contrast, emphasizes the earthly nature of the pleasure they provide, like a cheap, material version of spiritual ecstasy. Finally, the title also contains a pun on cactus (仙人掌 *xianrenzhang*),⁵ a plant that according to Chinese medicine "activates the circulation of *qi*, makes the blood more tonic, clarifies the heart" (American Dragon n.d.).⁶ The visual composition thus seems to parody Taoist rituals of longevity based on the ingestion of plants and sexual arousal (with no emission of sperm).⁷ The aesthetic poverty of the staging, and its kitsch quality, add to the promiscuity of the nude bodies and the floor—and other low-value material such as newspapers—to suggest that this consumption of sex is degrading. The ease with which the girls seem to accommodate such dire conditions—displaying an apparent domestic comfort—further indicates that the origin of the decay is in them, and its victim will be the (male) viewer, or the consumer.

Philippe Pirotte sees in it, however, an aesthetic quest influenced by both literary refinement and a rejection of today's consumerism of sex. He argues: "It brings the literati's impassive attitude from the daydream to the brothel. [...] [T]he photographs portray naked or half-dressed young women passing time and possibly waiting for customers—suggesting a certain type of consumerism" (Pirotte 2012, 101).

The comments of the Antwerp Museum of Modern Art, which acquired the photographs (under Pirotte's supervision), also establish a link between this work and traditional painting from a formal point of view: "Fudong carefully stages the

⁵ I am grateful to Shan Xueping of Shanghart Gallery for this information.

⁶ Entry "Xian Ren Zhang – Rhizoma Opuntiae" in *American Dragon* (n.d.).

⁷ The general principle is to recover the cosmic order formed by *shen* (spiritual order), *qi* (the breath that maintains balance in change), and *jing* (material and bodily order). Producing sperm leads to a loss of *jing*. In contrast, withholding ejaculation reverses the flow. In this way, *jing* rises through the spinal column and nourishes *qi*. Once *jing* is strengthened, *qi* is strong and *shen* is powerful, leading to good health. Sexuality is thus part of vital nourishing practices (养生 *yangsheng*), which also include breathing exercises, gymnastics, and the ingestion of herbal remedies (see Despeux and Khon 2003, 194, 221, 224; and "Religious Daoism" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive* 2017).

scenes as would a traditional painter create the mood of his painting.”⁸ Pirotte rightly adds that the work is a warning to Chinese intellectuals faced with the Cornelian choice of participating in—and committing to—the world’s affairs or standing aside in negative abstinence (Pirotte 2012, 101). When we compare *Shenjia Alley* with *Tonight Moon*, we do see an implicit association between the repression of desire, consumerism, and spirituality. If these two works are, however, a disenchanting critique of the spiritual state of China, their common focus on the male subject’s disenchantment underlines the centrality of the masculine in Yang’s search for the spiritual. It suggests that one should refrain from a shallow discourse on Yang’s series as inspired by “Chinese spiritual tradition,” using the neo-orientalist association of “blandness,” meditative mood, and the “sense of nature” (see Gaffric and Heurtebise 2018). In such a discourse, the centrality of the masculine in ancient and contemporary Chinese thought, as in Yang Fudong’s artwork, is ignored.

In my view, the work should be seen as a warning against lust, and thus as the reminiscence of a moral position, inspired by Confucianism and Daoism, and still present in New Confucianism, in which women are a danger to men’s souls. In exhausting their semen, the women of *Shenjia Alley* jeopardize their *qi*.



Figure 3: Yang Fudong, *Shenjia Alley–Fairy*, 63 x 150 cm, 2000, photograph
(Source: Courtesy of Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery)

⁸ M HKA, collections, untitled and undated. Available at: <https://www.muhka.be/collections/artworks/s/item/254-shenjia-alley-fairy>.

3. Female figures in Yang's work or the imprint of New Confucian morality

For Confucianism, as for Daoism, social harmony is achieved by respecting the social order, which is a reflection of the cosmic order in a macrocosm/microcosm relationship, in particular the balance between the masculine, active *Yang* principle and the feminine, passive *Yin* principle (Despeux and Kohn 2003, 640–641). At a social level, this implies control of the feminine by the masculine, in particular of its sexual appetite, which may exhaust masculine energy to the point of death, as exemplified in the Ming-period work *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅 *Jin ping mei*, 1617, translated by David Todd Roy, 1993–2013). According to Confucianism, women are either submissive, passive, “natural”, and virtuous, or powerful, sophisticated, and impure. The powerful woman is depicted in literature and painting as dangerous, leading to the death of the male hero, while the woman who excels in her role as wife and mother reinforces the social order (Wang 2010, 636; Van Dung 2022).

The renewed emphasis on Confucianism in contemporary China, in official discourses and among the Chinese male elite, has been accused, by the emerging feminist movements, of rebuilding the patriarchal order of the Republican and Imperial periods, which had been suspended since 1949 (Sung 2012). I believe that this pattern is present in some of Yang's works.

3.1 *After All I Didn't Force You*

Yang Fudong's first video work, entitled *After All I Didn't Force You* (我并非强破你 *Wo bingfei qiangpo ni*), from 1998, shows a series of fleeting encounters between a single woman and various men of indistinct appearances. A succession of single sequences, where she faces her partners across a desk or a coffee table, alternate with scenes when she wanders aimlessly in the street, followed by the men, accompanied by romantic music, while the phrase “after all, I didn't force you” appears on the screen. The meaning of the sentence is unclear as the Chinese could mean “I am not breaking with you” and it is unclear who the “I” is. The domineering body language of the male and the recoiling body of the woman facing him across the table suggests that the “I” is the male while in the wandering scenes the woman, with her fashionable hairstyle and clothes, and distanced gaze, seems to be controlling her cohort of male partners. As Qiu Zhijie's curatorial line aimed at criticizing consumerism and the loss of traditional values, *After All, I Didn't Force You* does indeed evoke the anonymity of Internet dating. The multiple male partners facing a single woman suggest that elements of feminine versus masculine power are also at play, against a backdrop of the defense of this traditional family order, as the next series *New Women* also indicates.

3.2 New Women series

The video installation—which is also presented in photographic form—entitled *New Women* (新女性 *Xīn nǚxing*) (2013) (Figures 4 and 5) further addresses these tensions.



Figure 4: Yang Fudong, *New Women*, 2013, video installation

(Source: © Yang Fudong. Courtesy of Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery)

It presents beautiful naked women—actresses from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Sydney (Chen 2014)—in a private salon in the Sino-Western style typical of 1930s Shanghai: velvet and mahogany chairs, Victorian colonnades, and marble fireplaces. They are naked except for their jewelry—necklaces, earrings, bracelets—in a fetishistic staging. The light emphasizes their curves, which match those of the furniture they are caressing with their long, varnished nails. In the classical tradition, the virtuous woman/wife was represented with a plain cloth in a natural setting (Fong 1996, 25), underpinning the link between the absence of sophistication and “natural,” moral behavior. Sophisticated clothing and decor evoke, in contrast, the corrupt, unvirtuous woman, the whore, the courtesan, as is the case here. The presence of a peach blossom in the background of one of these images (Figure 7), is a classical reminder, a semantic trope, that youth and beauty are passing while virtue is eternal, and a sign that this setting has a moralizing context. Yang’s women are objects of desire, open to the gaze of the photographer and the visitor. One critic writes that



Figure 5: Yang Fudong, *New Women*, 2013, video installation

(Source: © Yang Fudong. Courtesy of Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery)

the visitor moves between these monitors and feels drawn in, and “pressured” (Chen 2014). The work, Chen (2014) further suggests, is a celebration of elegant beauty as opposed to the vulgarity of “today’s images.” Indeed, the promiscuity and nudity of the models are reminiscent of *Shenjia Alley*, of which this second series appears to be a chic version.

3.3 New Woman or Modern Girl?



Figure 6: Marlene Dietrich in *Shanghai Express*, dir. Josef Von Sternberg, 1932,
still image, 01:13:15

(Source: Archive.org, public domain)



Figure 7: Yang Fudong, *New Women*, 2013

(Source: © Yang Fudong. Courtesy of Yang Fudong and Marian Goodman Gallery)

The seduction of the models is constructed using the characteristics of the *garçonne* with a tomboy haircut, and the vamp, reminiscent of the Republican era, and famously incarnated by Marlène Dietrich in *Shanghai Express* in 1932 (Figure 6): edgy hairstyle, full lips with heavy make-up, long thin eyelashes, intense and willful gaze underlined by a pencil line, an oval face with visible bone structure, and a small chin. The model from Yang Fudong's series (in Figure 7) has a similarly oval face (although her cheekbones are not salient), well-built shoulders, and almost masculine physical strength. A blurred reflection in the foreground, on the wood of the armchair, creates a depth that accentuates the focus on her face and hands. But unlike Dietrich's haughty pose, which seems immersed in inner reflection, untouchable, unfathomable, and impossible to contain, the eyes of Yang's model express melancholy. The passivity of her body's posture, which offers itself to the viewer's desire, is reinforced by her oblique outlook and body position that invites the viewer's gaze to enter the image, to follow the line of her shoulders and then her hip, and imagine in the semi-shadow, between the chair and the fireplace, her long legs, and naked buttocks.

What do these formal and semantic choices by the artist mean? Between the wars in China, and especially in Shanghai, a paradigm shift in femininity took place. Beauty criteria evolved, under Japanese and Western influence, away from the norms of classical beauty. There was a demand for full red lips, half-closed eyelids with no creases, eyebrows shaped like butterfly wings, modest eyes, a slender, fragile body (Fong 1996, 23), as well as a V-shaped face, a flat chest and clothing that did not show the curves of the body in order to reflect its virtuous dispositions (Zeng 2010, 22). Although the red lips were retained, in the 1920–30s the eyes had to be bolder, with a double crease drawn with a pencil on the eyelids to give it a Western appearance. The face became rounder, and the body exhibited muscular strength, large shoulders, and a strong bone structure, as if trained for swimming.

The comparison with Dietrich's posture in *Shanghai Express* demonstrates that the Westernization of female aesthetics was accompanied by a Westernization of moral criteria regarding women's sexual freedom. A wave of emancipation was then sweeping Chinese society. It took two forms, as it had in the West: that of the "New Woman" (新女性 *xin nǚxing*), or the "Modern Girl" (摩登女孩 *modeng nūhai*) (Zhou 2019), one being the Confucian modern mother figure, the other the degenerate socialite with a loose morality.⁹

Since 1918, for the intelligentsia and the republican elite, the "New Woman" had been both the new feminine norm and the emblem of Chinese modernity as a whole, following the example of educational, scientific, economic, and industrial development programs (Schwarcz 1986). Men thought of this new woman, not

⁹ I would like to thank Marie Laureillard for drawing my attention to this distinction.

as an individual but as a social role. Her acceptable degree of financial and sexual independence varied according to the parties involved (Ma 2003, 4–11). While the most left-wing intellectuals, like Lu Xun, thought it necessary for women to be financially independent and therefore to work outside the home, others deemed that they should exercise their rights and their new knowledge within marriage, which could become a place of equality between the sexes (Harris 1997, 287–288). These tensions are reflected in the passionate debates surrounding the character in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora, who decides to leave her home to find herself and be respected by her husband (Harris 1997, 287–288). In the Republican China of the 1920s, the tension between these two models became acute. The new woman had access to education, knew the rules of hygiene and the benefits of sport, but had to remain focused on her role as mother and wife. Her posture and clothing had to be fairly prudish,¹⁰ as shown in women's magazines (see, e.g., Hubbard 2014; Ma 2003), and advertising calendars *yuefenpai* (月份牌). The breasts are freed from the corset—in line with the new hygiene and freedom from coercive rules of the past—and clearly visible under the garment, but evoke above all good health and breastfeeding (Lei 2015, 189).

The “Modern Girl,” in contrast, is physically, sexually, and socially more liberated, may refuse to marry, insists on practicing men's professions and having equal legal rights in terms of property, vote, etc. It was driven by avant-garde women, actresses such as Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉) (Ma 2019) and writers such as Ai Xia (艾霞) (Colet 2015) and Chen Xuezhao (陈学昭) (Ma 2003). The tensions between the two models of the modern, freer womanhood, were debated in prominent and rather mainstream newspapers in particular *The Ladies' Journal* and *The New Woman*, successively run by Zhang Xichen, a journalist who would later become an ardent feminist (Ma 2003; Hui-Chi Hsu 2018). While for Zhang and its readers, a debate on the degree of independence of women and their role outside marriage was acceptable, for conservatives, the modern girl was a danger to society. She was portrayed as a prostitute, a communist, or a lost woman with no future (Lei 2015, 188).

These debates and ambiguities are the subject of the 1935 film *New Women* (新女性 *Xin nǚxing*) by the director Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生), who was close to leftist circles. The film is based on *Xiandai yi nǚxing* (现代一女性, *A Woman of Today*), Ai Xia's largely autobiographical novel. It tells the story of a single, elegant woman writer who is somewhat infatuated with her beauty; photos of her in acting poses decorate her apartment. Constantly at loggerheads with men, who see her as an easy woman rather than a writer, she loses her job as a music teacher and thus her livelihood after spurning the advances of the headmaster, Dr Wang. She

¹⁰ See, for example, Xie Zhiguang (circa 1929), reproduced in Francesca Dal Lago (2000, fig. 2, p. 104).

decides to become a prostitute to support her sick daughter, but in the end, makes the decision to commit suicide (and her daughter dies). Taken to the hospital, she changes her mind and wants to live on to fight against the corruption of the media world that is playing her for a fool. She dies speechless, as women workers march in front of the hospital, singing "The Song of the New Woman" (新女性主題歌 *Xin nǚxing zhutige*), which would become the national anthem of the People's Republic (Harris 1997, 285).¹¹ This implies that true freedom lies in collective, socialist, and not individual, bourgeois freedom.

Cai Chusheng's film actually presents several female role models, from the most despicable (Dr Wang's wife who forgives her husband's betrayal in exchange for a Cadillac) to the most virtuous (the music teacher Li Ayin who gives singing lessons to the workers). The intertwined destinies of these women demonstrate how difficult it is to invent and impose the status of the new woman individually, and how violent the journey is for the protagonists. The heroine is portrayed as both courageous and selfish, a good and a bad mother, anti-social and individualistic (she married a childhood sweetheart against the advice of her family), talented, and narcissistic. Her conquering gaze on the portraits that decorate her apartment is that of the tomboyish women who were also called "flappers" at the time (Lei 2015, 194). Her independence of spirit and morals, and her ambiguities, are punished by loneliness, social death or prostitution. The men are generally presented as selfish and immoral (Shen 2012).

The suicide of the lead actress, Ruan Lingyu, shortly after the film's release, on International Women's Day, March 8, 1935, dramatically confirmed these difficulties and sent shockwaves through public opinion. The actress, who had achieved financial independence, was divorced and lived with her lover, was attacked by the conservative press as a lost woman who was paying for her dreams of free love. For the press, both the heroine and the actress appeared not as the courageous and patriotic "New Woman" but as the "Modern Girl," i.e., as a danger to the social order (Harris 1997, 294) who seeks love but threatens to destroy her partners like a praying mantis, a she-demon (Stevens 2003, 89).

This Chinese *garçonne* is not a woman to love and marry, but a low-class woman to force and abuse. This second type is incarnated by Anna May Wong in *Shanghai Express* (1932). This film is a colonial view on the Chinese debate by an American author and producer, suggesting that in the West the situation is different: the military doctor remains in love and faithful to the courtesan Shanghai Lily (played by Dietrich), while the Chinese prostitute's fate is to be abused by her fellow countrymen. The film was indeed part of an American strategy to portray

¹¹ The scene is visible on YouTube "Song of the New Women" (新女性主題歌) – New Women (1935): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAPaGj-heHY>.

China as “backward,” which led to the banning of Paramount films in China for a period of time (see Leong 2005, 74; Li 2020). The situation of free women in the West was of course more nuanced as remarked on by the Chinese feminist Chen Xuezhao, who emigrated to France at the time. She stated that French women were enslaved to seduction and to men, had no demand for independence, and were more backward than Chinese women (Ma 2003, 19).

On which side is Yang Fudong's *New Women* series? Some critics claim that with these portraits Yang supports the liberated status of women in China in the 1930s, as in contemporary China (Reynaud 2017). The artist statements are elliptic. He argues: “[My series is] a tribute to early Chinese films from the 1930s, including *New Women* (1935) directed by Cai Chusheng.” He adds: “His was a realistic work, and I hope mine is a more abstract expression. The film talks about the image of an ideal woman, but there is a difference between reality and dreams” (in Stanhope 2014). In fact, Yang's (reverential) reference to the 1930s and to the 1935 film is part of a trend in the 1980s and 1990s that saw the emergence of a veritable cult of Ruan Lingyu, against a backdrop of tension between individual freedom and propaganda that culminated in the Tiananmen massacre (Harris 1997, 298). Despite a common interest in the figure of Ruan and the feminine, I believe that Yang's works and words do not partake in this political movement concerning individual freedom versus State control. Yang's series on *New Women* is a search for an unattainable ideal, the abstract concept of the feminine which does not refer to women only but is part of the human soul. This is confirmed when he adds: “In addition, ‘New Women’ is the depiction of the perfect woman image in each person's heart. [...] Therefore, ‘New Women’ also implies an idealistic state” (Lu 2013). Thus, the artist is in search for a “pure” (i.e., virtuous, spiritual) life that necessitates a “pure state” of mind, which suggests that Yang is looking at the debates on the feminine power of the 1930s from a masculine perspective.

Indeed, despite all the political feminist debate of the 1930s concerning *New Women*, the figure of the *femme fatale* (borrowed from the West) had, according to Sarah Stevens (2003), a psychological “mirror” dimension that was specific to China. Her deep, sometimes melancholic gaze and her marginal situation were an expression not of the specific situation of women, but of the insecurity of men (Stevens 2003, 90). It expressed the fear of emasculation of the male subject which was associated with the nation's loss of control over itself due to foreign control (Japanese and American). This analysis by Stevens helps make sense of the meaning behind Yang's *New Women* series, in which the gaze of the young women (towards the camera) appears both strong and fragile, active and passive. Like a mirror, it could express the contemporary Chinese male anguish, stemming this time not from the loss of Chineseness under the influence of foreigners, but

from the perceived tensions in the relationship between men and women due to the rise of feminism in the 1990s.

4. Feminism in China in the 1990s

The feminism of the inter-war period merged with the communist movement of 1949 to form a non-gendered egalitarianism. After the Cultural Revolution, a new wave of female contestation emerged among intellectuals. It aimed to retain equal rights with men and fight against the return of traditional values while asserting a specific sensibility (Croll 1977, 723; Shen 2017, 7). In the 1980s, it gave rise to the term *nǚxìng zhuyì* (女性主义), where *zhuyì* refers to the study of the feminine as the essence of woman and to a “feminine” struggle. It was not until the 1990s that the term *nǚquán zhuyì* (女权主义), which refers to women’s rights, came to designate feminist movements. It gained visibility at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (which Hillary Clinton attended). Women, feminist, and gender studies departments were then established in many Chinese universities.

Despite all this, there was and still is a strong resistance to changing social canons and, as Professor Emerita at Nankai University in Tianjin Sheng Ying (盛英, b. 1939) points out, many contemporary writers display a patriarchal conception of femininity and view feminism as a threat to the cohesion of society. They revel in recounting the sexual fantasies of concubines as in Su Tong (苏童, b. 1963), *Wives and Concubines* (妻妾成群 *Qiqie chengqun*, 1990); in describing the sexual urges of ugly women presented as obsessive, controlling, and a destroyer of their weak husbands as in Mo Yan (莫言), *Beautiful Breasts, Beautiful Buttocks* (丰乳肥臀 *Feng ru fei tun*, 1996). Most express a fascination with a slim waist and thin eyebrows—a Chinese beauty canon since the time of Confucius—and indulge in descriptions of sexual intercourse using Taoist sexual metaphors, such as “dragon fighting,” and “tiger marching” as in Li Peifu’s (李佩甫) *The Gate of the Sheep* (羊的门 *Yang de men*, 1999) (Sheng 2010, ch. 8). The popularity of this genre is linked, according to Shen Ying, to the perception of male powerlessness in the face of the rise of female emancipation and prominence in education and business. This is a fact, as the success of girls is exacerbated by the gender imbalance created by the one-child policy and the selective abortion of girls. Indeed, powerlessness is the theme of Jia Pingwa’s (贾平凹) untranslated novel *Huainian lang* (怀念狼, 2000), meaning “missing wolves” or “the wolves of the past.” This book expresses concern about the disappearance of “wolf men,” i.e., men with a strong libido. A hunter Fu Shan is impotent and masturbates to preserve his *Yin/Yang* balance. As we have seen, according to Taoist sexual theory, harmony between *Yin* and *Yang* is preserved by absorbing the female “essence” during intercourse, without ejaculation.

Without feminine contact, physical and spiritual death lurks. These anxieties may explain the return of a patriarchal and derogatory characterization of women's sexuality—or their desire for social success—with terms such as *shengnü* (剩女) or “leftover woman,” which refers to careerist women who find themselves alone and less “marriageable” after the age of 25 (Ji 2015, 8–9; Shen 2017, 17).

Anuradha Vikram asserts, without demonstrating it, that Yang's portraits of young women in bathing suits in the *International Hotel 6* series (2010) are a stance in favor of women who aspire to independence (Vikram 2013). I argue, in contrast, that this work, showing young sportive women giggling cheerfully in front of the camera like naive schoolgirls is geared at the male viewer. The presence of some of these images in the collection of Qiao Zhibing (乔志兵), owner of Shanghai Night, a very successful karaoke bar on the Caobao Road area, and their display in one of the private lounges (Figures 8 and 9), where male customers are led by hostesses dressed as soubrettes, suggests that indeed their function is ambiguous: the photography of these models in bathing costumes, smiling to the camera much like “New Women” of the 1930s, are hung over velvet sofas, in a subdued lighting. They appear in this context to second the décor geared towards the male clients. According to the scheme proposed by Laura Mulvey (1975, 11) in *Visual Pleasure and Cinema*: “the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work withing the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him.”



Figure 8: Image of a Shanghai Night salon with three photographs by Yang Fudong (left: *Hotel International*, 2010; center and right: *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, 2003–2007)

(Source: Courtesy of Qia Zhibing's collection)



Figure 9: Yang Fudong, *Hotel International*, 2010, in a private salon of Shanghai Night
(Source: Photograph by the author)

Yang's depiction of the "New Women" of the 1930s as fascinating, elusive, and also dangerous to men suggest therefore an unease in the confrontation with contemporary feminine power as a danger to the masculine spiritual balance, much aligned with New Confucianism's most conservative aspects. Yet his definition of the feminine as an ideal "part of the human soul" suggests a more Daoist dimension and a search for a lost *Yin/Yang* balance is also at play.

5. In search of the *Yin* of the male soul

Unlike the "religions of the Book," the position of Neo-Confucianism, inspired by Daoism, was that the feminine spirit (*Yin*) is as important as the masculine (*Yang*) for the spiritual and social vitality of men (McLachlan 2021). Long before Carl Jung's proposals on the existence of a feminine aspect (*anima*) in the male psyche (1989, 391), and on the nutritive, transformative role of the feminine, symbolized by the alembic of alchemy (Jung 1989, 200), Daoism recognized this duality of the feminine and the masculine in the cosmic and microcosmic order, as expressed in particular in the *Secret of the Golden Flower* (太乙金華宗旨 *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi*, 1688–1692), as Jung himself acknowledges (Jung 1989, 197). Hence, at a social level, *Yin* is feminine, black, the absence of energy, and death and on a cosmic level, the balance between *Yin* and *Yang*, between passivity and activity, between desire and moderation (in sexual appetite, willpower) is a source of longevity (Fu and Wang 2015). In *Women*

in *Daoism*, Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn (2003, 19) even suggest that women, as bearers of life, have a special link with the Dao.

Yang Fudong's preoccupation with the feminine could be a search for such a Yin/Yang balance, harmonious masculinity, aimed at repairing the current situation of wandering men, too *yin*, or absorbed in their work, too *yang*. There are the men in office suits in *Tonight Moon*, meditating in front of water and plants (*Yin*); the male character in *Liu lan* (2003), an urbanite in love with a peasant woman. The woman is active (*Yang*), embroidering and fishing on calm water in a misty landscape (*Yin*); the man dressed in a white summer suit, wearing an oversized white (*Yin*) scarf, stares at her idly, while a popular song proclaims that lovers are always separated.

Another film, *Ye jiang/The Nightman Cometh* (2011), is undoubtedly the paragon of these representations of a lost masculinity symbolized by the omnipresence of white and death. Yang depicts an old general contemplating his defeat on a desolate snow-covered plain. A young princess comes along dressed in white, representing purity, like the deer that accompanies her; she is followed by a middle-aged woman, dressed in a white cocktail dress, together with an ephēbe also dressed in an unlikely white suit. Their summer chic attire and the bewildered look they cast on the stage,¹² are an allegory of the capitalist, westernized Shanghai of the 1930s, which for Yang is a *topos* of decadence. Effeminate, maladjusted, coward, and selfish (in comparison to the grand detachment of the general), they wear the color of death in this snowy landscape.

With their languid appearance, strange postures, and sophisticated clothes, the *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (竹林七贤 *Zhulin qi xian*, 2003–2007) are also images of lost masculinity. At once androgynous and powerless, they walk with non-chalance, sophisticated elegance, and dependency through a rural environment. The artist says they are on a kind of road movie in search of beauty (Yang 2017). The M+ museum in Hong Kong, which owns one of these video artworks, writes that they are focused “not on nation-building, but on self-definition” (Blair 2019). This melancholic work is, according to the artist, influenced by the paintings of the reclusive painters Ni Zan (倪瓚, 1301–1374) and Shi Tao (Yang 2017). Both artists lived during periods of turmoil and retired in exile in a rural setting. Ni Zan's painting *Six Gentlemen* (六君子图 *Liu junzi tu*, 1345, see Figure 10) bears witness to this.

¹² See some images at: <http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/traderoutes/yang-fudong.html>.



Figure 10: Ni Zan, *Six Gentlemen*, 1345, Yuan dynasty, ink on paper, 61.9 x 33.3 cm
(Source: Shanghai Museum Collection; public domain)

Depicting six trees isolated on an island, it precisely illustrates the idea of the resilience of learned monks in the face of political and spiritual change, which corresponds to the work of Yang, whose “intellectuals” are referred to in the original title as *xian* (贤, “scholars and sages”) (Svalkoff 2010, 6). Their fashionable and expensive clothes (from famous brands including Burberry) borrow from Shi Tao’s taste for refinement and express a search for literary sophistication and poetic beauty (Vial Kayser 2015).

The artist’s discourse and personal demeanor evoke the *caizi* (才子), or the talented scholar, the archetype of masculinity in the classic period, different from the warrior but just as respected. A portrait of this “successful literati” can be found in the cinema of the Han Han (Hunt 2020, 34) such as *The Continent* (後會無期 *Hou hui wu qi*, 2014), which tells the journey of three men in search of “re-virilization.” During the journey, Jiang Hu, a sensitive-looking scholar with large round glasses

and a soft voice (Hunt 2020, 34–35) grows in self-confidence, thus becoming successful with women and wealthy. Pamela Hunt (2020, 34–35) describes the film as “a journey in search of an ideal masculinity that seemed lost,” “a space for the (re)construction of an authentic and dominant masculinity in the face of the crisis [of virility].”

The seven intellectuals in Yang’s artwork include two women. No sexual or sentimental interaction between men and women is suggested as if the spiritual “road” journey implied celibacy and chastity. The danger of the feminine as *Yin*/white/water/death is looming, however, as in the portrait of the main model, immersed in a white bathtub on a beach, staring at the viewer with her dark, unfathomable gaze (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, Part IV*, 2006, photograph, 120 x 180 cm

(Source: Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery)

In this series, a Daoist/cosmological connotation also appears in the way the wanderers’ journey is associated with the elements: water and earth obviously, but also wood (trees), iron (in the peasant instruments they inefficiently use). This association gives a definite cosmic flavor to the series that evokes the Daoist concept of *wuji* (无极, “limitless, primordial state, no energy”) (Zhang 2002, 14), which moved into a sense of “completion” in the writings of the Neo Confucian philosopher Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐, 1017–1073) (Lindén 2011, 167–168). The elements form a dynamic diagram in which the union of the two sexes result in the production of myriads of beings, and thus “give rise to the phenomenal world” (Lindén 2011, 167–168).

6. Conclusion: Yang Fudong and *The Dream in the Red Chamber*

My analysis aims to highlight this dual aspect in Yang Fudong's work, which seems to offer both praise and fear of the feminine. This ambivalence can be explained by the fact that the 2000s coincided with the emergence of a new Chinese feminism, a crisis of masculinity in China, and a renewed interest in New Confucianism as an alternative to Western modernization. In this respect, the artist seems to be part of a conservative trend aimed at re-establishing a dominant masculinity that has been jeopardized by the educational and professional success of women—a trend that is in line with the government's concerns (Gang et al. 2021), and of which the film-maker Han Han is a well-known example (Hunt 2020). In contrast to these calls for virile masculinity, however, the artist also expresses a desire to rebuild masculinity through an aesthetics suffused with literati references to the feminine as a spiritual principle. The figure of the *caizi* as the poet intellectual with a feminine soul, with an elegant but nonchalant demeanor, regains agency over the Western "businessman."

The ambivalence at the heart of Yang's work echoes Cao Xueqin's famous eighteenth-century novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. This novel has recently been regarded by Chinese critics as "feminist" and "progressive," an anticipated version of the works of Lu Xun and Mao Dun (Edwards 1990, 407). These claims are based on the portrayal of women by the main character, the effeminate Jia Baoyu, who celebrates femininity as a higher cosmic principle, as can be seen in chapter 20, quoted by Louise Edwards:

As a result of this upbringing [among girls], he [Baoyu] had come to the conclusion that the pure essence of humanity was concentrated in the female of the species and that the males were its mere dregs and offscourings. To him, therefore, all members of his own sex without distinction were mere brutes who might just as well not have existed. (Cao 1978, 407–408, quoted in Edwards 1990, 410–411)

In this novel, pre-pubertal girls are the carriers of this cosmic harmonious ideal. They are "fairies," while married and elderly women, and cantankerous nannies are impure because of their sex life; they are "monstrous demons" who disrupt this harmony because they are cruel, jealous, envious, and angry. The "fairies" who concern themselves only with poetry and music, are the keepers of the cosmic order as long as they stay away from power, which, according to the Qing value system, "corrupts" (Edwards 1990, 408). Hence, fairies in the novel are powerful, they behold the secret of life but must be confined to their apartments, in divine seclusion.



Figure 12: Yang Fudong, *The Colored Sky: New Women II*, 2014, photograph
(Source: Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery)

As in *Dream in the Red Chamber*, Yang's depiction of women contains a condemnation of the lustfulness of New Women/Modern Girls and praise of the transcendent femininity of young girls like the young princess in *Yie Jiang* or the starlets in *The Colored Sky: New Women II*, 2014 (Figure 12). In this second work, multiple-colored screens reminiscent of candy wrappers (and of childhood sweats) project a warm light on the bodies of young girls in swimming costumes (Yang 2015). Sexual symbols surround them: shells with openings resembling the female sex, turgid cacti, and a viscous snake. A false deer and a horse appear, which, according to the artist, is a quotation from a traditional fable, "Show a Deer and Call It a Horse" (指鹿为马 *Zhi lu wei ma*), from the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.E.), the equivalent of "The Emperor's New Clothes," which talks about what is false and what is true (Anonymous 2015). Yang opposes the false reality of the colored screens, of the deer with the purity of young girls who, in his opinion, hold a "special secret" (Yang 2015), as do the "fairies" in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.¹³

¹³ Edwards (1990, 427, note 11) notes that "the conflation of the goddess and the whore within Chinese culture is also revealed in the word *shennü*, which the *Cihai* explains has long meant both goddess and prostitute."

Hence, it appears that the desire and fear of the feminine, that is a leitmotif in Yang's work, are part of a more general crisis of masculinity in China, threatened by both the rise of women's power, and the loss of the value of the feminine in men forced to emulate the Western macho, virile model. Incidentally, my analysis sheds light on the meaning of Xu Zhen's (徐震, b. 1977)' work, *The Problem of Color*, presented in *A Useful Life*. It shows a naked man of sculptural elegance, photographed from behind, a trickle of blood running down his thighs, suggesting castration or menstruation, we do not know. According to the artist, the work exudes a sense of beauty: "There is nothing abject in these pictures, but rather an insistence on beauty" (Xu Zhen, quoted in Pirotte 2012, 99). Perhaps the beauty in Xu Zhen, as in Yang's works, comes from the feminization of the male body, and from the resistance to de-virilization that strikes a balance of *Yin* and *Yang* in the male spirit.

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¹⁴ All online sources were last accessed on March 14, 2024.

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STYLISH AND BOLD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE TROPE OF THE MODERN GIRL IN INDIAN CINEMA IN THE LATE COLONIAL PERIOD

Sutanuka Banerjee and Lipika Kankaria

This chapter examines the distinct trope of the Modern Girl, which became apparent in Indian cinema in the early twentieth century, taking into account the discursive construction of feminine modernity from the interwar period to the end of colonial rule. The Modern Girl, who became a heuristic device and represented the desires and anxieties of an emergent modernity on screen, had transnational connections, thus opening an interesting area of research that unravels the intersection of capitalism, consumerism, and individual agency as evidenced by global trends and sartorial representations of the *sitaras* ("stars"). The chapter relies on films, documentaries, archival resources, and secondary material sources to explore the relevance of gender and modernity in the Indian context. It includes the discourse analysis of such representations to highlight a complex web of spatial, cultural, and temporal mediations.

Keywords: modernity, gender, film, India, colonial period

1. Introduction

The Indian film industry has experimented with thematic explorations and shooting locations over the years and can be historically examined in the context of its transnational connections (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 1998; Rajadhyaksha 2003; Sinha 2013). The "global reception and increasing visibility of Indian films in various countries are the result of a complex network of national and transnational" factors (Kankaria and Banerjee 2020, 236). The growth of the industry, due to technological advancements during its budding stage, had facilitated the movement of ideas beyond borders. While analyzing the transnational connections that became

apparent in Indian cinema in the early twentieth century, the distinct trope of the "Modern Girl" can be identified. Various cross-country collaborations propelled the emergence of the figure of the Modern Girl, who became the representative image of modernity, fashion, and femininity. The thematic discourse of films of the 1920s and 1930s contributed to shape the figure of the Modern Girl, who became a heuristic device and represented the desires and anxieties of an emergent modernity on screen.

The Indian Modern Girl had precedent in the image of the "Gibson Girl," created by Charles Dana Gibson (see Patterson 2010), who was a representation of the quintessential figure of the American woman at the turn of the twentieth century, epitomizing ephemeral beauty. The Modern Girl around the World Research Group (2008)¹ situates the iconography of the Modern Girl at the intersection of capitalism, consumerism, and individual agency as a result of her participation in global trends. The first appearance of the Modern Girl on Indian screen in the 1920s was geared by an appropriation of Western ideas of modernity. This trope was conceived not as a blind consumer of commodities, but as an active participant in the process of negotiating ideas of modernity, thereby producing newer meanings in connection with existing ones (Banerjee 2014).

The Modern Girl embodied a decisive struggle between contesting ideas of tradition rooted in the culture of the country and an imported modernity. Various forms of media created and publicized the look as well as the outlook of the Modern Girl. They were often seen in cinema and advertisements which associated such women with luxury, cosmetics, and travel. Their images reflected the changes taking place in society regarding the position of women which were brought about by extensive local-global intersections. The Modern Girl represented "an up-to-date and youthful femininity, provocative and unseemly in its intimacy with foreign aesthetic and commodity influences" (Weinbaum et al. 2008, 9). Transnational encounters helped reshape and re-define the prevalent gender norms and stereotypes while allowing for the exploration of various models of femininity. Although these changes were universal, the subtle differences made the trope of the Modern Girl distinct from one another. The emergence of the Modern Girl has long been negotiated in the Asian context. There are various studies which have focused on these icons across countries, including for instance, Japan (Silverberg 1992, 1998; Sato 2003; Frederick 2005), Malaysia (Lewis 2009), Burma (Ikeya 2008), Siam (Posrithong 2019), Indonesia (Kamphuis 2022), China (Stevens 2003), Korea (Suh 2013), and India (Ramamurthy 2006, 2008; Banerjee 2014).

¹ This research group comprised Tani E. Barlow, Madeleine Yue Dong, Uta G. Poiger, Priti Ramamurthy, Lynn M. Thomas, and Alys Eve Weinbaum, and studied the complexities of the Modern Girl.

This chapter is an attempt at situating the Indian Modern Girl and exploring the transnational modernity exemplified in the visual media during the 1920s and 1930s. Critically analyzing the emergence and evolution of the Modern Girl on Indian screens will contribute to unearthing the intersection of race and gender embedded in the visual and consumerist culture. It is worth noting that most of the Modern Girls who acted in silent films in India were of Jewish, Eurasian, and Anglo-Indian origin. This study employs discourse analysis and specifically focuses on the actresses of the time who were pioneers in breaking stereotypes. The chapter will focus on two particular actresses, Sulochana and Nadia, who were very popular during this era and were the leading ladies in many films. To explore the multi-layered nuances of their characters, the chapter relies on film excerpts, documentaries, and secondary material resources available online which include posters and stills from movies. The transformation in the representation of the Modern Girl in Indian films and its relegation to the margin in later decades have also been highlighted.

2. Theorizing glocality and modernity

The process of globalization promotes the creation of transnational social spaces (Roudometof 2005), which results in increased cross-border transactions. It is in such spaces that cultural exchanges are facilitated, and newer concepts are framed. The significance of global interconnectedness is an important component when undertaking analyses across disciplines employing specific theoretical lens (Castells 1996; Albrow 1997; Beck 1999, 2000). There have been varying opinions regarding the multifarious consequences of globalization, as several theorists have pointed out that the presence of a globally dominant culture poses a challenge to indigenous culture. This might prove to have a counteractive influence as the local and traditional culture do not have the capacity or the position to oppose the homogenization that globalization promotes (Thornton 2000). Globalization tends to propagate replication, and this has led to the formulation of newer concepts such as glocalization that aim to challenge the monolithic construction of cultural elements. The word “glocal” is constructed by fusing two terms—global and local. This idea has gained momentum among scholars in recent years as it encourages a cross-cultural perspective while exploring complex issues which involve global and local intersections. The notion of “glocality” embodies transnational processes and can be defined as the diffusion of the global and the local, which results in distinctive outcomes in different contexts. This highlights the global heterogeneity and the intermixing of cultures whereby selective appropriation of ideas are possible. The concept was introduced as an alternative to the traditional globalization framework as it provides a new arena for inquiry (Giddens 1990;

Sparks 2000), and this has been implemented in the field of media and film studies. Robertson (1995) emphasizes the understanding of the global-local nexus which aims to study the reconfiguration of global significations and their adaptations into the local contexts. The visual representation of these multi-layered negotiations is visible in myriad forms in the film and media industry as cross-cultural elements play a very important role in shaping the images.

Modernization has historically been understood as a "process begun and finished in Europe, from where it has been exported across the ever-expanding regions of the non-West" (Mitchell 2000, 1). The concept is fraught, however, with contradictions as it is a subjective position and a discursive ideological space created by local-global interactions. The concepts and discourses surrounding modernity are generally associated with a Eurocentric bias and carry an underlying patriarchal overtone. The emergence of the Modern Girl has been a result of the multi-layered Western influences and needs to be examined with respect to global media flow, modernity, and gender. According to Munshi (2001), the concept of femininity has been produced through various discourses "including those of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism." The colonies have had historical linkages with the "West" (Srivastava 2004) which has shaped and influenced their culture, yet this space cannot be homogeneously understood. This liminality and plurality of modernity were reflected not only in the literature of the times, but also in the visual representations, which recorded the changing concepts and attitudes of the producers as well as the consumers of visual culture. The transnational approach to the Modern Girl lays greater emphasis on the global facet of the appearance, hinting about the fact that "modern forms of femininity emerged through rapidly moving and multi-directional circuits of capital, ideology and imagery" (Barlow et al. 2005, 248). As a heuristic device, the Modern Girl exemplified the diverse aspects of feminine modernities through appearance, consumerism, the making and viewing of the body, popular culture, and contemporary representations (Nicholas 2015), with a view to negotiating with their image not only as modern objects but also of themselves as modern subjects. The Indian Modern Girl was a product of transnational connections, where the local was influenced by the global and vice versa.

Among various issues that can be studied at the intersection of global and local paradigms, modernity and its far-reaching impacts are important concepts that can be examined in relation to visual culture. The discourses of modernity have mostly originated from a Eurocentric perspective wherein ideas spread to different countries due to colonial influences. Non-Westerners engaged in complex interactions with these ideas, however, and adapted it based on their sociocultural context. These multi-layered negotiations have been theoretically conceptualized as "multiple modernities" and "alternative modernities" (Chatterjee 1997). In addition,

Bhabha (1991), Appadurai (1996), and Chakrabarty (1997) have also theorized about the development of the plural nature of modernity. This can be understood in terms of a heterogeneous concept which focuses on hybridity and intermingling of cultures leading to glocalization. Another important concept that needs to be mentioned in this context is the idea of colonial modernity, which lays emphasis on the colonial roots of the modernization process and how it integrated with the local cultures. The impact of colonial modernity was visible on the screen as well as in the representations in the print media as the Modern Girl navigated the multi-layered anxieties associated with the assimilation and appropriation of the global influences in a local context. In this sense, global modernity has been interpreted and adapted in various social and cultural contexts. Out of the diverse negotiations that on-screen modernity has undergone, the figure of the Modern Girl has been a persistent trope that has raised various debates about changing social and gender roles.

In the interwar period, the concept of modernity was shaped and disseminated "through the circulation of images, such as photographs in magazines, movies, and department windows" (Freedman et al. 2013, 4). This allowed the diffusion of the nuances of modernity in the public space into the private spheres. This influenced the local culture substantially and formed an integral part of the public culture. Appadurai and Brackenridge (1995, 5) define public culture as a "zone of cultural debate," which cannot be comprehended without understanding the conflicts and anxieties associated with "national sites and transnational cultural processes." This space problematizes the ideas of modernity and other cultural constructs, and at the same time allows for cultural encounters and interactions. The experience of modernity, in the case of films, considers not only the spectator but also closely involves the complexities of the performer's subjectivity and agency. Modernity shapes a new social identity which is built on the intersections of the consumption of culture as well as personal and national narratives (Lee and LiPuma 2002). The producers of visual media, such as advertisers and filmmakers, were conscious of women's changing roles and demands during the 1920s and 1930s, which consequently resulted in elaborate ideas of feminine subjectivities. This also encouraged increased consumption and, as scholars such as Weinbaum (2008) and Thomas (2008) have highlighted, it served as a means to participate in hegemonic racial identity and, sometimes, even to contest it. The consumerist culture is guided and molded by the audience's reception which is based on their own life experiences (Iser 1989). This highlights the nuanced engagements between cultural producers and the consumers.

Kellner and Durham (2001, 5) state that all cultural artifacts produced in a society are loaded with "meaning, values, biases, and messages" that need to be situated within the social contexts of their production as well as reception. The

various forms of entertainment contain representations which are situated at the intersection of gender, class, sexuality, and other social categories thereby making the idea of representation a complex and multilayered one, where culture produces meanings. As global media flows became part of the visual industry, consumerist tendencies began to be embedded in the local practices. The booming market of films in India was a result of the cultural consumption that started with the silent cinema of the past and continued to grow through newer mediums. The commercial film industry gave rise to a discourse based on images and narratives and which was further defined by the images of glamour, lifestyle, and fashion of the female actors, promoting cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, and thereby shaping the perceptions of people across classes and localities. Prompted by capitalism and material culture, the aspirations and performance of the Modern Girl in India shaped individual and collective identities influenced by advertising, bodily practices, and consumption. There was a marked shift of representation as an increasing emphasis on glamour, sexuality, and appearance highlighted the notion of the "modern self," which later manifested through beauty contests and pageants (Munshi 2004; Thapan 2004). As more consumer products, magazines, fashion trends, and accessories became available from other parts of the world, the consumerist practices of women underwent a change as they were no longer bound by the locally produced limited items but had access to global products advertised on screen. The discourses relating to beauty, clothing, body, and fashion led to the production as well as the performance of the newly defined female body.

Transnational modernity resulted in new depictions of the Modern Girl and her interpretation of the concept of modernity as well as negotiations with global ideas which were available across countries due to increased movement of people as well as commodities. The icon of the Modern Girl gained momentum as a media construct that symbolized Westernization and culture of consumption at a time when many of the countries were navigating the colonial influences and trying to negotiate with their cultural past. They symbolized the contradictions and ambivalence which were at the center of the debate surrounding modernity and its appropriation. The manifestation of various aspects of modernity was not restricted to their on-screen presence as the off-screen lives of the Modern Girl also reflected their engagement with variegated facets of modernity that captivated the public. They were able to challenge the restrictive norms of society through their sartorial experimentations and lifestyles, which generated interest through magazines and films (Ramamurthy 2006). The transnational influence in visual culture in India can be traced back to the early years of cinema, where the leading female stars were not essentially of Indian descent. The presence of women on the Indian silver screen was still considered a taboo and it was a generation of women from the Jewish and Anglo-Indian community who broke the stigma by entering

the public space, often adopting stage names to obscure their identity (Eisenberg 2020). The Indianized version of their names struck a chord with the audience, who imagined and reimagined their representation globally. While Jewish Indians were certainly the “other”—they practiced their own unique customs, were somewhat geographically isolated, and usually unable to speak Hindi—India was, and continues to be, one of the few places where Jews have integrated into society without facing antisemitism (Desai 2016). Modern Girls gained public acceptability and popularity by adopting Indian-sounding names although they stood apart due to their distinctive physical appearance on screen (Exbulletin 2021; Shrava 2021). The iconography of the Modern Girl became representative of the transformation that women’s appearance and presence on screen were undergoing amidst debates of modernity, female subjectivity, and cosmopolitanism:

In the early to mid-twentieth century, articles, discussions, and opinion pieces on women’s rights and the idea of the “modern woman” were common in English-language and vernacular newspapers and magazines. Discussions ranged from fashion to professions to ideas about what constituted the modern Indian woman. While Jewish women were rarely singled out in these conversations, actresses and the roles they played on screen and off screen were common topics of discussion. (Mukherjee 2023)

The global cultural flows and commodity market fashioned femininity, but the Modern Girl “indexed the racial formation of the nation or colony in which she resided” (Barlow et al. 2005, 247). The cosmopolitan Modern Girl made her initial public appearance through films where she was portrayed as the English educated college girl. Slowly, her flamboyance spread to other forms of visual culture, and generated a “social identity and a wildly popular icon in multiple media” (Ramamurthy 2006, 197). Although the *sitara*, or “starlet,” was an instant hit among the Indian audience, she was eclipsed over the years and has recently been re-discovered by scholars who have attempted to understand the complexities of her origin and fluidity of her performance. It is therefore important to formulate newer theoretical paradigms in order to understand the nuances of modernity and its appropriation by the Modern Girls in the context of India. These examples establish the more public roles that women during this period were adopting, thereby breaking away from the conventional set-up of society and asserting their independence. The growing portrayal of the Modern Girl as the quintessence of pleasure, desire, beauty, and autonomy highlighted a wider adoption of Western ideologies. The iconography of Modern Girls bears testimony to the divergent ways of individual appropriation of a global trend of the 1920s and 1930s, and demonstrates how these icons adopted and adapted their roles to serve local, national, and global purposes.

3. Analytical tools

According to Foucault (1978), discourses are not static as they endure constant struggles and transformations based on shifts in social structures. Discourse analysis focuses on identifying the underlying discussions that are embodied within any given text through a close analysis of the language, images, and subtext used. This approach also inquiries into the implicated broader social relations (Gavey 1989). Spatially and temporally, films embody "constantly varying configurations of sound, image, gesture, text and language" (O'Halloran 2004, 110). Interpretation of cinematic discourses and meaning making through reasoning helps in deciphering the semiotic message encrypted in the films.

Film discourse simultaneously refers to optical and auditory sign systems which is designed in a way to execute the filmmaker's creative intentions. The subjectivity of the audience adds, however, further complexities to the narration, which is compounded by various elements such as language, emotiveness of actors, intertextuality, etc. This helps in gaining insights into the filmic content and its contribution to broader cultural, political, and social discourses (Bateman 2018). Critical discourse analysis emphasizes the links between discourse and other social elements. It is an explanatory critique as it "does not simply describe existing and evaluate existing realities but seeks to explain them" (Fairclough 2023, 1). The chapter engages in normative critique, that is, the analysis does not simply describe the realities but evaluates the representations on the screen. The present research will therefore seek to identify the motif of the Modern Girl, uncovering their subject position and the subjectivities that are presented through cinematic texts.

The discursive themes and their treatment on screen can be multidimensional and might be interpreted in myriad ways depending on one's point of view. In this context, a comparative approach attempts to understand one film by relating it to another film based on any object, representation, or concept. A comparative perspective, when attempting to analyze cinematic discourse, helps in understanding the different nuances projected through various films. The subtle similarities and differences become more prominent while closely examining the contemporary films which helps in holistic discourse analysis. It helps in establishing and elaborating new connections based on similar theoretical paradigms.

The chapter seeks to unravel the multilayered icon of the Modern Girl during the formative years of Indian cinema. The chapter will rely on primary sources such as films, either whole or partial, posters of the films, and other visual materials. In addition to these, it will refer to secondary sources such as magazines from the same period to examine discourse surrounding the representation of the Modern Girl on screen and its reception by viewers.

4. Visual economies of the Modern Girl in an Indian context

The emergence of the Indian Modern Girl at the global-local interface presents interlocking views of acceptance and condescension about women's negotiations in the public sphere with respect to body and fashion. As a result, the codification of the "modern girl" as a canonical figure has been a challenging one, being variously interpreted and understood, in terms of diversification in the socio-cultural milieus. Around the 1920s, there were cultural and social changes taking place in India which sought to transform and define women's position and appearance in society. This was a complex space which problematized questions of race, gender, and power and constantly challenged the stereotypes. The appearance of discourse related to these issues and the arising debates could be attributed to the increasing reach and popularity of films. Dilemmas and questions of morality came to be associated with the visual industry which portrayed women in a "modern" manner. This period introduced evolving concepts of beauty, morality, class, sexuality, and desirability. These notions were derived from representations in the visual culture that encouraged ways of viewing the body as modern and feminine through the use of commodities and practices, which included skin care, make-up, and dress to propagate and sustain the discourses of beauty that were fundamental in fashioning the identity and image of the Indian Modern Girl (Ramamurthy 2008). She became the standard representation of modernity as well as femininity and this symbol was situated at the intersection of commercialism, culture, and the self. These ideas were shaped by the leading ladies of the silver screen and the discourses surrounding their lives off-screen. These developments made the appearance of the Modern Girl almost like a performance that was produced through a host of global commercial goods and home-grown cosmetics.

Although restricted to the urban setting, it was a development based on the visual presence of woman in the public sphere. As is evident from representations in the popular culture of the time, the film stars in the image of a Modern Girl epitomized glamour in the 1920s and a deviation from traditional constructs of femininity. The "familiarity with urban space was crucial to adapting to modern modes of employment and entertainment, where publicness and performativity were crucially tied together" (Niazi 2019, 335). The women actors generated excitement in the cities through their appearance and lifestyle during the 1920s–1930s, when society was being shaped by modernization in social, technological as well as cultural spheres. The spectacle of modernity was seen in urban spaces in the form of trains, motor-cars, film studios, and telephones while glamour and the flamboyance of lifestyles and fashion could be spotted on the streets (Bhaumik 2001). Access to this urban space was not, however, within the reach of the commoners, which added to the elusiveness of the film stars and helped in generating the popular discourses surrounding their lives on and off the screen (Madhukalya 2015).

Reneé Smith (Seeta Devi), Ruby Myers (Sulochana), Rachael Sofaer (Arati Devi), Susan Solomon (Firoza Begum), and Esther Victoria Abraham (Pramila) were among the first influential actresses who brought about a revolution on screen. It is to be noted that the actress-producer Pramila hailed from the same Baghdadi heritage as her sister, the actress Romila (Sophie Abraham), and her cousin, the starlet Rose (Rose Musleah). Seeta Devi's debut in *Prem Sanyas* (*The Light of Asia*) in 1925, an Indo-German production, made her an instant star in the budding film industry. This was followed by *Durgesh Nandini* (1927), *Shiraz* (1928), and *Prapancha Pash* (1929). Sulochana was working as a telephone operator before making her film debut in a film entitled *Cinema Queen* (1926) and had a long career thereafter. Some of her most popular films were *Typist Girl* (1926), *Balidan* (1927), *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), *Indira BA* (1929), *Sulochana* (1933), and *Gul Sanovar* (1934), among others. She was commemorated with the issue of an Indian stamp dedicated to her in 2013 (Robbins 2016). Arati Devi had the distinction of acting in the first Bihari film, entitled *Life Divine* (*Punarjanma*), but she did not have a long career as she gave up acting after her marriage. Pramila, the first Miss India and a popular screen personality, had an exceptionally versatile career, which included stunt films, such as *Return of the Toofan Mail* (1935) and *Ulti Ganga* (1942). She was one of the major woman film producers in Indian cinema with thirty-six acting credits to her name. Patience Cooper was another actress who popularized the Western, Hollywood-inspired look. She is also credited with playing the first double role in Indian films in *Patni Pratap* (1923) and *Kashmiri Sundari* (1924). Apart from these actresses, one of the most prominent stars was Mary Ann Evans, who came to be known as Fearless Nadia, a woman of Australian origin who became a successful actor as well as stuntwoman in the Indian cinema. Her first film, *Hunterwali* (*A Woman with a Whip*, 1935), where she played the titular character, became extremely popular and established her reputation as a stunts performer.

The graphical representation of styles, as seen in the films and film posters of this period, accentuates the stress on a modernized way of dressing that was gaining popularity. More often than not, the dress sported during the interwar years in India was mostly a variation of the traditional sari, but these variations signified fluidity as the style of wearing a sari culturally indicated the class or caste of a woman. Moreover, experimentations with draping styles did not associate them with any particular region, which added to the enigma and appeal of the stars or *sitara*. These modern draping of the sari broke stereotypes as is evident from the portraits of various actresses. New elements such as elaborate frills and designer blouses added to their glamour. In addition to this, the storylines of the films included a wide array of characters which experimented with their clothing and appearances. For instance, in *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), Sulochana played eight different characters including a policeman, a European blonde, a Hyderabad

gentleman, and a gardener. This demonstrates that cross-dressing was also adopted on the screen, which further emphasized the fluidity and ambiguity of the actresses.

There were various ways in which the Modern Girls were depicted on screen. In addition to the above discussed variations, the popular stunt films of the time shaped the figure of the avenging angel, who was generally masked and wore Western attires. In this context, mention must be made of Fearless Nadia, who wore tight clothes in sync with the characters she played on screen in action films such as *Hunterwali* (1935), *Hurricane Hansa* (1937), and *Punjab Mail* (1939), ushering in a different trend and visual depiction of modernity. The experimentations regarding appearances helped the actresses in proclaiming their identity, thereby exercising their will and agency which gave expression to their negotiations with the ideas of modernity. The hair sometimes became shorter as the shift was to more radical and utilitarian cropped hair. An increased and loud use of make-up characterized the portraits and photographs of the leading film stars. Deeper shades of lipsticks, emphasizing the shape of the lips and eyes deeply lined with eyeliners and kohls, made their appearance very feminine and attractive. Ramamurthy (2006, 200) cites some of the tropes that stood out as symbols of the Modern Girl during this period: “sexy and provocative; long limbed or made to look so; she wore Western-style clothing and hats; she sported bobbed hair, lipstick, plucked eyebrows, mascara, and painted nails.”

The liberal lifestyle of Jewish and Anglo-Indian people made it easier for them to take on roles that other women of the time could not. Therefore, the Modern Girl also symbolized racial ambiguity and religious hybridity as they integrated themselves into the multicultural setting. Starting as early as the 1920s, their influence was predominant in the performing arts industry, as they enthusiastically incorporated dance numbers. The carefree demeanor alongside their lighter skin tones helped them flourish during the silent era and early talkies era. Women's visibility in the public during this time was characterized by experimentations of looks. It is further evident that they complicated their social position through their on-screen performance within a visual register by asserting their sexual agency and appearing in the public domain. The cinematic public space that this Modern Girl inhabited was a field of performance and enactment in the quest for self-fulfillment of the subject position of the Modern Girl. She encouraged the consumerist culture and indulged in consumption, an activity exemplified by a number of advertisements and posters from the early twentieth century (Thakurta 1991; Hussain 2021). The on-screen and off-screen lives of these women reflected their autonomy, agency, and modernity as they were challenging the established patriarchal norms. Their lives off-screen generated an interest, through magazines and newspapers, among audiences who closely followed their lifestyles, and this gave

rise to the codification of new body cultures—hairstyles, clothing, and activities. This in turn came to be followed by the masses who emulated the visual representations. The growing reach of industrially manufactured images to the masses shaped a new relationship between public visibility and femininity, which defined the identities of women in not only public but also private spaces.

The above-mentioned actresses, along with a few others, were trailblazers who ventured into a territory that was hitherto unexplored by women. The thematic issues portrayed in the films have been essentially mythological in the initial stages in order to cater to most Indian audiences. For instance, Patience Cooper, an Anglo-Indian actress, starred in films such as *Nala Damayanti* (1920), *Ramayan* (1922), and others which were inspired by Indian myths. Slowly, bold female characters were being written for the screen, such as in *Wildcat of Bombay* (1927), *Hunterwali* (1935), *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), *Hurricane Hansa* (1937), *Lutaru Lalna* (1938), *Punjab Mail* (1939), *Jungle Princess* (1942), etc. In addition to this, the complex figure of the Modern Girl was explored in a middle-class setting, as female protagonists assumed the roles of new urban professions which were arising, such as typists, secretaries, telephone operators, teachers, doctors, and others. This is prominent in several of Sulochana's films, such as *Typist Girl* (1926), *Indira B.A.* (1929), and *Indira M.A.* (1934) (Dhawan 2007; Chowdhury 2020). This questioned gender roles and participation in public places, as these women were seen exercising individual autonomy in their personal as well as professional lives. In the film *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), Nadia thrilled the audience through her stunts while fighting off robbers atop a speeding train, while in films like *Hurricane Hansa* (1937) and *Punjab Mail* (1939) she played the role of an avenging angel who attempts to seek justice for the wrongs meted to her. Responding to the audience's craze for stunt films inspired by the West, the filmmakers exploited this genre with respect to the Indian context and referenced contemporary society so as to satisfy the demands of the audience (Bhaumik 2011), thereby, shaping a new generation of stuntwomen on screen.

Moral concerns were raised due to their sartorial representation and intimate scenes. Being Modern Girls, their sensual appeal lay in displaying their body aesthetics (Ramamurthy 2006). Images of physical intimacy in which the Modern Girl is seen passionately embracing or kissing her partner were also commonplace. The film industry therefore provided a space that blurred the boundaries of class, morality, gender, and sexuality. The Western outlook and freedom to work were some of the factors which influenced the women from the Jewish and Anglo-Indian community to opt for acting as a profession. The reason for their popularity was their ability to transform into the character and the flexibility to adopt and adapt to the Indian context. Their style did not adhere to the usual everyday wear as the Modern Girl transformed traditional dressing trends and suited it to their

needs. The lighter skin tone was a primary reason for the directors to encourage the Jewish or Eurasian actresses as it made it acceptable for them to be filmed on celluloid, as the technology was not sufficiently developed during the early years. Their altered persona created an enigma, and the switched identity added glamour to the film stars. The cultural othering also added to their appeal as they challenged the patriarchal construct of domesticity.

The question of visual modernity, that was portrayed on screen, was closely linked to the popularity and reach of the screen narratives and its related discourses to the audience. The discourse that surrounded the screen personalities lent them a popularity and an aura that awed the audience. The female stardom and popularity were a result of the magazine articles, photographs, publicity, and advertising. It is a construction based on film narratives along with the extra-filmic accounts which can be read within the social as well as the cultural contexts, and all this formed the cultural texts that were consumed by people.

Although there were several actresses who were quite popular during this time, unfortunately many records of their personal lives and the films have not survived. Although magazines reported on the lives of actresses, Majumdar (2009, 38) remarks how “no knowledge about the personal lives of actors and actresses coded as ‘private’ was circulated in the official private discourse until the 1940s.” Hence, it becomes crucial to uncover their contribution to the Indian cinema through a close analysis of available sources. The next section focuses on Sulochana and Nadia, among other actresses, as they created a lasting impact on the Indian screen.

5. Discourse analysis of the representations of Sulochana and Nadia

The presence of Sulochana and Nadia on screen distinguished them in terms of their sartorial appearance and cinematic appeal. The popularity of these stars and enthusiastic reception of their films cannot be overlooked. Ruby Myers, famously known by her stage name Sulochana, hailed from a Jewish family settled in India (Chowdhury 2020). She was pursuing a job as a telephone operator when she was spotted by Mohan Bhavnani of Kohinoor Film Company (Times of India 2015). Initially reluctant to join the film industry, as it was not considered an honorable profession, she eventually left an indelible mark through her performance in several films. As discussed earlier, in *Bambai Ki Billi* (*Wildcat of Bombay*, 1936), she played the role of a criminal called Billi or Wildcat as well as eight other roles which included the roles of a policeman, street urchin, gardener, fruit seller, Hyderabad gentleman, and a European blonde. She donned Western dresses almost in the Hollywood fashion, men’s clothing, and other experimental attires such as chiffon sari and a sleeveless blouse that set a new trend on screen. This was further

accentuated by increasingly hybrid representations. Mention should be made of some other films of hers such as *Cinema Queen* (1926), *Typist Girl* (1926), *Anarkali* (1928), *Indira BA* (1929), and *Sulochana* (1933). The titles of the films bring into focus the female lead, who is the eponymous character and the star of the narratives. Several of the films were semi-autobiographical and partially based on the life of Sulochana. For example, *Cinema Queen* (1925) was inspired by the life of Sulochana and presented an empathetic portrayal of the struggles of the actor. In addition to this, *Telephone Girl* (1926) was centered around her life when she worked as a telephone operator before joining the film industry. In this film, she plays the lead character, who works as a telephone operator to sustain her family until a kind lawyer falls in love with her. The film traces the hurdles and challenges that they face and how they overcome the odds. According to Majumdar (2009), such storylines of ordinary working women who have successful careers in films emphasized class mobility and empowerment.

Apart from such roles, Sulochana was also seen in romantic films such as *Madhuri* (1928), which gave her immense fame during the era of silent films. She did not shy away from kissing scenes and came to be known as "India's first sex symbol, and its archetypal modern girl" (Ireland 2007). It is of interest to note here that the 1930s were a time when the films were slowly transitioning into talkies, and this required the actresses to be fluent in the vernacular languages. Not all the Anglo-Indian or Jewish actresses were fluent in the local languages, proving it to be a challenge for them. This led to the obscurity of a few stars, but Sulochana took time off from filming to become proficient in Hindustani, a popular vernacular language which contained elements of Hindi and Urdu. This helped her in rejuvenating her career as she made a comeback with the talkie version of *Madhuri* in 1932. The success of this film inspired filmmakers to revisit silent films and produce new talkie versions of them. Sulochana became one of the highest-paid actresses in India (Mukherjee 2023). Her fame was so widespread that Gandhi used Sulochana's popularity to reach audiences while India's independence struggle was ongoing, as he used her image in his campaign poster (Jews of the Week 2018).

A close look at Sulochana's films demonstrates that she was the focal point in most of them, such as *Gul Sanovar*, whose poster featured a close-up of her face in which she sported elaborate jewelry and dark lips. Interestingly, the name of the actress featured almost as prominently as the title of the film. Her representation in posters and photographs focuses solely on her, often featuring a close-up image of her face, reflecting how the narrative of her personal as well as professional life surrounded her. The available archival resources highlight the angular postures and visual aesthetics that she wore on screen. In terms of clothing, she is seen wearing a wide variety of outfits ranging from Indian attires like sari to Western dresses in films such as *Indira M.A.* (1934), where she played the role of

an Oxford-educated woman who was trying to negotiate with modern and traditional beliefs. This fluidity in terms of appearance and her versatility represented her position in the Indian film industry as she was able to overcome the strict impositions placed on women from entering this profession.

Remembered for her masked, cloaked adventurer persona, Mary Ann Evans, also known as Nadia, was born in Australia to a British father and moved to India around the time of the First World War. This spectacular theater artist also worked in the circus where she performed various acrobatics and stunts. She was spotted by the renowned film maker J.B.H. Wadia who scripted films based on her performing skills which thrilled the audience. An interesting example that Rosie Thomas (2005) cites in her essay about Nadia is how she played the role of an avenging angel in *Hunterwali* (1935) and came to be known as Fearless Nadia due to the bold characters that she played on screen. Thomas (2005, 35–36) states that she played “a swash-buckling princess in disguise, she roamed the countryside on horseback sporting hot pants, big breasts and bare white thighs and, when she wasn’t swinging from the chandeliers, kicking or whipping men, she was righting wrongs with her bare fists and an impervious scowl.” She traded the Indian attire for androgynous clothes which was very well-received by the audience. A major concern for the makers of this film, the Wadia brothers, was that her appearance was too “European” for Indian audiences (Thomas 2005, 50) as they were concerned about the audience’s reaction to the behavior of a woman unlike any traditional Indian woman. Such doubts were dispelled, however, by the success of her first films. Nadia’s public figure symbolized urban modernity and sophistication. A close critical discourse analysis highlights the cosmopolitan and multicultural outlook that shaped the plural modernity that Nadia represented, and this fluidity was seen in posters as well as on screen (Wenner 2005). She wore Western outfits that accentuated the curves of her body, and the exotic appeal lay in the blonde curls and light skin tone, which bequeathed her with a Westernized image that was acceptable to Indian sensibilities. The technical advancements and skilled experimentation made it possible to incorporate elements that added to the thrill of the audience, such as racing cars and train sequences. Other celebrated films include *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), *LutaruLalna* (1938), *Punjab Mail* (1939), *Diamond Queen* (1940), *Bambaiwali* (1941), *The Jungle Princess* (1942), *Muqabala* (1942), *Hunterwali ki Beti* (1943), *Mauj* (1943), *11 O’Clock* (1948), etc.

Unlike any other actress of her times, Nadia captured the male-dominated cinematic space in her role as a stuntwoman, horse-rider and roof-climber which became an enigma as she was seen performing gravity-defying tricks. Her performance in *Hunterwali* (1935) captivated the audience and this film can be said to have been ahead of its time for its portrayal of the female lead. Nadia’s representation of a blonde lead in *Hunterwali*, sporting tight outfits and using a whip

had modernist as well as feminist nuances. This persona is reflected in the poster which stated that the film featured Fearless Nadia along with her photo in a masked appearance and hot pants with a cape. The masked, mysterious identity became synonymous with her, and the audience associated her with fast, action-oriented sequences. The inherent dichotomy that she embodied is reflected in many of the films as she switched from Western attire to ethnic Indian wear to emphasize her "Indianness" and connect with the audience (Ayaz 2020).

In *Miss Frontier Mail* (1936), the audience was exposed to scenes which featured hunting, racing fast cars along with fight scenes against men atop a train in motion. The posters of films like *Lutaru Lalna* (1938) and *Punjab Mail* (1939) displayed Nadia sporting a mask and riding a horse, sometimes holding a gun, and thereby emphasized the action, movement, and thrill that the film promised to the audience. Furthermore, these films featured scenes of Nadia riding a horse or a bicycle with moving trains. The train acted as a metaphor of modernity and hinted at the rapidly changing society. As is evident from the depictions of the posters and some of the names of the films, the train became a recurrent symbol of modernity that was commonly used by the filmmakers, the Wadia brothers (Vitali 2008). In films such as *Muqabala* (1942), revenge as the primary motive of a courageous woman brings out the essence of the dynamism and changing representation. Here, the Modern Girl plays a dominant role on screen as the plot revolves around twin sisters who were separated at birth. One of the sisters, named Madhuri, grew up in a luxurious household while the other sister, Rani, was brought up by a gangster and was forced to work as a dancer. Madhuri finds out the truth about how the gangster had killed their mother and imprisoned their father. They are consequently seen fighting for justice and finally freeing their father. Its relevance in contemporaneous film industry was the thematic reinforcement of justice prevailing, and how it highlighted the idea of freedom as society was also striving towards the independence of the nation. The films of Fearless Nadia met with amazement among the audience and her far-reaching impact and popularity has been explored in recent years through research engagements and films such as *Rangoon* (2017) which is based on the life of Fearless Nadia (Indiaglitiz 2017). The film heavily draws on her persona as a stuntwoman and actress upon which the lead character named Julia is centered (Rathi 2017). The film, which shows her as an actress and the star performer of a dance troupe, depicts the attires and sensuous appeal of actresses in the 1940s.

The content of the films starring Nadia featured a storyline that generally spoke out against social evils and oppression. In such narratives, the leading lady emerged as a leader or a savior to free people from the clutches of the oppressor and became a beacon of justice. Hansen (1992, 28) has identified the *virangana* ("brave woman" or "heroine") motif in the women characters of this period, as they

dressed like men and displayed essentially masculine skills. In many of the films, the leading lady is seen engaging in battles and showcasing military skill, therefore she is someone who transgresses the boundary by taking on the avatar of a man. This transformation into a fearless heroine on screen is only possible when she indulges in cross-dressing and dons a mask for anonymity. The significance of the mask is twofold as it acts as a tool to hide her interracial identity for public acceptance and to reinforce her independence on and off screen. Fearless Nadia acted as the female version of Robin Hood and one of her films was even called *Lady Robinhood* (1946). As nationalist references could not be shown on screen explicitly during the colonial period, these characters were devised as icons who delivered people from subjugation and embodied liberty.

The portrayal of female warriors on screen is inspired by legends of brave women who took up the garb of men to uphold justice. Through the roles that Nadia enacted on the screen, the forte of men was now invaded by the woman figure thus re-defining traditional concepts of masculinity and reiterating the manifestation of modernity. The audience accepted this new public figure who challenged the patriarchal code, asserted her agency and “provided a counterpoint to the image of the *purdah*² woman of the empire films and visibilized their active role in the national movement” (Chowdhry 2000, 98). In this context, Thomas (2005, 44) mentions that the way Nadia’s otherness was negotiated and dealt with by the filmmakers made her popular among the audience of the time.

The Indian Cinematograph Committee was established in 1927. The primary function of the censorship was to ensure safety in theaters but later, it began to filter and screen the films being shown in order to promote a political agenda (Sinha 2013). By 1930s, “the focus of the board was on curbing the expression of sexuality on the screen as sensitive issues concerning physical intimacy and open display of affection on screen were severely criticized” (Kankaria and Banerjee 2020, 241). Since the films imported from America often exhibited sensual scenes involving white women, this became a major concern for the ICC as the white women would be seen in sexualized forms (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy 1980, 43) which would lead to a moral crisis. Although the actresses belonging to the Jewish community took the center stage in the formative years of the Indian cinema, slowly they became side-lined in the mainstream cinema as there was a shift in the discourse of the films. This was marked by the transition of the *sitara* from the Westernized depiction to the Indianized version upholding a moral bastion. This slowly eclipsed the careers of actresses such as Nadia due to her distinct physical appearance. They were relegated to the margins where they played the

² Referring to the practice of seclusion, which was prevalent in certain sections of society, wherein the women used a veil or stayed behind a curtain to remain out of view of men and strangers.

roles of a vamp or seductress and were often portrayed as a foil to the virtuous lead character to encourage a comparison in which the righteous Indian woman is always rewarded. Moreover, the advent of talkies entailed stiff competition for the Jewish and Anglo-Indian actresses as women from the higher and middle strata of Indian society were entering the film industry.

6. Conclusion

The Modern Girl with her appearance, flamboyant style and independence signified a new development in the discourse of femininity, where she could simultaneously become a modern object and subject. The transnational figure of the Modern Girl embodied contradictions in the fantasies of the consumers as it was intimate and personal yet quite distant and public. A new kind of woman was taking the modern visual field by storm during the 1920s whose presence denoted a wave of change. The appearance of the Modern Girl revolutionized the film industry as women became a part of the public while they shaped fashion sensibilities through their "modern" outlook. The multicultural exchanges impacted the attires and sartorial representations (Strubel and Josiam 2016) as they were exposed to Western influences, but they appropriated it to their contexts.

Modern Girls played the lead characters in female-centric films that incorporated a wide array of issues. Initially, in the 1920s, the films featured the Westernized Modern Girl, but gradually there were simultaneous depictions of Western-inspired as well as "different yet modern" women on screen. Actresses of Jewish and other origin were instrumental in creating the aura of awe and stardom that paved the way for them in the entertainment industry. It was through the stylization and manifestation of their bodies and the performance of their gender in the visual media that created various possibilities of on-screen characters which were unprecedented. Stars such as Sulochana, Nadia, Patience Cooper, and others were successful in transforming the cinematic space with their electrifying presence and charms, which continued well into the early sound period. Their cultural hybridity initially added to their charm, but gradually they were side-lined into playing the roles of a vamp or seductress. This highlighted the tensions between culture and modernity. The representations of bodies, modernity, and femininity were configured and reconfigured through a variety of discursive practices, which makes the study of the Modern Girl an interesting one.

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LABOR, MARGINALIZATION, TAIWANIZATION: MAPPING THE EMBODIMENT OF THE BEING-WOMAN IN POST-MARTIAL TAIWAN THROUGH WU MALI'S "STORIES OF WOMEN FROM HSIN-CHUANG"

Roberto Riccardo Alvau

This paper examines Wu Mali's (吳瑪俐) "Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang" (新莊女人的故事) art project within the socio-political framework of Taiwan during the so-called "Taiwanization" (本土化) period during the 1990s. Starting from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis explores how Wu foregrounds the embodied experiences of marginalized women workers in Hsin-Chuang, a key-textile industry hub near Taipei City. By centering the narratives of these women, the project challenges traditional gender norms and exposes the exploitative labor conditions as well as critiques the gendered social structures and systemic inequalities faced by these workers during "Taiwanization." It is a nuanced project which addresses feminism in post-martial Taiwan, as well as intersects the issue of capitalism as a colonizing practice, and as an exploitative system of Taiwanese identity. All these elements converge, simultaneously, to depict a fragmented Taiwan which, precisely in the fracture of its rupture, finds the threads for its healing.

Keywords: Taiwan, Asian feminism, gender studies, post-capitalism, participatory art, socially engaged art

1. Preface

When I first decided to approach Taiwan as a researcher, I realized the complexity of addressing non-self histories from a (mis)situated perspective permeated by an unrelentingly Eurocentric, heteronormative, and macho-capitalist vision. Despite

efforts, navigating through the intricacies of non-Western panoramas must always be approached with meticulous care by Western researchers. Our reading is inevitably biased, defective, and often unconsciously—or, worse, deliberately—shaped by the historical presumptions we unwittingly carry with us.

It is imperative to mention these points, as they have been my primary concern and challenge throughout my research. Examining Taiwan from my Mediterranean perspective of socio-cultural constructions is fraught with complexity and risk. This is especially true when addressing feminism and subalternities, as it accentuates the distance between the subjects of the narrative (the active agents) and the narrator (the passive subject). Between these poles lies the intricate act of narrating. To narrate means first to observe and then interpret. The integration of the colonialist, patriarchal, and Western-centered gaze occurs within the process of understanding established between these two actions. This complexity is likely to be reflected in the following pages, despite my efforts to minimize it. I tried to approach the subject with the observant objectivity of a researcher who tries to allow sources to speak for themselves. As a result, this investigation has been conducted slowly and with great effort. Drawing upon historical, visual, and oral sources from contemporary Taiwan, this article aims to construct a partial chronicle of the intricate interplay among territory, identity, art, feminism, and patriarchy. These concepts converge within a physical space that has undergone a pursuit of reterritorialization over the past fifty years in Taiwan. Furthermore, they underpin the experiences of fragmented, fluid, and nomadic individuals who express an ongoing struggle to establish a rooted sense of belonging within their own territory.

Taiwan has often been discussed in the West from a specifically US-centric point of view due to the post-colonial influence that this country exercised on the island since the fall of Martial Law. The focus of this study has been primarily to explore, however, the voices of Taiwanese researchers, both “Hakka” (客家 *kejia*) and aboriginal, or at most emigrated in Western contexts.¹ Thus, most of the bibliography only collects Taiwanese voices which compose the specific story among bodies, identities, feminism, and art. It is a complex network emerging strongly throughout the last twenty years and as we will see, it is currently one of the most flourishing panoramas of the East Asian artistic context. This bibliographic choice is grounded in a clear decolonial and transfeminist methodological approach, which recognizes the oppressive features of today’s post-capitalist system affecting all non-white, non-heteronormative, and non-masculine communities. Within the constraints of my education, efforts have been made to avoid relying on

¹ The Hakka people are an ethnic group with Han Chinese ancestry, mainly concentrated in southern China, as well as in Taiwan and parts of Southeast Asia.

Asian narratives originating from whiteness. Instead, the narrative of the following pages has been constructed from Taiwanese sources, or at least from Asia. It is important to note, however, that this article still represents an incomplete draft of a broader research process on the condition of Taiwanese social groups during the period of "Taiwanization" (本土化 *bentuhua*).² Comprehensive field research has not yet been conducted to write these pages. Instead, it has been realized as an intensive archival effort to gather, catalog, and translate freely accessible sources addressing this issue, in order to provide an English-language text easily accessible to non-Sinophone readers. The voices, sought to be made visible, therefore take shape through the filter of other voices situated midway. This note is necessary for a proper understanding of the text that follows.

2. Introduction

The article endeavors to critically examine the social issues that emerged in Taiwan following the lifting of martial law, particularly delineating the nuanced circumstances of specific communities, especially women. This study is filtered through the lens of contemporary art, specifically through the work of the artist Wu Mali, an unwavering figure dedicated to the realm of social, community, and participatory art since the early 1990s. Wu Mali stands as a voice among many, positioned midway in the social hierarchy, empowering those without a voice to seize the opportunity. By using art as a medium of both self-expression and legitimization, the artistic process developed by this artist enables marginalized bodies to uncover new realms to inhabit, where they can enact alternative narratives alongside the traditionally established ones.

The article starts with a premise: post-martial Taiwan is built on the construction of a partial and incomplete national narrative. In its effort to create a sense of cohesive community through the phenomenon of "Taiwanization," the socio-cultural structure of the island fails to incorporate all layers of society into its emerging identity discourse. The result is an imperfect national narrative, where the colonizing and exclusionary characteristics of the previous Sinic values system still persist. In this context, Mali Wu's position represents a powerful agent for establishing new alternative narratives. Immersed in the hegemonic cultural context, the artist was able to infiltrate within the institutional fabric new counter-hegemonic discourses, capable of activating the invisible voices that composed 1990s Taiwan. This is the pivotal case of "Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang," a social art project carried by the artist in 1997 and the main theme of the following article. As we will observe,

² Although more generally indicated as "Taiwanization" in English, the Chinese term literally means "localization."

the project's questions around feminism, capitalism, and Taiwanese identity reveal the deep-seated injustices behind the idea of Taiwaneseeness, while simultaneously offering new potential pathways forward.

This article, therefore, follows a linear evolution of the concepts highlighted earlier. To begin with, it provides a brief introduction to the socio-cultural issue of "Taiwanization," founded on a resurgence of Taiwan studies motivated by the dual principles of "prioritizing Taiwan" (台灣優先 *Taiwan youxian*) and "being the master of one's own household" (當家作主 *dangjia zuozhu*). Through this historical-political overview, it becomes evident that the national narrative of "Taiwanization" is rooted in a specific notion of Taiwanese exclusivity. While aiming to acknowledge past oppression, it simultaneously oppresses and marginalizes other social groups. This leads us to examine more closely the issue of female bodies during the 1990s, using the examples highlighted by Wu Mali. Hsin-Chuang stands as a perfect example: it is a geo-historical juncture where the conflictual "Taiwanization" narrative can be best appreciated. Through Wu's art installation, the aim of this second part of the article is to delineate the nature of these silenced bodies, reflecting on their performative and political power following Judith Butler's theories. The juxtaposition of the condition of women in Hsin-Chuang with these theories reveals a landscape marked by exclusion and marginalization in relation to the values promoted by "Taiwanization." This further facilitates a reflection on the values of emerging Taiwanese masculine-capitalism, positioned at a midpoint between the American-centric capitalist system and the Confucian-Sinic heritage of the past.

The question that arises is, therefore, the following: Is it possible to make these bodies speak and be heard? In an effort to address this question, the final section delves into the effectiveness of Wu Mali's artistic project. It focuses on the emancipatory poetics of its aesthetic and on the infiltration of the oppressed bodies within the "Taiwanization" social stratification. This experiment marks a significant milestone for Taiwanese social art, whose paradigm has been vigorously carried forward starting from the 2000s onwards. The strength of today's Taiwanese feminism, along with the critical reevaluation of contemporary Taiwan's nationalist narrative, stems from these moments of tension, boldly highlighting the societal wound. As we will see, the 2000s present a progressively optimistic landscape, where marginalized groups patiently gain territory.

3. "Taiwanization": the post martial law socio-political background and the cultural turn

A discussion of the issue of female bodies and voices in post-martial Taiwan requires some knowledge of the country's recent history. Since the fall of the dictatorial era and its mainland reconquest aspirations, Taiwan has slowly sought

to redefine the boundaries of its identity, drawing from a diverse colonial and, notably, indigenous heritage as the foundation for establishing a collective history. As a temporal boundary, the history of the "New Taiwan" begins with the abolition of martial law in 1987, preceded by popular contestations and the gradual erosion of *Dangguo's* (黨國, "one-party system") hegemony. Following some brutal incidents—such as the "Kaohsiung Incident" (高雄事件 *Gaoxiong shijian*) in 1979³—as well as the death of President Chiang Kai-shek (蔣中正), the democratic transition commenced around the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, Taiwan transitioned into a multiparty republican system, ushering in new political identities and easing censorship. This period also saw a resurgence of international relations and significant economic growth, marked by rapid urbanization and modernization. In fact, the intensification of international relations allowed the island to experience a brief economic miracle, especially for industry, which would last until the early 2000s.

The political structure also underwent some changes. Surprisingly, the once-monolithic Kuomintang managed to realize a peaceful transition, retaining part of its hegemony and thus, its power as the primary political force in Taiwan's system. The party abandoned its efforts to sinicize the island, opening to the acceptance of a new Taiwanese identity. In this sense, the openness to the global and the rediscovery of the so-called "motherland" by the Taiwanese solidified the idea of a substantial difference between the island's inhabitants and those on the mainland. Globalization served as a conduit through which the distinctive multicultural identity of Taiwan could be validated. This polarization between the mainland and the island was the essential feature for the formation of this new Taiwanese identity, as can be observed in Kuomintang's President Lee Teng-Hui (李登輝) 1999 address: "All of us who grow up and live on this soil today are Taiwanese people, whether we are aborigines, descendants of aborigines or of the immigrants from the mainland who came over centuries ago. We have all made equal contributions to Taiwan's future. It is possible for each one of us, the 'new Taiwanese people,' to convert our love and affection for Taiwan into concrete actions in order to open up a grander horizon for its development. It is also our responsibility to establish a magnificent vista for our descendants" (Huang 1999, 92–93).

The foundation of this New Taiwan and the new Taiwanese society is built upon a socio-cultural program known as "Taiwanization." This was a significant process which led to the establishment of new postcolonial, multicultural, and post-Chinese perspectives among society. Temporally, its heyday can be situated in the 1990s, with evident traces extending into the early 2000s, driven

³ The Kaohsiung Incident was a clampdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, on December 10, 1979. It marked a significant moment during Taiwan's martial law period, due the government arrests of the main opposition leaders protesting for democracy.

by the definitive forces of globalization, industrialization, and a globally uncertain economic panorama. These factors continually reinforced the trend toward Taiwanese identity. It is crucial to emphasize that "Taiwanization" differs significantly from the democratization process unfolding in the country. As underscored by Bruce Jacobs—while both processes share close ties to Taiwan's political development—"Taiwanization" places greater emphasis on an identity related to Taiwan and its nationalism rather than being solely a matter of political democratization (Jacobs 2013, 570). Thus, the sense of Taiwaneseess emerged in response to the previously imposed concept of Chineseness, particularly as interactions with the mainland increased. It is essential to acknowledge the rejection and racism experienced by the Taiwanese population from the People's Republic of China during this period. Ethnic distinctions and mainland colonization ambitions caused a definitive rupture in socio-cultural relations, as we can observe in events like the 1994 "Qiandao Lake Incident" (千島湖事件 *Qiandao hu shijian*), in which twenty-four Taiwanese tourists were kidnapped and burned alive in southern China. The brutality of this incident and the indifference of the Communist government further exacerbated the growing divide between Taiwan and Mainland China that had been developing throughout the decade.

Alterity alone proved insufficient, however, for constructing a wholly autonomous and distinct national identity that separated itself entirely from the centuries-old Chinese tradition. The decisive factor was the construction of a new narrative for the country, one that embraced a seemingly multicultural and versatile discourse by exploring loosely defined cultural roots. "Taiwanization" revolved around two core principles highlighted before: "prioritizing Taiwan" and "being the master of one's own household." These principles served as complementary responses to the enduring influence of Chinese culture. Through these trends, it became possible to construct a new narrative of Taiwaneseess, rooted in the political and historical unity of the various cultural groups within its territory. The formation of these ideologies took place both in the social and cultural spheres, with the educational context serving as the most evident example. The Ministry of Education reform in 1994 played a pivotal role, modernizing the educational curriculum, promoting native Taiwanese languages, respecting traditions, and revising Taiwan's concept and evolution. The battle for Taiwan's individuality, particularly in language, literature, and education, engaged the entire academic community, leading to the gradual deconstruction of the old dominant Chinese mentality, with particular attention to the mainland's colonial and oppressive aspects. The principles of these cultural policies, articulated by Chang Bi-yu (張必瑜), were clear: "Taiwanese culture had little Chinese influence, Taiwanese literature had its own merits. Taiwan had its own history and tradition, and Taiwanese people were very different from the Chinese" (Chang 2009, 45).

The construction and preservation of this new discourse relied significantly on cultural policies, especially in delegating and decentralizing cultural power to more marginalized cities and counties, which encouraged the local population to promote their festivals and festivities, marking a significant shift in the country's cultural paradigm. The goal of these cultural initiatives was ultimately the narration of a Taiwanese identity founded on a rediscovery of folkloristic traditions, respect for the past, and a revision of the recent (and traumatic) colonial history. By granting full freedom to its citizens, "Taiwanization" sculpted the features of its identity one step at a time, continuously evolving and completing itself. As theorist Su Zhao-ying (蘇昭英) emphasized:

The awareness of art and culture has extended its scope from high-art exhibitions and performances to the landscape and environment, culture and history, and industry. The content of cultural construction had raised the simple satisfying life to the setting of community aesthetics and common ethics. The central cultural policy had shifted from the monopoly of the Chinese Cultural movement to the deeper and wider local community. The subjectivity of local culture emerged. In addition, the cultural map dominated by the central government and Taipei city had changed to multi-development at the local level. All these phenomena happened during the last two decades, 1980s and 1990s. (Su 2001, 1)

Not everything, however, was as it seemed. While it is accurate to assert that Lee's new Taiwanese canonical narrative depicts a story of marginal communities (the colonized Taiwanese people vs. the colonizer Mainland people), it is essential to emphasize that simultaneously these post-Chinese insights of the new Taiwanity also marginalize peripheries within peripheries. What is neglected is that the polarization between Chinese vs. Taiwanese creates a dominating and all-encompassing narrative that further marginalizes those who do not fit into its narrow framework. Despite a clear attempt to overturn old dominant values, what ensued was a mere shift in cultural hegemony that did not entirely ameliorate the complex social fabric characterizing Taiwan at the time. The much-desired freedom of the new Taiwanese identity continued to partially rely on the foundations of a post-Chinese culture heavily stratified socially. A profound paradox characterizes the cultural turn of the 1990s: in its attempt to deconstruct layer by layer the old Chinese hegemony, the new Taiwanese identity does not fully embrace its multiracial and multicultural nature.

Certain communities continue to be marginalized within this new hegemonic identity discourse. The narrative promoted by the new hegemony highlights the oppressed status of society (the Taiwanese people), but it fails to acknowledge that, in their state of oppression, the oppressed Taiwanese hegemony also use mechanisms of marginalization, despotism, and submissiveness against other social

strata which form their unity. Accepting a specific narrative meant relinquishing another. The pastiche of New Taiwaneseess, envisioned by Lee, does not place everyone on an equal footing; instead, it creates a jumble of identities. Despite the attempts made, Taiwanese society in the 1990s continued to be marked by clear social stratification: certain groups, such as the island's indigenous communities or women, still bore the burden of the veiled marginalization and oppression that "Taiwanization" has not been able to diminish.⁴ Despite small steps forward in recognizing the uniqueness of indigenous culture and the social condition of women, the unifying discourse of hegemonic Taiwanese identity revolves around a singular concept of an individual oppressed by the previous dictatorship. The lost identity therefore lies hidden within the folds of this dictatorial suffering; however, the individual who suffers and is martyred is neither female nor indigenous, but rather male and "Hakka."

This imperfect view of the Taiwanese identity's narrative not only allows us to understand this power dynamic, still bound to the previous Sino-patriarchal system, but also focuses on the condition of communities that have been systematically oppressed by past hegemony. These are individuals who have never been able to make their voices heard. The enthusiasm of democratic transition has empowered them to strongly assert their narrative. It is precisely during these years that "Taiwanization," propelled by political hegemony, is accompanied by the surge of various social movements. These movements are chiefly aimed at critiquing the existing contradictions within the national narrative while highlighting the circumstances of other social strata within the community. Particularly noteworthy for this article is the swift ascendancy of feminism in the region compared to the second wave of the 1970s. Feminism broadens its perspective in an intersectional paradigm, involving questioning of institutional channels. This resonance is distinctly felt across the island, notably within the realm of art practices. Contemporary art served as one of the conduits through which a critical interpretation of Taiwanese society in the 1990s is most effectively conveyed, particularly through the works of selected artists. This article aims to precisely focus on this tension present in "Taiwanization" through the specific example of Wu Mali's art installation in Hsin-Chuang in 1997, which raised the following questions: What about the status of women in the New Taiwan? What is their role in the "Taiwanization" process? What about their voices? Or using the same

⁴ This is not to criticize or negate the positive aspects of this socio-cultural process for Taiwanese society in the 1990s. Nor is it to adopt the stance of the "white savior," ready to point out the problems caused by non-white men and quick to forget their own. Taiwan has often suffered from violent processes of white colonization, let us not forget this. One should also recall the relentless pressure of Western culture that has violently influenced its contemporary society and the "Taiwanization" process itself.

artist's words from her 1999's artwork installation "Epitaph": "His/tory has been revised—the rioter may become the hero, how about her story?"

4. Re-mapping women's role during "Taiwanization": Wu Mali and the case of "Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang" (1997)

The 1990s marked a zenith for contemporary Taiwanese art. Thanks to the cultural promotion bolstered by "Taiwanization," a significant number of Taiwan-born artists chose to return to the island after studying abroad, bringing with them languages and expressions that lean towards a hybridization of the artistic scene. Among these examples is Wu Mali (1958), who remains one of the most prominent figures in post-War Taiwanese art. Her background, consistently focused on the social-political endeavors of feminism, environmentalism, and the rights of marginalized communities, has led to a series of social projects based on the idea of art as a tool for social change. Wu's artistic journey began with her education at Tamkang University, followed by her time in Austria and Germany, where she specialized in sculpture at the Düsseldorf Arts Academy. Returning to her native Taiwan in 1985, Wu found herself situated within the temporal and spatial confines of martial law's lingering shadow. During these formative years, Wu Mali's artistic vision still drew significantly from Western echoes of materialism and conceptualism, as evidenced by works such as "Time and Space" (1985), created to commemorate her initial return to Taiwan, and "Library," for which she was invited to the Venice Biennale in 1995. Despite their materiality, these pieces already embark on a profound exploration of gender issues, intricately examining them through the multifaceted prism of politics and power. As Sophie McIntyre has pointed out, during this early period, the artist developed a deep interest in post-structuralist theories concerning the dematerialization of the art object and aura. The influence of authors such as Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes is evident, from whom she inherits the concept of the "death of the author," as well as the understanding of hegemonic systems of power (McIntyre 2012, 245). Her art during these years does not aim at direct social change but rather highlights the cracks in the hegemonic power system and the fundamental injustices that compose it.

It is a skeptical and cynical art that would soon evolve towards a more defined social compromise in the 1990s. It was during this pivotal period that she started a profound introspection, pondering the role of artists within the societal and political context. Her poetics evolved, focusing on a persistence of motifs such as the condition of women, the effects of industrialization, and issues of global capitalism in contemporary Taiwan. The condition of women's bodies and voices will specifically become one of her main areas of interest, which she approaches with a less militant and more critical stance than her colleagues of

that time. Her reading, halfway between the personal and the political, allows her to observe that while most male artists remained entrenched in political discourse, gender issues were an inseparable facet of daily life, enhancing the binomial between the personal and the political, which always remains determinant in her social projects.

The turning point in her trajectory took place with her participation in the exhibition "*Lord of the Rim*" in Hsin-Chuang in 1997 (Chang 1998).⁵ Here she participated with an art installation clearly addressing the issue of Taiwanese identitarianism through the prism of women's voices as a memorial, protest, and remembrance. Her aim was not only to highlight the tension but to also shape an alternative national narrative to the hegemonic one. *Lord of the Rim: in Herself* was a group exhibition curated by Yuan-chien "Rita" Chang (張元茜) at the local Hsin-Chuang Cultural Center, in which, in addition to Wu Mali, the Taiwanese artists Hou Shur-tzy (侯淑姿), Maggie Hsu (徐洵蔚), the Korean artist Ahn Pil-yeon (안필연), the Japanese artist Shimada Yoshiko (嶋田美子), and the American artist Judy Chicago participated. This curatorial project aimed to give more institutional recognition to East Asian women artists, featuring a series of pieces that addressed themes such as gender relations and roles, poetics of bodies, and social performativity, deliberately connecting to a stereotyped "feminine" craft dimension, such as fiber art, sewing, and weaving techniques. As highlighted by Lu I-Ying (陸依穎), through the repeated appearance of feminine iconography, such as the uterus (Maggie Hsu), flowers (Wu Mali), scissors and mirrors (Ahn Pil-yeon), and even the placenta, or condoms (Shimada Yoshiko), these artists give voice to exclusive experiences of contemporary women, common across their diverse cultural backgrounds, thus reconstructing history (Lu 2015, 275). Despite the effort to discursively legitimize the project with the presence of international artists like Judy Chicago, as the critic Maggie Pai also states, the exhibition did not attract significant media attention, especially due to the liminality of the place chosen, Hsin-Chuang, with respect to the centralizing metropolis of Taipei (Pai 1998, 66).

The choice of Hsin-Chuang was not, however, coincidental. This small suburb, relatively close to Taipei, underwent major industrial modernization during "Taiwanization," which turned it into one of the most developed peripheries for the manufacturing sector. The town reinvented itself as the epicenter of the Taiwanese textile industry, attracting cheap labor from all over the island—especially from the south, more populated by the historically disadvantaged native communities. Despite a somewhat flourishing period during the early 1990s, the city gradually

⁵ The original Chinese title, "盆邊主人 – 自在自為," translates to "Master by the Basin – Free and Unrestrained."

lost its status as an industrial hub during the latter years of the same decade. The rapid establishment of mainland China with the “made in China” phenomenon accelerated the decline of Taiwan as the new epicenter of industrial production and, consequently, caused a gradual shift of the maneuvering from the island to the mainland (Chin Davidson 2019, 90). Indeed, the exponential growth of the textile industry only led to a regularization of widespread forms of labor precariousness, forcing traditional families to fragment their nucleus and structure. What occurred was that men, formerly workers in the Hsin-Chuang industry, were encouraged to leave for the mainland for higher income, whereas women had to adapt to a dual role of traditional housewife and precarious worker—replacing the men in the town factories.⁶ This process of social disparity intersects at once different fractures of interest to contemporary Taiwan and its social problems: traditional roles of men/women, their socioeconomic conditions, the postcolonizing pressure between Chinese heritage and nativism, and, especially, the development of a specific tension between the local vs. the peripheral. This capitalist urbanization process leads to socio-economic disjunctions in the territory, as observed in the case of Hsin-Chuang—quoting Jane Chin Davidson: “Industrialization in Taiwan and China are gendered ones, and, as expressed through their interpellated subjects of Chineseness, the political upheavals and the Confucian kinship tradition still haunt the relations of labor” (Chin Davidson 2020, 103). Within the phenomenon of Taiwan’s massive industrialization, one must not forget the fundamental role played by the Western world and the neocolonialist pressure exerted in the territory. The causes of the precariousness of the industry can be found in the articulated and entrenched presence of Western multinational corporations, whose ramifications into Eastern Asia are facilitated by the availability of cheap labor, including the women of Hsin-Chuang (Chien 1998, 128).

All of this background marks the starting point from which Wu Mali begins to weave her narrative of Hsin-Chuang. Eager to provide a voice for the suburb’s unseen, the artist began by interviewing those women to collect their memories and experiences. The project entailed a documentary compilation of visual, oral, written, and material testimonies of these women workers, aiming to re-signify their life experiences and, in the process, legitimize identity discourses about contemporary Taiwan. It is a nuanced project that not only addresses feminism in post-Martial Taiwan, but also intersects with capitalism as an environmental threat (ecofeminism), a colonizing practice (decolonialist thought), and an exploitative system of Taiwanese identity. In her visual presentation exhibited in 1997, Wu projected the oral testimonies of the women through video to express,

⁶ The 1990s statistics for the percentage of women aged fifteen and over in China’s (Taiwan included) labor force is 68 per cent, more than the numbers in many other developed nations (Song 2014).

in first-person, the mourning of the trauma experienced by them. The main wall, facing the entrance, serves as the welcoming gesture for the exhibition audience. On this surface, a video is projected, systematically alternating between fragments of factory work and Chinese texts capturing the testimonies of these women. The room is consequently filled with the sole sound of sewing machines, consistently evoking the memories of the women in the exhibition, reinterpreting the action not only as denunciation but also as catharsis, a space for encounter and collective healing. The symbolism between industrial labor and creative work becomes readily apparent, as the artist herself articulates: "When textile workers are sewing, the monotonous and repetitive sound of the machines resembles that of a typewriter. While they are weaving, it also seems as though they are writing. That's why I wrote the story of their lives on fabric" (Chen 2008).

The rest of the exhibition space, dark, diaphanous, and silent, serves as the literal canvas for these words repeated incessantly. Observing the other walls, the viewer realizes that they are adorned with selected flower patterns, embroidered onto a violet tapestry. As the artist explains: "I felt the women's lives, so interwoven in the textile industry, were re-woven in the cloth and their lives" (Pai 1998, 41). This interpretation of fabric as writing, of women's manual labor as creation, is inspired by the historical and only-known exclusive female script in the world: Nüshu (女書 *nüshu*) writing, found in Jiangyong, China. These text fragments represent a language exclusively devised for women, indecipherable symbols creating an alternative microcosm to patriarchal hegemonic narratives. Nüshu preserves matriarchal power, the script is passed down from one generation of women to another, with symbols transmitted orally from mothers to daughters. Wu Mali transformed the meaning of Nüshu and wrote women's biographies through the sewing needle to present the relationship between women and society: "Like Nüshu, the needles and threads are their desires, their realities, and their stories. These stories are indistinct, as if secretly concealed in the work. Although they are afraid of being recognized, they also seem to await and hope to be discovered" (Lu 2015, 280).

The concept of embodiment is therefore both evident and crucial in understanding this piece. The story recounted by the artist provides a well-defined overview of the condition of proletarian, immigrant, or native women during the period of "Taiwanization." The women of Hsin-Chuang are not just individuals; they are living territories, representing a space from which to challenge the exclusionary dynamics of "Taiwanization." In its democratic endeavor to construct a new hegemonic identity, the dominant system projects a fundamentally patriarchal framework where the man, perceived as the only conceivable gender, occupies the central role as the active agent. Conversely, woman, characterized as the passive agent and ontologically existing as the absence of the other gender,

is relegated to oblivion and a plural subalternity stratification (Chen 2021, 40). In this regard, the endeavor of “Taiwanization” bears a striking resemblance to the power systems elucidated by Foucault, which engender the very subjects they subsequently represent. In the case of women, it means they grow up under the social structure of patriarchy, accept the established gender order, and play the role of women according to the social norms of womanhood. The image of women is a patriarchal cultural fiction, and femininity is the result of socialization, born out of a male imagined worldview. Through its hyperregulated sphere, encompassing both the personal and political domains, the power system exercises measures of constraint, control, contingency, and prohibition that delimit the spectrum of actions undertaken by the individuals constituting it.

This forced repetition of bodies is a public strategy of control of the hegemony, which “Taiwanization” is also unable to evade. Instead, Taiwan during those years began to develop a unique post-capitalist approach, with nuances lying halfway between Western heteropatriarchy and neo-Confucian Sinic values. While it aimed to uplift the oppressed segments of society (the Taiwanese), it simultaneously continued to oppress categories that did not fit into the patriarchal centrality. In this context, it is essential to highlight the viewpoint of academic Yang Cui (楊翠), who underscores the significance of the Sinocentric tradition in shaping the role of women within Taiwanese history. In contrast to the matriarchal societies among the island’s native inhabitants, the colonial experience from the mainland has instilled a tradition emphasizing the tenets of Confucian ethics in the region. This also leads to a schematic construction of gender roles between “man” and “woman.” The prominence accorded to man as the dominant gender in society automatically relegates woman to a micro-social environment typified by the family, which is constraining and marginalizing in relation to the macro-social political-economic sphere. In this regard—akin to the case of the Catholic family, the role of woman is confined to performing household chores, encompassing not only child-rearing but also daily domestic tasks, sewing, tending to in-laws, cleaning, laundering, and engaging in household crafts, rendering the family nearly the focal point of their lives and the locus of their activities (Yang 1993, 10). Thus, gender roles are still preserved in their binary framework, reinforcing heteronormativity and excluding women from socio-political life, as observed even in legislative and bureaucracy cases. Acknowledging the legislative heritage on the island is crucial, as it serves as the primary superstructure through which hegemony wields its power. Simultaneously, it plays a pivotal role in shaping and defining the public identity of individuals.

Despite, however, an apparatus of laws oriented towards a German-based legal system favored by the Kuomintang, for much of the twentieth century, Taiwanese legislation was inspired by the post-imperial reminiscences of the Qing Code

(大清律例 *da Qing lǜlì*), the legislative system in place in the mainland Republic up until 1912. Although it is certain that the Qing Code was a system now obsolete and considered antiquated by political hegemony, one can simultaneously see how these laws are fundamentally built on the unequal relationship between men (husbands) and women (wives), as well as on the non-parity relations of race and ethnicity. This legislative code of neoconfucian tradition constitutes one of the several factors underlying the establishment of male hegemony in the territory, while stratifying subordinate individuals according to ethnicity, gender, race, and cultural origin. It is a code of laws openly sexist and racist, inspired by the ancient Tang Civil Code (唐律 *Tang lǜ*) used during the Tang dynasty on the mainland, which, even after deep revisions in contemporary times, continues to promote the idea of the man (the husband) as a respected elder, while the woman (the wife) is considered inferior. These codes clearly demonstrate the historical male dominance and the unequal legal relationship between husband and wife, evident in the increased penalties for criminal acts committed by women against men, compared to reduced penalties vice versa, for crimes such as violence, robbery, and homicide, among others.

This constitutes a symbiotic but irregular power relationship in which the individual, whether dominant, oppressed, or subaltern, is defined and produced in accordance with this structure. And thus their activity and performance. As Butler reminds us, “gender is the cultural meanings that the sexualized body accepts” (Butler 1990, 10). Hsin-Chuang women consequently determine and shape themselves through this systematic (and obligatory) repetition of the oppressive logics of hegemony. There is no other option for them but forced labor in the factory, whether it is to support their children, brothers, fathers, or husbands. They are always labor-power that spills over for the good of the man. In this regard, it is interesting to understand Hsin-Chuang women’s stories following Butler’s theories, which emphasize the determinant role of the performativity of bodies as a regulating element of gender roles and distinctions. By reiterating specific actions, bodies are signified and structured within defined hegemonic categories. Ergo, the women of Hsin-Chuang, through repeating choral actions framed within the idea of being-woman, do not understand another possible life beyond secular notions such as family care, forced labor for the support of siblings’ studies, and much more:

Most of them had left the farming villages that they once called home and came to the factories immediately after elementary school. These women worked day and night, spending the prime of their lives in the factories, in order to send money back home so that their brothers could continue their education. Later, many of them would marry men who worked at the same factories. In the 1990s, when these labor-intensive

industries began to move offshore, the men were first to be laid off, and the women were suddenly burdened with full responsibility for their families financial situations. (Wu 1998, 190)

This unjust power dynamic further underscores the centrality of men as the sole acceptable gender, while women are relegated to a non-gender status, shaped and molded by the dominant society, and compelled to conform to the standards imposed by the same hegemony. Inheriting this cultural, social, and legislative baggage from the Chinese colonial experience naturally leads to the formation of a fractured, uncertain, and fluctuating Taiwanese society. Despite minor advancements, this mentality persists, enduring through the martial law period and the subsequent years of "Taiwanization," further reinforced by the influence of Western capitalism, which operates on similar dynamics of heteropatriarchal control. It is within these fractures that a pervasive sense of progress in social rights begins to emerge. This gradual shift has facilitated the establishment of the feminist movement and its studies. Challenging the idea that women's history is limited to the codes of heteropatriarchal inheritance, it instead resides in the contemporary reflection of their marginalized condition. As Hai-ming Huang insightfully remarks, "[Wu Mali] reminds us that men have their history, but women's history is not written yet" (Huang 1998, 43).

Wu's project aims to unravel theories previously hypothesized by Butler. Thus, repression engenders the very object it seeks to reject. Butler argues that the patriarchal repressive mechanism is both prohibitive and generative, giving rise to the principles necessary for the emancipation of the subject it excludes. To transcend the oppressive logic of the dominant system, one must comprehend the intricate social stratification of marginalized subjects. In the case of Hsin-Chuang's women, this entails acknowledging their apparent societal role and their status as others in relation to the singular male gender. Consequently, individuals will not only recognize their oppressed condition but also become cognizant of the potential for subverting their circumstances: "If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its natural past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities" (Butler 1990, 119).

Reflecting on the nature of Hsin-Chuang's women, natural inquiries arise regarding how individuals can challenge imposed categories and the extent to which they can enact change. Contrary to initial assumptions, these women, as depicted by Wu Mali, are far more self-aware of their condition. The project gathers some striking testimonies:

"The truth is Hsin-chuang has cost me my life, my youth. I lost everything in the end."

"Hsin Chuang is a place where I lost part of myself, What was it? Alas, it was my innocent youth!"

"I've lived in Hsin Chuang for twenty some years, But never felt anything about it, I just want to leave as soon as possible."

"Now the time is no more, my husband and I broke up, and the children and the factory belong to him. After living in Hsin-Chuang for more than twenty years, it didn't make me feel anything, I just wanted to leave quickly. Hsin-Chuang left me with nothing, losing most of my life and youth."⁷

The crucial question is not so much whether these women can speak but, as posed by Wu Mali herself, "Who is listening to whose stories?" (Wu 2015, 187). The artist recognized that within a hypothetical pyramid of social injustices, there are individuals whose sufferings are so deeply layered that they remain silenced. There is not enough space, time, or attention given to them. Despite a hegemonic shift, the counter-narratives within the framework of Taiwan as home/nation persist in perpetuating a power dynamic that renders certain voices invisible and marginalized, particularly affecting women, as noted by social historian Chen Hsiang-chun (陳香君): "Taiwanese male victims have been rehabilitated as heroes-martyrs. Women, however, still remain invisible" (Chen 2005, 2).

Despite their condition of subalternity as women, immigrants, proletarians, or even indigenous people, the women of Hsin-Chuang find the necessary tools to amplify their voices in the parody of their gender performativity. During this process, the artist wisely chooses to step back and allow the collective bodies to take over, produce, and complete this collaborative project (Deepwell 1997, 49). The artist provides a platform, from her position of privilege, for the women of Hsin-Chuang to express their voices more loudly. It is important, however, to note that this voice has always been present. These bodies have not been passive during "Taiwanization"; they have been active agents who have spoken, performed, and thus shaped the narrative of this social, cultural, and economic movement. The tool of oral history enables these women to personally express their experiences rather than relying on someone else's narrative or being spoken for. Through this depersonalized approach by the artists, these identities are revealed, enhancing the personal/political dichotomy and offering the possibility to reconstruct a new Taiwanese identity starting from their perspective. Thus, the ultimate goal was not solely to focus on the overrepresentation of the masculine in "Taiwanization," but especially to understand and showcase women's role during these years. In this way, the women of Hsin-Chuang can not only speak for themselves, dignifying their subaltern positions, but also be listened to.

⁷ The quote is from a text appearing in an installation work *Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang* by Wu Mali, exhibited in *Lord of the Rim: in Herself or Himself?* exhibition, Hsin Chuang, Taiwan, 1997.

5. Conclusion

Hsin-Chuang's experience, along with the broader exhibition *Lord of the Rim*, demonstrates the intention to rewrite the narrative logic of "Taiwanization," aiming to include historically invisibilized collectives, such as women and natives, in its discourse. All these elements converge to depict a fragmented Taiwan that, precisely in its rupture, finds the threads for healing. The need to "find its place in the world" drives artists to rethink Taiwan not solely based on its present merits, but also on the structural problems that continue to shape it (Chien 2004, 271). This is what scholar Shih Shu-mei (史書美) describes as "vernacular cosmopolitanism," the dialectical ability to produce interventions that communicate from the periphery to the center, rather than emerging chaotically from the center and absorbing parallel narratives (Shih 2007, 175). This tendency has been developing capillarily since the 1990s, especially within socio-cultural initiatives. As Victoria Lu (陸蓉之) points out: "The awakening of female consciousness in Taiwan has been a gradual process. Initially concentrated in the area surrounding Taipei, its influence gradually seeped into the male chauvinist south of the country" (Lu 2002, 40).

Over those years, several associations emerged in defense of women's rights, based on artistic and historical narratives. The women's movement in the 1990s was mostly composed of young female workers, each with their own growing experiences and backgrounds, and a stronger and more clearly identifiable subjectivity. This is exemplified by the Women's Awakening Association (婦女新知基金會 *Funü xinzhī jījinhui*), formally established in 1982 to raise feminist voices, as well as the Taiwanese Feminist Scholars Association (台灣女性學學會 *Taiwan nüxing xue xuehui*), founded in 1993 by the same artist. Equally significant is the birth of The Women Artists Association of Taipei (台灣女性藝術協會 *Taiwan nüxing yishu xiehui*), initiated by Jun T. Lai (賴純純), Wu Mali, and others during the 1990s, along with a series of parallel and subsequent projects to Hsin-Chuang that delve further into the role of women and possible forms of social subversion. After the 1997 experience, particularly, the Taipei artist perceives the bias of her project, whose only effect is to expose the fracture. But there is no possibility of healing the wound only by pointing it out: "In 1997 I interviewed female workers in clothing factories and wove their stories into a work entitled 'Stories of Women from Hsin-Chuang.' My exhibition was well received, but it did not provide any real help to these female workers. I was confronted with the ethical question: what is the goal of so-called 'critical art' or 'political art' in general? Is it to catalyze change by focusing the public's attention on some social issue?" (Bo 2016, 155).

As Wu's career progressed, she became increasingly known for her approach to participatory art and community engagement. Her projects moved beyond the confines of traditional art mediums, offering the possibility of genuine integration

within the marginalized communities she addressed. Thus, the priority became to create new safe spaces where narratives essential for social change could be independently and effectively woven. As she states: "This kind of hidden 'visionary realm' is an alternative world apart from Taiwan's patriarchal home/nation values, a world that she has created as a woman" (Chen 2008). The new spaces emerging from this effort are characterized by their hybrid and innovative nature. Overcoming the equivalence of localism with identity, Wu transcends the Taiwanese-identitarian paradigm. Instead, she seeks new transnational and transfeminist approaches in which there is no univocal concept of identity or community. A clear example of these new more activist poetics that go beyond simply denouncing facts is the project "Awake in Your Skin: Bed Sheets of Soul" (從妳的皮膚裡甦醒 — 心靈被單 2001). This project was part of the larger Textile Playing Workshop (玩布工作坊 2000–2004), commissioned by the Taipei Awakening Association (婦女新知基金會 *Funü xinzhi jijinhui*). Through the parody of a repeated activity of the performativity of the female universe, i.e., bed care, the artist invited the workshop participants to create a space for social exchange. The sewing action was translated as the second objective of the workshop, made invisible by the main purpose: the sharing of common experiences, of being-woman, of actions, roles, and pre-assigned bodies to deal with.

They told their stories through the highly traditional craft of needlework, allowing art to become a life-transforming agent. They did not intend to teach artistry, but hoped to use this opportunity to interest the participants in and engage them in social affairs.

[...] One of the participants was a full-time housewife. Previously, when her husband suddenly called to inform her that he could not come home for dinner because of some engagement at work, she would become irritated, and the couple argued a great deal. After she started attending the fabric workshops, instead of getting angry, she felt happy that her husband was not coming home for dinner, because she did not need to stop her craftwork. The point is, her own change startled her. She brought this up in the workshop to discuss with other women. In one way or another, the women in the fabric workshops rediscovered their own needs, their own purposes in life, and their own values. The process was rich in details and cannot be summed up by theories. (Bo 2016, 155)

The artist's strategy is to combat the patriarchal system by re-signifying the very conditions it imposes on women's bodies and actions. Fragility and precariousness are thus the weapons used to create new possible interstices, seeking social practices centered on solidarity and community. Community caring blurs the distinction between the public and the private, allowing communities to reclaim the spaces and realities taken away by patriarchy. If the establishment fails to

acknowledge this conflict, the only option is to engage with it to make it visible and relevant to everyone. Only in this way can "Taiwanization" and the modern conception of Taiwanese identity become a multiform body that goes beyond its exclusivity, understanding the central role of each and every woman of Hsin-Chuang as an active, formative, and determining agent for her emancipation as an independent territory, people, and nation. People without territory have no voice. From here arises the importance of knowing how to listen to subalternity and, in the process, knowing how to carve out for New Taiwan a physical and collective space within the world.

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Embodied Entanglements: Gender, Identity, and the Corporeal in Asia

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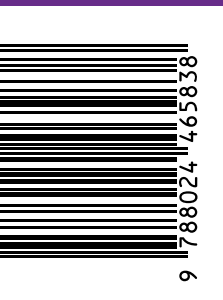
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Ideas on the (human) body, gender, and identity lie at the core of many socio-political issues and cultural trends in Asia today, while also inspiring innovative research on artistic expression from Asia's past. By focusing on socio-political as well as cultural issues from diverse geographical and historical contexts, this book highlights complex links and interactions that bind these three interpretative axes. How do bodies become conduits for the expression and negotiation of gender and other identities? What do the lived experiences of women and LGBTQ+ people in Asia reveal about biopolitics, normative expectations, and value systems in different societies? How does art reflect the representation and fashioning of gendered bodies and ambiguous identities? Cutting across the quotidian and the avant-garde, activism and art, violence and pleasure, as well as the intimate and the political, this book sheds new light on Asian cultures and societies, spanning India, Indonesia, Japan, mainland China, Taiwan, and Thailand, affirming thus the region's significance in broader debates on biopolitics, gender, and human dignity.