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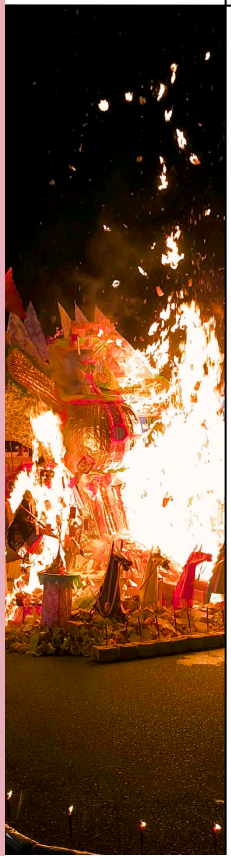

Navigating In-betweenness: Literary and Filmic Border-crossings in the Cultural Sinosphere

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Da Shi Ye, also known as the King of Ghosts, during Hungry Ghost Festival in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia (September 2025); Courtesy of the Artist.
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Editorial

Navigating In-betweenness: Literary and Filmic Border Crossings in the Cultural Sinosphere

Helen Hess and Chee Yong Lee

Introduction

This special issue stems from a panel presented at the 2024 Association of Chinese and Comparative Literature (ACCL) conference at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, titled "Behold the Human." Against the backdrop of rapid global transformations and the rising influence of posthumanist, inhuman, and anti-humanist perspectives, the conference centered on a critical reflection on the concept of the human in literary and cultural discourse, particularly within the contexts of Chinese and comparative literature. Panels addressed a range of issues—including epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions—examining how conceptions of the human have been constructed, contested, or reimagined across diverse literary forms and media, including classical texts, modern literature, genre fiction, cinema, and digital platforms. Several contributions focused on the human's entanglement with the non-human and the role of literature in articulating these evolving dynamics. The articles presented in this special issue reflect the discussions and insights generated during a panel titled "More than Human: Transgressions of Human and Non-human Realms in Chinese Literature and Films," which specifically focused on themes of border transgressions, the concept of the "more-than-human," and how Chinese-language and related literary and cultural narratives engage with these issues.

The three articles explore various perspectives on different forms of border crossing in Chinese-language literary and filmic narratives. Each contribution focuses on a particular thematic, historical, and geographical context. Historically, the issue spans research from the long nineteenth century to the present. Geographically, the contributions focus on Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and Malaysia. The narratives examined, focusing on different themes and situated across diverse geographical contexts, reflect the multiplicity of cultural productions that are produced in what Khun Eng Kuah (2024: 19–20) terms a "collaborative cultural basin"—a framework we refer to as the cultural Sinosphere.

Framing the Cultural Sinosphere

Chinese-language narratives produced outside mainland China are often categorized under terms such as "Chinese diaspora literature" and "Chinese diaspora film," labels that invoke the concept of "diaspora" or "diasporic." Originally used to describe the dispersion of the Jewish people, the concept of diaspora has since been expanded to encompass any "deterritorialized" or "transnational" population (Brubaker 2005). However, scholarly debates have questioned whether the term "Chinese diaspora" is analytically useful or overly restrictive. Wang Gungwu, for example, argues that there is no singular Chinese diaspora, but rather multiple, distinct diasporas (Wang 2004: 170). Shih Shu-mei critiques the term "diaspora" for its inherent emphasis on the country of origin, which she contends can hinder processes of localization (Shih 2010).

Shih's advocacy for the concept of the Sinophone shifts the focus from a nation-centered understanding to one that emphasizes place-based, Sinitic-language literary and cultural productions. Building on this perspective, David Der-wei Wang extends the conversation with his concept of "Sinophone-Xenophone mesology." Wang's mesology transcends the linguistic and cultural boundaries associated with the Sinophone, underscoring how the environment, both natural and cultural, influences and interacts with human identity and experience (Wang 2015, 2022).

Rather than re-engaging with the debates concerning the definitional boundaries and analytical utility of terms such as "Chinese diaspora" or "Sinophone," this special issue proposes the Sinosphere as a more capacious and generative conceptual framework. By adopting this broader lens, we aim to move beyond entrenched theoretical disputes to foreground the formal and aesthetic dimensions of cultural and literary production. Drawing on recent new formalist approaches—such as those articulated by Caroline Levine (2006, 2015), who emphasizes the mutual imbrication of form and social reality—we investigate how literary texts within the Sinosphere both reflect and actively shape complex questions of identity, migration, and cultural negotiation. This methodological shift allows for an in-depth engagement with the aesthetic strategies through which cultural meanings are constituted and contested.

In this context, we draw inspiration from the preface to the German translation of Trinh Minh-ha's *Elsewhere, Within Here*, where Babka and Schmidt (2017: 14) introduce the notion of *poetische Wissenschaft* ("poetic science").[1] We propose an extension of this idea in the form of "poetic theory," a concept that resonates with Mersch et al.'s (2019) notion of "literature as theory." This challenges conventional hierarchies between theory and literature by proposing that theoretical insights can emerge not only through the application of external frameworks but also from the texts themselves—through their formal properties, narrative structures, and aesthetic

1 The German term *Wissenschaft* encompasses all areas of academia, including the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities. Accordingly, *Wissenschaft* is less narrowly associated with the hard sciences than the English term *science*.

characteristics. By advancing the concept of poetic theory, we aim to conceptualize literature as a generative space for theorization, wherein literary form functions both as a mode of expression and as a site of knowledge production.

Literary and cultural productions from across the Sinosphere often explore themes such as displacement, alienation, "in-betweenness," and border crossing—including but not limited to migration contexts. The contributions in this issue focus on examining various types of such border transgressions. For instance, they investigate transgressions between the human and the non-human, the physical and the metaphysical realms, and crossings of geographical, epistemic, and socio-cultural boundaries in Chinese-language literary and cultural productions. Expanding on Wang's Sinophone-Xenophone mesology, which deepens our understanding by exploring the interrelations between human beings and their environmental contexts, we propose adopting a "more-than-human" perspective, as described by Sarah Whatmore (2006: 604–607), which encompasses non-human subjects, particularly environmental and cultural elements, to bridge the dichotomy between "nature" and "culture." Non-human and supernatural elements, such as representations of ghosts, remain integral to the literary and visual traditions within the contemporary cultural Sinosphere, with new forms emerging in newer popular genres like science fiction.

Fran Martin (2003: 132–133) emphasizes in the context of Taiwanese queer literature that identifications with ghosts are often appropriation strategies that refer to the marginalization of subjects who do not conform to the heteronormative attributions prevalent in society:

> Elsewhere, following Foucault, I have referred to this *tongzhi* obsession with anthropomorphic animals, spirits, cyborgs, ghosts, vampires and the like as a reverse discourse that cites *tongxinglian*'s exclusion from the human realm in order effectively to criticize that exclusion by effecting a textual return of the outcast in these disquieting figures of queer haunting. Such figurations bear an interesting relation to normativity. (Martin 2003: 240)

Building on Fran Martin's insights into the spectral and hybrid figures that populate Taiwanese queer literature, we see how these non-normative representations—ghosts, cyborgs, spirits, and other liminal beings—function as metaphors for social exclusion and as tools for resisting hegemonic norms. These figurations not only challenge the human/non-human divide but also resonate with broader themes of displacement and boundary-crossing central to Sinophone cultural productions. As such, they provide a conceptual bridge to a queer methodology that similarly resists fixed identities and normative boundaries. Moving on from these haunting, hybrid presences, in the remainder of this introduction we shall shift focus from representations of marginality to the critical practices that unsettle and rework the very structures of normativity, identity, and belonging.

Queer(ing) as Method

In her essay *Critically Queer*, Judith Butler contends that the term "queer" must remain open and mutable if it is to serve as a site of collective contestation and a point of departure for both historical reflection and future imaginations. According to Butler, the term should not be fully owned by any group but should instead be continually reinterpreted and redirected for urgent political purposes. She suggests that "queer" may even be replaced by more effective terms that better serve these political aims. Furthermore, she argues that the term will become obsolete if it succumbs to demands that seek to exclude certain groups, as this would undermine its original purpose (Butler 1993: 19–20).

At the same time, Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2008: 2–3) highlights a tension between the anti-normative aspirations of queer and its widespread use outside of theoretical discussions as a shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities. According to Leung, "queer" often functions as an umbrella term for sexual minorities, representing an open-ended category for a diverse range of identities, both established and potential. Nonetheless, Leung advocates for conceptualizing "queer" as something that critiques and resists normative forms, while also acknowledging the real appeal of identity politics, especially when considered in plural and coalitional terms. She further notes that terms like homosexual, gay, and lesbian are rooted in Western contexts and have different histories in East and Southeast Asia.

Howard Chiang (2014: 25–30) observes that the introduction of the Western concept of homosexuality into Chinese culture led to a significant shift in how same-sex desire and relationships were understood in Chinese society. He explains that the translation of this foreign concept produced an epistemological shift in the cultural and social meanings attached to these relationships.

Likewise, the term queer cannot be easily transplanted into Asian contexts. For example, there is no direct Chinese equivalent for queer. In Chinese-speaking communities, terms such as *tongzhi* (literally "comrade") have been repurposed as umbrella terms for sexual minorities. Another term, *ku'er*, is a homophonic translation of queer. However, *ku* (酷) can also mean "cool" or "cruel," which gives *ku'er* the additional connotation of "cool kid," reflecting the multiple layers of meaning associated with queer (Lim 2008: 244–245).

In this context, Andrea Bachner (2014: 201–202) proposes understanding "queer" not as a fixed state, but rather as a process of *doing* and *becoming.* For Bachner, the focus should be on "queering" rather than "queerness," with queering serving as both a practice and a method for challenging and subverting normative understandings of gender, sexuality, and identity.

Donna Haraway (2008) similarly critiques the stability of categories—especially "species"—and insists on their openness, internal contradiction, and continual

reworking through encounter. Instead of a distinction between human and non-human, Haraway proposes the concept of "companion species":

> Queering has the job of undoing "normal" categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation. That is crucial work and play. But perhaps companion species can remind us that terran critters have never been one—or two. Tubes, membranes, orifices, organs, extensions, probes, docking sites: these are the stuff of being in material semiotic intra-action. There is no ontological starting or stopping point, neither order nor disorder, boundaries nor boundary violations. (Haraway 2008: xxiv)

Companion species, according to Haraway, are about "patterning, consequences, and the possibility of response" (Haraway 2008, xxv). Like Butler's queer, Haraway's concept of "companion species" resists singular meaning, emphasizing mutual becoming, misrecognition, and relational entanglement. The term "companion" itself, rooted in *cum panis* (with bread), evokes shared vulnerability and a material practice of co-flourishing, much like queering as a method.

Haraway's notion of "queer worlding" offers a speculative and material ethic that aligns with Bachner's and Leung's calls to keep queering dynamic and responsive to context. She warns against the violence of normative classification, whether in species, gender, or identity, and instead invites us to inhabit the messiness of "response-able" relations. In this sense, queering and companioning are parallel practices—both insist on remaining open to the unfamiliar, to the off-category, and the unpredictable potential of living and dying together, transcending differences. In light of these linguistic and cultural complexities, we propose considering queering as a method for critically examining normative identity categories.

Navigating In-betweenness

The act of navigating in-betweenness—both as a strategy and an analytical lens—is particularly relevant in light of shifting borders, linguistic and cultural diversity, and patterns of both internal and external migration in the cultural Sinosphere. While early migration was largely confined to Asia, from the nineteenth century onward—and with increasing momentum to the present day—Chinese populations have emigrated globally. As a result, Chinese-speaking communities have emerged across diverse regions, accompanied by corresponding cultural and literary productions.

The articles in this special issue are arranged in chronological order, beginning with analyses of literary works published in the late nineteenth century and concluding with literary and screen media produced in the early 2020s. This ordering was chosen primarily to facilitate continuity in the discussion of historical contexts and terminology. To some extent, the articles build upon one another.

It is essential to note, however, that this structure is not intended to replicate a Western-centric, linear conception of history—an approach that has been critically examined by scholars in postcolonial studies as well as in Chinese studies. In these fields, it has been argued that traditional Chinese understandings of history conceive

of time not as linear and teleological, but as cyclical. More recently, scholars have proposed new concepts for thinking about time and history (e.g. Chen 2024; Wang et al. 2022).

Among these alternative frameworks is Prasenjit Duara's (2021) approach, which conceives history as currents flowing like those of the ocean. This metaphor resonates strongly with several contributions in this issue, particularly those engaging with the theme of water. Indeed, some articles even incorporate sources dating back to the 17th century, placing them in dialogue with contemporary literary productions. The papers can thus be read as being linked through threads tracing historical events, socio-political contexts, and theoretical concepts—like small streams of water that are interconnected in complex ways and sometimes create shared basins.

The first article by Hock Keong Choong titled "Reimagining the Weretiger of the Malay Peninsula: Western Colonial and Chinese Diasporic Perspectives" examines the evolving representations of the weretiger—a mythical shapeshifting creature from Malay folklore—contrasting its cultural significance with that of the Malayan tiger, a national symbol of Malaysia, while tracing accounts from non-indigenous observers, such as Western colonists and Chinese authors. On the one hand, this paper explores the research and writings of Manuel Godinho de Eredia and Hugh Clifford, arguing that the narrative frames the weretiger within a hierarchical framework of disdain, employing a two-tiered gaze. On the other hand, from Ma Huan to Hsu Yun Tsiao and, more recently, to Maniniwei and Amanda Nell Eu, it illustrates how Chinese authors have transformed the weretiger motif from folkloric curiosity into a vehicle for cultural critique. Together, this paper advocates for the weretiger as a polyvalent symbol whose meanings shift across historical, cultural, and ideological contexts.

The article "A Queer Momotaro under the Postcolonial Pacific: Reading *The Membranes* Alternatively" by Sophia Huei-Ling Chen argues that *The Membranes,* published in 2021, functions as a national allegory of Taiwan, challenging the dominant interpretation of the novella solely as a work of science fiction. While previous readings often overlook the author's engagement with shifting global power dynamics, this study situates the narrative within the post-martial law context of 1990s Taiwan—a time marked by cultural liberalization and subversion of genre and gender norms. Set in a postapocalyptic underwater world where heterosexuality is abnormal and Taiwan exerts significant regional influence, the narrative reflects a queer and nationalist fantasy that resonated with contemporary Taiwanese readers and continues to hold relevance amid ongoing geopolitical tensions. Focusing on the protagonist Momo's origin story, the article offers an alternative reading that highlights cultural specificity and explores Taiwan's modern identity and existential anxieties beneath its science fiction and queer themes.

The third article, "Off to Other Shores: Transgressing Borders in Contemporary Sinophone Screen Media" by Helen Hess, examines how contemporary Sinophone

feature film and series portray crossings between physical and metaphysical realms, analyzing how these thresholds function as sites for negotiating cultural, linguistic, and political tensions. The study highlights two case studies: the Taiwanese–Malaysian Netflix series *The Ghost Bride* (2020), in which a young woman enters the realm of the dead to confront supernatural violence and reclaim agency, and the Malaysia–Hong Kong co-production *Barbarian Invasion* (2021), which offers a contemporary Sinophone perspective on spiritual and embodied forms of border-crossing beyond explicit ghostly encounters. Through an intersectional lens, the article demonstrates how these narratives of in-betweenness challenge gendered, classed, and ethnic hierarchies and offer imaginative models for coexistence and plurality in the Sinophone world.

Delving into these various aspects, the contributions in this special issue aim at analyzing how different, at times intersecting types of transgressing boundaries—geographical, epistemological, socio-cultural, discursive, etc.—are represented in literary and filmic productions, and how the writers, their protagonists, and their works are situated in, create, and navigate worlds "in-between."

To refer to such spaces "in-between" in the context of Sinophone Malaysian literature, also known as Mahua literature, scholars Khor Boon Eng and Chen Sihe employ the term "third cultural space" to characterize the unique cultural landscape inhabited by Sinophone Malaysian writers and communities. This term is adapted from Homi Bhabha's influential concept of the "third space," which originally referred to the hybrid cultural zone that emerges from the interaction between colonizer and colonized. However, Khor and Chen reframe this idea to suit the specific dynamics of the Malaysian context. Their "third cultural space" does not center on colonial power relations but instead describes the complex and multifaceted cultural space that arises from the intersection of Chinese and Malaysian linguistic and cultural traditions. Khor and Chen's reinterpretation highlights the creative potential and distinct identity formation that occur when different cultural frameworks coexist and interact within a shared environment.

This resonates with the artwork by artist I-Lann Yee titled "Like the Banana Tree at the Gate." In this work, Yee critically addresses the overlaps of the marginalization of women, ethnic minorities, and the destruction of the environment in the context of Malaysia's national history. The title is a reference to a seventeenth century sultan in Borneo who advised his subjects not to plant banana trees in front of their houses so as not to give the impression of wealth to potential colonial exploiters. This story was cited by Michael Dove in his book *The Banana Tree at the Gate: A History of Marginal Peoples and Global Markets in Borneo* as an example of anti-colonial resistance (Dove 2011).

The female figures in Yee's work symbolize the so-called Pontianak, also referred to as Kuntilanak, a female spirit who died giving birth to an illegitimate child and lingers among the living after her death as a man-eater. There are many stories about Pontianak, which often serve to admonish young women not to risk such a fate.

Pontianak is said to have long black hair and often lives in banana bushes. It is a common symbol in Malaysian and Indonesian popular culture.

In local folklore, Pontianak is sometimes described as crossing the boundary between human and animal forms. Informants report that she can transform into a bird when travelling long distances. This ability reflects her strong association with nature. The name "Pontianak" is sometimes linked to the Malay phrase *pohon tinggi* ("tall tree"), reflecting the belief that the ghost inhabits either banana trees (*Musa* genus; Indonesian: *pohon pisang*) or banyan fig trees (*Ficus* genus; Indonesian: *pohon beringin*), depending on the region (Duile 2020: 290).

As an undead figure, Pontianak embodies a dual nature. She may appear as a frightening vampire-like spirit dressed in white with long black hair, but she can also take the form of a woman constrained by traditional gender roles. This transformation occurs when she is subdued by driving a spike or nail into her head or the nape of her neck. Nicholas and Kline (2010: 202) interpret this act in Pontianak narratives from Malaysia not only as an expression of sexualized control but also broader patriarchal authority. When restrained, she becomes a beautiful but compliant woman; once the nail is removed, she reverts to her ghostly form and regains her uncontrollable and dangerous character. In this state she symbolizes behaviors considered socially inappropriate for women: she seduces men and her presence is marked by loud, shrill laughter. As Cohen (1996: 16) argues, monstrous figures often embody transgressive traits that societies attempt to suppress, yet these repressed elements continually return. Pontianak reflects this dynamic, as her independence and sexuality become threatening when they are no longer controlled.

Duile (2020) further interprets the popularity of the Pontianak figure as reflecting broader cultural negotiations between social values and conceptions of nature. In this context, the ghost represents forces associated with the natural world that remain excluded from the human sphere, highlighting an unresolved tension between society and nature.

> "The pontianak continues to haunt us in 21st century patriarchal Southeast Asia," Yee explains. "She is the woman standing at the gate like the banana tree in full view. She is potential and power and resource. A banana plant lives only briefly, bearing just one bunch of fruit before it dies. Its root structure, however, grows a new plant immediately – and so the cycle continues, ever present with a memory of the past." (Yee 2016)

I-Lann Yee thus addresses a structural correspondence between the fear of planting a banana tree and the fear of women's agency. In her artwork, she addresses the stigmatization and oppression of women. According to Yee, these women are made into monsters because they embody a different form of femininity than admitted (Boo 2016), a femininity that expresses strength. Julia Kristeva explains this phenomenon through the concept of abjection. The abject represents parts of identity and society that do not conform to order and are therefore feared (Kristeva 1982: 1-31).

Yee's artwork can therefore be understood as a votive gesture for female self-determination—for instance, the right of women to decide if, when, and whom to marry. Through strategies of appropriation, it reclaims figures historically framed as threatening and turns them into symbols of resistance and visibility. At the same time, the Pontianak motif itself embodies a condition of liminality, occupying a space between categories such as human and ghost, victim and monster, subjugation and agency.

This idea of in-betweenness is echoed in the cover image of this issue, which depicts the burning of an effigy of Da Shi Ye (大士爷), the King of Ghosts. The photograph was taken during the Hungry Ghost Festival in September 2025 in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. In Chinese folk and Daoist-Buddhist traditions, the festival marks a period when the gates of the underworld are believed to open and spirits are released into the human world. A towering paper effigy of Da Shi Ye is typically installed at the ritual site to preside over the proceedings and to maintain order among the wandering spirits, ensuring that offerings made by the living are distributed fairly. At the end of the festival, the effigy is ceremonially burned, symbolically sending the deity—and the spirits under his supervision—back to the underworld (Xiao En 2021).

Such offering rituals exist precisely at the threshold between worlds, as described in Helen Hess' paper "Off to Other Shores: Transgressing Borders in Contemporary Sinophone Screen Media" (this issue). Materially present yet intended for the realm of spirits, joss paper offerings mediate between the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible. As a visual motif, the image therefore foregrounds a liminal space where the boundaries between the physical and the metaphysical become permeable. In this sense, the cover image resonates with Yee's reworking of the Pontianak figure, as well as with creatures such as the weretiger and the various Malaysian ghosts discussed in Hock Keong Choong's paper, "Reimagining the Weretiger of the Malay Peninsula: Western Colonial and Chinese Diasporic Perspectives" (this issue), and the liminal character Momo examined in Sophia Huei-Ling Chen's paper, "A Queer Momotaro under the Postcolonial Pacific: Reading *The Membranes* Alternatively" (this issue)—the android who lingers between the worlds of human and machine, reality and artificiality, and life and death. All these symbolic figures highlight how marginalized identities emerge and gain meaning within transitional or ambiguous zones.

Khor and Chen's notion of the third cultural space provides a productive framework for conceptualizing such liminal configurations, understanding space as simultaneously material, symbolic, and lived. The analysis of hybrid "in-between" worlds that arise when established boundaries are crossed foregrounds how marginalized subjects create meaning and agency within contested spaces, thereby challenging binary distinctions such as center/periphery, self/other, or tradition/modernity. The concept thus offers a useful lens for examining the dynamic and layered spatial imaginaries explored in the contributions gathered in this special issue.

Considering the continuous transformations and relationships inherent in these transgressions, the authors of this special issue argue that including non-human and supernatural elements enriches our understanding of historical, socio-political, and cultural-aesthetic phenomena in Chinese-language/Sinophone narratives. This approach prompts us to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and dichotomies such as culture versus nature, human versus non-human, physical versus metaphysical, or male versus female, while also encouraging a more multifaceted exploration of the intricate connections and intersections between these realms. Ultimately, this special issue aims to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities and interplay between the worlds created in literary and cultural productions across various historical and geographical contexts, but also of the "worlding" of Chinese-language literary and visual media, as introduced by Chan Cheow Thia (2023).

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the organizers of the ACCL conference in Hong Kong for making this panel possible. We are especially grateful to Prof. Dr. Nicolai Volland for his invaluable and insightful feedback as the panel's discussant. We also wish to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants for their contributions, as well as to Jeanette Gerhardt and the ASIEN editors, Dr. Florian Pölking and Anna Fiedler—without their support, this special issue would not have been possible.

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ASIEN 172/173 (Juli/Oktober 2024), S. 19–40

THEMENSCHWERPUNKT

Refereed Article

Reimagining the Weretiger of the Malay Peninsula: Western Colonial and Chinese Diasporic Perspectives

Hock Keong CHOONG

Abstract:
The weretiger, a fearsome shapeshifting figure from Malay folklore, contrasts sharply with the Malayan tiger, a national symbol revered in Malaysia. Transgressing the boundary between human and beast, it embodies an unsettling other to human society (both protective and perilous) and has permeated the cultural imagination of the Malay Peninsula. Although rooted in local belief systems, the figure has evolved through external and diasporic perspectives, acquiring new meanings beyond its original cultural context. This paper examines shifting representations of the weretiger among observers from outside the primary belief-bearing communities: first in Western colonial writings and then in the Chinese diaspora in historical China and Malaya/Malaysia. The inquiry is situated within the existing scholarly landscape, beginning with Robert Wessing's comprehensive study of Southeast Asian weretiger traditions, which provides a sociological foundation grounded in local beliefs; it further acknowledges Nazry Bahrawi's cultural translation framework regarding how oral traditions have been textualized into modern adaptations within the Malay literary sphere. Building on and moving beyond these perspectives, the paper analyzes how Western colonial authors, particularly Manuel Godinho de Erédia and Hugh Clifford, framed the weretiger within a hierarchical framework of disdain, deploying a two-tiered gaze: the Malay community's gaze toward internal and external others (including marginalized groups such as the Semang and Kerinci), and the Western colonists' gaze toward the Malay community. Finally, it traces how Chinese authors, from Ma Huan and Hsu Yun Tsiao who actually hailed from China, to the more recent Malaysian-born Chinese creators Maniniwei and Amanda Nell Eu, have transformed the weretiger motif from a folkloric curiosity into a vehicle for cultural critique, eventually turning from an external lens to a pursuit of internal authenticity. In doing so, the paper foregrounds the weretiger as a polyvalent symbol whose meanings are constantly renegotiated across historical, cultural, and ideological contexts.

Keywords: Weretiger, Malay Peninsula, folklore, hierarchy of disdain, two-tiered gaze, Hugh Clifford, Maniniwei, *Tiger Stripes*

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Introduction

The Malayan tiger serves as a potent national emblem in Malaysia, symbolizing authority, majesty, courage, ambition, and protection. Its image is prominently featured in the logos of leading institutions and corporations, including Universiti Malaya (Malaysia's premier university), Maybank (Malayan Banking Berhad), and Proton (the national carmaker). In sports, the tiger's distinctive stripes often appear as a signature design on Malaysia's national teams' uniforms, most notably on the Olympic team's jerseys. Interestingly, in the folklore of the Malay Peninsula, the weretiger, a legendary creature derived from the tiger, is depicted as both awe-inspiring and fearsome, in stark contrast to the noble and righteous symbolism of the Malayan tiger.

For readers unfamiliar with the weretiger, it may help to think of its European cousin: the werewolf, a legendary shapeshifter widely known through popular culture.[1] The werewolf thrived in Europe because wolves were a common and familiar threat there, whereas the weretiger emerged in Asia where tigers were the dominant large predator. Owing to their bestial ferocity and the potential threat they pose, both the werewolf and the weretiger are often constructed as unsettling others in relation to human society within their respective regions. Having sketched the comparative context, we must also consider how their shapeshifting ability, while superficially allowing them to transgress the human–beast boundary, more profoundly signals the blurring or even reconfiguration of distinctions between species, identities, and the civilized and the savage. This transformation gives rise to a richer spectrum of social, cultural, and identity-based symbols and meanings, raising a critical question: How ought these newly liberated significations be interpreted?

Previous studies of the weretiger have largely employed sociological and anthropological methods to explore the belief systems of primary local communities, such as examining origins, transmission pathways, and folklore typologies grounded in local oral traditions and colonial archives (Skeat 1900: 157–170; Wessing 1986). Furthermore, a recent study has utilized the framework of cultural translation to examine the development of weretiger folklore within the Malay literary sphere of the Malay Archipelago (Bahrawi 2021: 66–81). In contrast, this paper adopts a comparative literature approach, allowing us to read weretiger texts across genres, languages, and eras as deliberate cultural constructs rather than mere ethnographic curiosities. It investigates how external and diasporic observers, specifically Western colonial writers and diasporic Chinese authors, have engaged with the weretiger as a site of otherness, even as the authors themselves are perceived as a kind of other in a certain sense. By analyzing their texts, the study seeks to uncover the narrative mechanisms of othering they employ in engaging the weretiger myth and to derive broader theoretical insights into the construction of cultural otherness,

1 The phenomena of were-animals, including the weretiger, has been classed as lycanthropy, a concept closely related to the werewolf, by earlier scholars (Wessing 1986: 25).

or, alternatively, to leverage that otherness as a means of critiquing entrenched orthodox values.

It begins with a review of Robert Wessing's comprehensive study of Southeast Asian weretiger traditions, which sets the stage for subsequent analyses. This is followed by an overview of Nazry Bahrawi's research on cultural translation, which addresses the textualization of oral traditions into modern adaptations within the Malay literary sphere. Departing from these scholarly frameworks, the analysis first scrutinizes the historical records produced by Western colonial authors. The investigation commences with Manuel Godinho de Erédia's (1563–1623) record in *Description of Malaca, Meridional India, and Cathay* (1613). This is followed by two short stories by Hugh Clifford (1866–1941), "A Night of Terror" and "The Were-Tiger," both included in *In Court and Kampong: Being Tales and Sketches of Native Life in the Malay Peninsula* (1897). The study then shifts to key engagements within the Chinese diaspora, tracing a trajectory that spans historical China as well as Malaya and present-day Malaysia. This trajectory traces Ma Huan's (馬歡, 1380–1460) brief mention in *Yingya Shenglan* (瀛涯勝覽, 1451) and Hsu Yun Tsiao's (許雲樵, 1905–1981) October 1951 column in *Nanyang Yuebao* (南洋月報), reaching more contemporary manifestations such as Maniniwei's (馬尼尼為, b. 1980) descriptive texts and illustrations in *100 Malay Ghosts* (馬來鬼圖鑒, 2021), and the independent film *Tiger Stripes* (虎紋少女, 2023), written and directed by Amanda Nell Eu (余修善, b.1985).

Drawing on this comparative survey, I argue that external and diasporic perspectives do more than simply exoticize the weretiger; instead, they repeatedly recast the figure as a barometer of cultural anxiety, projecting colonial and diasporic tensions onto its liminal form. By tracing these shifting interpretations, the paper reveals how the weretiger functions as a dynamic site for the ongoing production of otherness, where identities are constantly negotiated across time and space.

Roars in Nusantara[2]: Endogenous Narratives on the Weretiger

Robert Wessing's *The Soul of Ambiguity: The Tiger in Southeast Asia* (1986) offers a comprehensive synthesis of weretiger traditions and related scholarship across the region. Although much of the research he draws upon originates from Western anthropologists and sociologists, Wessing provides a critical map of the local worldviews that animate the Malay Peninsula. Establishing this foundational understanding of the figure's endogenous roots is essential; it allows for a more

2 Nusantara is a conventional term in the Malay world referring to the maritime regions of Southeast Asia, primarily the Indonesian Archipelago, the Malay Peninsula, and Borneo. Its scope also includes specific areas of Cambodia and Vietnam where Austronesian languages are spoken, as these languages are genetically related and cognate with Malay, reflecting a broader shared linguistic heritage. While weretiger legends are widely distributed throughout Asia, the folklore within Nusantara serves as a typical representation of this phenomenon in Southeast Asia.

nuanced analysis of how the weretiger was later constructed as an other within the narratives of Western colonists and diasporic Chinese authors.

According to Robert Wessing, the weretiger is commonly understood as the posthumous manifestation of kings, nobles, ancestors, holy men, or cultural heroes whose souls and spirits continue to guard and protect their descendants. Among the Malays, weretigers could be seen as chiefs or heroes, or their souls after death which look after the village. For example, in Negeri Sembilan, members of certain families are believed to become tigers after death, serving as protectors of their descendants, crops, and livestock. Places believed to be inhabited by tiger spirits, such as graves or caves thought to be guarded by tiger souls, are often treated as sacred and referred to as *keramat* in both Malay and Indonesian (Wessing 1986: 27–50). Meanwhile, shamans, who are often closely associated with these revered categories, are believed to possess the ability to physically transform into tigers while still alive. Among the various ethnic groups native to the region, for instance, the shamans of the Benua[3] are said to be possessed by ancestral tiger spirits, while those of the Semang are believed to undergo corporeal transformation into tigers during their lifetime (Wessing 1986: 51–63). Extending this typology further, Wessing also includes the "familiar," typically a spirit embodied in animal form, within the broader category of the weretiger, given its analogous role in serving or protecting an individual (Wessing 1986: 63–74).

Wessing concludes that these manifestations "all seem to be rather benevolent creatures, concerned mainly with the protection and continued well being of their charges" (Wessing 1986: 74). However, many folk narratives also feature individuals who transform through magic arts, appearing not as guardians but as bloodthirsty predators with malevolent intent, attacking humans and livestock alike. The distinction between noble tigers and magical weretigers lies in their consumption: the former feed only on ritual offerings, while the latter are said to devour the flesh of those struck by misfortune (Wessing 1986: 74–87). It is worth noting that accusations of such malevolent transformations are often made by members of other communities. This pattern suggests that the circulation of weretiger lore possesses a distinct psychological dimension of othering: it reveals a process where social tensions, fears, and communal anxieties are projected onto the liminal figure of the tiger.

While Wessing's study offers a comprehensive synthesis of the role of the tiger within Southeast Asia, his taxonomy of weretiger phenomena reveals a certain conceptual tension. His categorization is not always grounded in consistent criteria. For instance, familiars—animal spirits closely associated with a specific individual, often a shaman—are included within the weretiger category primarily on the basis of functional similarity. However, Wessing's taxonomy falters by prioritizing

3 "Benua" is the standardized spelling in modern Malay, while earlier sources sometimes use the variant "Banua." In this paper, the original spelling "Banua" will be retained when citing historical documents, in order to faithfully reflect the original records.

functional utility over ontological essence. He categorizes familiars as weretigers based on their protective role, yet this overlooks the lack of any human-tiger transformation, a characteristic indispensable to the core of the weretiger myth. Nevertheless, I do not deny that tiger spirits acting as familiars are sometimes indistinguishable from or intertwined with weretiger folklore, which likely explains Wessing's decision to subsume familiars under the weretiger category.

Nazry Bahrawi's "Were-tigers in Were-text: Cultural Translation and Indigeneity in the Malay Archipelago," which is featured in the 2021 volume *Translation Politics in Southeast Asian Literatures* edited by Grace V.S. Chin, represents a significant recent study on weretiger lore within the Malay Archipelago. Bahrawi examines the evolution of the weretiger trope within the Malay literary sphere by utilizing the theoretical framework of cultural translation. To establish a historical baseline, he identifies three primary categories of precolonial oral folklore: spirit-tigers, naturally born tiger shape-shifters, and humans who employ magic to transform into weretigers. Building upon these categories, his argument centers on modern narratives from both Malaysia and Indonesia: the film *Sitora, the Weretiger* (*Sitora Harimau Jadian*, 1964) by the Malay filmmaker P. Ramlee and the novel *Man Tiger* (*Lelaki Harimau*, 2014) by Eka Kurniawan. Notably, P. Ramlee's work was later novelized by Zakaria Mohd Yassin (1965) and reprinted by Buku Fixi (2012), whereas Kurniawan's novel was translated into English (2015). Bahrawi interprets these two modern narratives as contemporary transformations of traditional weretiger folklore. Specifically, the former addresses the tension between superstition and science, while the latter explores the gray areas between feminism and patriarchy. Ultimately, Bahrawi theorizes these narratives as "were-texts," which are defined as texts that straddle the boundaries between modernity and mythology (Bahrawi 2021: 66–81). Bahrawi's conceptualization of "were-texts" is certainly intriguing. However, narratives that straddle the boundaries between modernity and mythology are common in contemporary literature. Therefore, I question the necessity of establishing this specific category within the Malay literary sphere to explain such a general phenomenon. Ultimately, my primary concern remains the extent to which this concept can offer truly new or original insights into this creative methodology.

The very difficulty Wessing encounters in attempting to impose a coherent typology, aptly hinted at by the title *The Soul of Ambiguity*, in fact highlights the inherent ambiguity and fluidity of the weretiger figure across its various cultural transmissions. Bahrawi examines modern transformations within the Malay literary sphere through the framework of cultural translation, focusing on the tensions between notions of tradition and modernity, yet his analysis does not address literary interpretations beyond this sphere. This paper does not attempt a similar typology or cultural translation approach, but rather seeks to examine how the weretiger has been perceived and interpreted from the perspectives of communities outside the Malay world, particularly Western colonists and the diasporic Chinese authors. To this end, this study employs a comparative literature framework to re-evaluate weretiger

narratives across various genres, languages, and eras, framing them as deliberate cultural constructs rather than simple ethnographic curiosities.

Hierarchy of Disdain: Gazing Through Western Colonial Eyes

One of the earliest mentions of the weretiger comes from Manuel Godinho de Erédia, a Bugis-Portuguese writer and cartographer based in Malacca, who was also a pioneering theorist of the Austral Land hypothesis. By 1613, Erédia had completed his *Description of Malaca*. He later produced two companion treatises; together, these three works are commonly grouped under the collective title *Description of Malaca, Meridional India, and Cathay*. In Chapter 15, "Concerning Gunoleda,"[4] he documents the legend of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, a prominent Malay folktale that exists in numerous narrative variants. The term *puteri* is ambiguous, referring variously to a maiden, a princess, or even a queen; Erédia interpreted her as "Queen Putry," indicating that she was regarded as the sovereign of Mount Ledang. To make the tale more accessible to Western readers, Erédia continually drew on ancient Western analogues and customs. For example, he likened Putry to the Thessalian sorceress Eritho or Syrce (modernly spelled "Circe") in Greco-Roman myths, underscoring her witch-like powers and shape-shifting abilities. He also compared Mount Ledang to Mount Athlante, the legendary home of pagan gods, treating the landscape as a sacred, distinctly pagan realm.

"This story must be a fairy-tale; but the natives regard it as true" (Mills 1930: 41). In this context, "natives" refers primarily to the Malay, in contrast to the wild Banuas, the aboriginal tribes said to dwell in the dark caverns of the mountains. The Malay maintain that the "wild Banuas" acquire magical arts enabling them to transform from human into tiger or other animals, and that they communicate with the devil or with Putry.

Around 1560, it was reported that at night the town of Malacca was beset by wild Banuas from the interior who transformed themselves from men into tigers and killed innocent women and children. Dom Jorge de Saint Lucia, the first Bishop of Malacca, organized several massive public religious events—offering a High Mass and a procession on the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady Protectress of the Fortress—and successfully excommunicated these tigers. Thereafter, no further tiger attacks on villagers occurred. Finally, Erédia proudly claimed that this "miracle" prompted many "heretics" to convert to Christianity (Mills 1930: 41).

That concludes Erédia's brief account of the weretiger, yet it is richly suggestive. From his vantage point, a cascading hierarchy of gazes emerges: the wild Banuas, categorized as "uncivilized" indigenous practitioners of magic, are subject to the gaze of native Malay Muslims, the "civilized" local community, who in turn fall under the colonial gaze of Erédia and his church, the "civilized" European Christian authorities.

4 "Gunoledam" corresponds to the modern Malay Gunung Ledang, meaning Mount Ledang.

Notably, from the Banuas' own perspective, the tigers serve as sacred guardians of Queen Putry on Mount Ledang. Thus, the shapeshifting arts are not malicious sorcery but a form of holy, esoteric knowledge. However, both so-called "civilized" communities, the native Malay Muslims and the European Christians, came to view the sacred guardians as evil creatures menacing human society. Here we see a complete inversion of the tiger's symbolic image. To defeat and expel these malignant beings, the colonial Christian authorities performed several massive Catholic rituals to restore the social order.

Three centuries later, Hugh Clifford, a British colonial administrator who spent over 20 years in Malaya, wrote two short stories about weretigers, "*A Night of Terror"* and "*The Were-Tiger,"* both of which he claimed were based on true events. These stories first appeared in his collection *In Court and Kampong: Being Tales and Sketches of Native Life in the Malay Peninsula* (1897). "*The Were-Tiger"* was subsequently republished in a shortened form in *The Further Side of Silence* (1916).

"A Night of Terror" recounts a horrifying night when a tiger burst into a family home and massacred its occupants. Near the Tembeling River in Pahang, a Malay family of five, together with two distant relatives and two guests, were relaxing and chatting after dinner. When the head of the household, Che Seman, suddenly mentioned the rumor that "He of the Hairy Face" or *Si Pudong*, the taboo name for the tiger, had returned to kill again, insisting that this tiger had once been a man. The story reached its climax when the tiger struck without warning: the household's desperate attempts at defense ended in a brutal slaughter. At dawn, the tiger departed, leaving only Mat, one of the distant relatives, alive, hiding overhead on a high shelf. According to Mat's harrowing testimony, the tiger did not eat its victims but instead toyed with their bodies, even tormenting the little girl before she succumbed. (Clifford 1897: 196–209)

Perhaps the most striking detail is Che Seman's claim that the tiger was a Semang shapeshifter who had been driven out from among the Semang. When his nephew Abdollah suggested that only the men of Korinchi[5] possessed such powers, Che Seman doubled down, insisting that the deep woods Semang possessed them as well. He recalled that, while out seeking jungle produce, he and many others had seen the weretiger's human guise indistinguishable from that of a Semang man—roaming alone, naked, and muttering to himself. As he declared, "All men know that it is He who by night harries us in our villages" (Clifford 1897: 202). However, Che Seman does not explain how he and the Malay villagers came to identify this solitary Semang wanderer as the weretiger. Clifford (assuming the "I" at the end of the stories in this book represents him) acknowledges that the incident was remarkable in every respect: it is the only recorded instance in the Malay Peninsula of a tiger daring to attack men within their closed houses, and the beast mutilated its victims

5 In this paper, the spelling "Korinchi" is retained to faithfully reflect original historical records, as it frequently appears in earlier sources. For contemporary reference, this form is standardized as "Kerinci" in Indonesian and "Kerinchi" in Malaysian.

without consuming them. He seeks to reconstruct, through rational analysis, the psychological basis of the Malay judgment—attributing the tiger's fearlessness and bloodlust to magic—and argues that these very features led them to interpret the attack as the work of humans transformed into tigers. Clifford's hypothesis rests on the subtle affinities between the tiger's monstrous instincts and human physiological impulses, yet he likewise overlooks why the Malay were so convinced that this particular tiger had been transformed from a Semang.

I suggest that the Malay in the story immediately linked the attacking tiger to the Semang because of an underlying hierarchy of disdain between the two groups. Compared to the Malay villagers living on the forest's edge, the Semang are labeled by Che Seman as "the negrits of the woods," a phrase that excludes them from the "civilized" world and relegates them to a more primitive status. This same hierarchy of disdain is further illustrated in another story from Clifford's *In Court and Kampong*, "In a Camp of the Semangs" (Clifford 1897: 171–181), where the social status of different communities—Europeans, the Malay, and the Semang—is explicitly determined by each group's perceived level of civilization, as shown below:

> I, the European, the white man, belonging to one of the most civilised races in the Old World; the Malays, civilised too, but after the fashion of unchanging Asia, which differs so widely from the restless progressive civilisation of the West; and, lastly, the Semangs, squalid savages, nursing no ambitions save those prompted by their empty stomachs, with no hope of change or improvement in their lot, and yet representing one of the oldest races in the world—a race which, though it first possessed the East, with all its possibilities and riches, could utilise none of them, and whose members carry in their eyes the melancholy look of dumb animals, which, when seen on the human countenance, denotes a people who are doomed to speedy extinction, and who, never since time began, have had their day or have played a part in human history. (Clifford 1897: 175–176)

By combining the hierarchies of disdain in these two stories, we see Erédia's two-tiered gaze reemerge over three centuries later: the indigenous Semangs, labeled "savages" who dwell in the woods and wield shape-shifting magic, are viewed as threatening others by Malay Muslims, who, though deemed "civilised" in "the fashion of unchanging Asia," themselves fall under the colonial gaze of Clifford, a European who claimed to belong to the "most civilised" race.

In Semang belief, the *hala* (the community's shaman and healer) can transform into a tiger. Intriguingly, the *hala* is also said to communicate with the blood-thirsty Supreme Being (known as *Kari*, *Karei*, or *Ta Pedn*) or with intermediaries called *cenoi* (Eliade 2004: 337). This belief may explain Che Seman's conviction that the Semang could become tigers. Furthermore, the tiger's role as the *hala*'s embodiment may be tied to the Supreme Being's requirement for blood offerings. What is clear is that, in Semang society, the *hala*'s shapeshifting serves an unambiguously social function that includes both religious and healing roles. However, among more "civilized" communities, this practice was recast as something "savage" and

dangerous: the Semang's marginal social standing made their tiger shapeshifting belief appear menacing, inverting the weretiger's original status as a sacred being. Moreover, the individual Che Seman accused of being a weretiger was himself expelled from the Semang community. If the Semang already occupied a peripheral position within the social hierarchy, this outcast wanderer represented an even more extreme marginalization through the lens of otherness.

The following discussion focuses on another of Clifford's stories, "The Were-Tiger." As noted above, two versions exist. Since the version in *The Further Side of Silence* is abridged, the analysis here will be based primarily on the original text in *In Court and Kampong*.

A Korinchi trader named Haji Ali arrived in Perak from Sumatra with his two sons and settled in Slim Valley. There, they operated a prosperous farm through which they amassed considerable wealth and they practiced their Muslim faith devoutly. Shortly thereafter, this prosperous outsider sought a wife in this poor Malay village and married Patimah, treating her well. Strangely, each night he left the house at dusk and returned only before dawn. On the third night of their marriage, Patimah stayed awake with curiosity and discovered that her husband returned with a tiger's head and a man's body—he was in fact a weretiger! Terrified, she fled through the jungle back to her home, drawing the attention of the entire village. Those poor villagers, who had been disappointed by Haji Ali's choice of wife, now seized the opportunity to mock Patimah's parents. Cut off from the community, Haji Ali and his sons lived in isolation. One night, the village headman, Penghulu Mat Saleh, discovered that a tiger had slain his water buffalo. He and the other villagers laid an ambush and wounded the beast's leg, then followed its tracks straight to Haji Ali's stilted house. There they found only Ali's sons, Abas and Abdulrahman, who claimed their father was too ill to see visitors. The villagers' exchange with the two young men grew increasingly tense, and in the end the villagers chose to withdraw. As they descended the steps of the stilted house, they noticed that the floor beneath Haji Ali's room was stained a dim red. Mat Saleh reported the incident to the district's British officer, who met the story with typical European skepticism. A few days later, Haji Ali and his sons vanished without a trace. Clifford, skeptical of the weretiger tale, initially suspected they were victims of foul play. Several months afterward, they reappeared in another part of the peninsula, with Haji Ali badly limping on his right leg (Clifford 1897: 62–77).

In this story, the weretiger is also portrayed as an outsider. Although the Semang are indigenous to the Malay Peninsula, "civilized" society still casts them as outsiders; similarly, a Korinchi man from Sumatra—even one who is Muslim and, in some contexts, regarded as ethnically Malay—remains an outsider in purely geographic terms. Whether excluded by cultural norms or by origin, both figures occupy the margins in these stories—strangers perceived as the constructed others.

At the outset of "The Were-Tiger," Clifford offers a lengthy discussion before the story proper begins, in which he notes that the Malay were well acquainted with

incidents of Korinchi men transforming into tigers. For example, he recounts that Haji Abdullah, also from Korinchi, was once caught in a tiger trap, and that countless others, after undergoing transformation, were said to have vomited feathers or to have abandoned their garments and trading packs in the thickets (Clifford 1897: 65). Wessing similarly records two incidents in which Korinchi men were suspected of transforming into tigers and were subsequently killed in the Malay states (Wessing 1986: 75–76). In addition, Frank Swettenham documented two cases of Korinchi men transforming into tigers on the Malay Peninsula, one of which took place in Perak. The Korinchi people, however, were unhappy about the rumors and insisted that not all possessed such magic, and that only the inhabitants of the Chenaku district in the interior of Korinchi who practiced occult arts could transform, while ordinary Korinchi people were fearful of entering the Chenaku district (Swettenham 1895: 200–201).

Notably, throughout the nineteenth century, a number of records attest to Korinchi men in the Malay Peninsula transforming into tigers. I suggest that this may be related to the large-scale migration of Korinchi people to the Malay Peninsula during that period.[6] Evidently, these newcomers aroused suspicion and unease among the local Malay. As the shapeshifter legends from Korinchi began to circulate in the Malay Peninsula, they were likely reshaped by local anxieties and aversions toward outsiders, thus giving rise to the reported incidents.

In contrast to "A Night of Terror," Clifford presents his viewpoint more explicitly in the extended introductory passage of "The Were-Tiger."[7] On the one hand, Clifford adopts a tone of irony to critique the Society for Psychical Research for uncritically treating faith as reality. He also targets educated Europeans who assume the world has been disenchanted, while remaining ignorant of cultures beyond Europe. In his view, the were-tiger folktale is best understood as a projection of human fear of wild beasts, as well as a deep unease with the greed, bloodlust, and tendency toward violence against one's own kind embedded in primitive human nature. On the other hand, he sought to suspend judgment on the were-tiger story and emphasized the importance of understanding the native view on human existence. Among the Malay, for example, encounters between the mundane and the supernatural are understood as parallel, coexisting realities. Though such

6 For example, Kampung Kerinchi, literally "Kerinchi Village," is an area in Kuala Lumpur that emerged around 1870 as one of the earliest Korinchi immigrant settlements and remains extant today. In 2012, Kuala Lumpur City Hall renamed it "Bangsar South," a decision that provoked widespread public criticism. In January 2019, the city officially restored the name Kampung Kerinchi on historical and socio-political grounds. (Malay Mail 19 January 2019; https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/01/19/bangsar-south-officially-reverts-to-kg-kerinchi-in-win-for-identity-traditi/1714191)

7 However, in the abridged version published nearly 20 years later, he removed almost half of the original introductory passage—particularly the sections criticizing the Society for Psychical Research (Clifford 1916: 40–55). Perhaps it provoked a backlash. Regrettably, his true motive for the omission remains unknown.

experiences may evoke fear, they do not necessarily elicit surprise, as both realms are regarded as equally real.

Clifford often oscillated between two ends of the spectrum: at times, he portrayed the local people as still trapped in the "dark centuries," yet he also showed genuine empathy toward them. He upheld the ideals of Western Enlightenment, while simultaneously criticizing the arrogance of European intellectuals—perhaps without even realizing how contradictory and unsettling such a mindset was. This ambiguity and vacillation in his perspective are precisely what set Clifford apart from conventional Eurocentric thinkers, and they reflect the growing self-reflexivity among colonial officials and scholars in the late nineteenth century.

The framework of the two-tiered gaze may once again be applied to examine the dynamics between the Korinchi people, the local Malay, and the European observer. In the story, the Korinchi men, wealthy outsiders from Sumatra, are regarded as strangers by the local Malay, despite their shared religious and ethnic identity. The European initially suspects that the were-tiger narrative is a convenient pretext through which the Malay could legitimize acts of hostility toward outsiders. However, upon learning of Haji Ali's reappearance, now limping, he ultimately refrains from drawing a definitive conclusion.

Kerinci, a regency in today's Jambi Province in Indonesia, is a natural habitat for tigers and the source of much folklore involving them, including tales of weretigers. It is said that two villages near Kerinci are inhabited by the Cindaku (also known as Chendaku) people. The inhabitants of these villages are said to possess the ability to transform: one into werepigs, the other into weretigers. At certain times of the year, the werepigs are believed to raid farmers' gardens, while the weretigers are said to hunt for human prey (Wessing 1986: 96–97). Meanwhile, according to research by Hebransyah Usman and his team, the community of Pulau Tengah, a traditional village located within Kerinci, preserves the tale of Bujang Nunggal and the Tiger Princess of Pasemah. This story is performed through a ritual known as *ngagoah imo* (literally, "tiger roaring"), which functions as a means of reinforcing social order. (Usman et al. 2014: 24–44)

This indicates that the tales of weretigers in Kerinci encompass both protective and threatening dimensions. However, when the Kerinci people migrate to other regions such as the Malay Peninsula, their perceived foreignness, strangeness, and marginality give rise to a sense of threat and anxiety among local communities. As a result, local communities tend to reduce the complex weretiger mythology associated with the Kerinci people to a simplified and threatening image of aggression. On one level, this narrative serves to explain incidents of tiger sightings, attacks, or livestock predation, thereby alleviating local anxieties surrounding such events. On another level, the underlying unease triggered by the presence of the Kerinci is projected onto specific events, reinforcing local suspicions and validating their distrust of outsiders. From an ecological standpoint, the growing number of tiger incursions into human settlements may be attributed to ongoing encroachment

on tiger habitats. In response to this phenomenon, the Kerinci people are perceived by the Malay in the Malay Peninsula as scapegoats: symbolic figures through whom communal anxieties are projected and the disruption is rendered intelligible.

From Folkloric Curiosity to a Vehicle of Critique: Chinese Diasporic Reframings of the Weretiger

While ethnic Chinese constitute an integral part of the Malaysian citizenry, weretiger folklore in the Malay Peninsula is conventionally perceived as the cultural heritage of the Malay and indigenous peoples. Consequently, when Chinese authors engage with these legends, they inevitably occupy the position of outsiders, a status that, to some extent, mirrors the perspective of Western observers. This paper identifies the four Chinese authors, hailing from diverse temporal and spatial contexts, as "diasporic Chinese," primarily because all four have traversed both identitarian and geographical boundaries.[8] Specifically, Ma Huan and Hsu Yun Tsiao represent one group: as individuals originally from China, they encountered these indigenous legends from an external vantage point and mediated them for the Chinese community. Conversely, Maniniwei and Amanda Nell Eu constitute a second group: as Malaysians who moved abroad, they reimagine these local myths from a distance to re-examine the complexities of identity. Intriguingly, for all four authors, the discourse on the weretiger emerges precisely at the juncture of these geographical and identity-based crossings.

The historical depth of such cultural encounters is best epitomized by the Ming dynasty voyager Ma Huan. As the earliest representative of the first group of diasporic Chinese observers, Ma Huan accompanied Cheng Ho (鄭和, 1371–1433) on three of his maritime expeditions. In his *Yingya Shenglan*, written more than a century before de Erédia's account of Malacca, Ma Huan recorded the following tale:

> In the state [Translator's note: Malacca], a tiger once transformed into a man, slipped into the town, and mingled with the crowd. However, a discerning observer saw through its disguise, captured it, and killed it.[9](Feng 1955: 25)

This earliest testimony also recounts the expulsion of the weretiger. In contrast to de Erédia's richly detailed account of a grand Christian exorcism to drive out the creature, Ma Huan's narrative simply underscores the locals' ingenuity. Their

8 While the term "diasporic Chinese" has been the subject of extensive academic debate, this paper employs the term through a performative lens, focusing on the lived experience and the act of traversing geographical and identitarian boundaries. This approach is exemplified by Ma Huan, much of whose life was spent in overseas travel, facilitating a continuous crossing of boundaries and the transmission of foreign exotica back to the Ming world. By emphasizing the "crossing" intrinsic to these authors' movements, this study draws a parallel between their spatial displacement and the transgression of the human–beast boundary embodied in weretiger folklore.

9 My translation. Original text: "國中有虎化為人，入市混人而行，自有識者，擒而殺之。"

vigilance regarding the weretiger's disguise further demonstrates the folklore's widespread popularity across the region.

Five centuries later, in October 1951, Hsu Yun Tsiao published a short column on weretiger lore, titled "The Magic of Humans Transforming into Tigers" (人變虎的法術), in *Nanyang Yuebao*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (Hsu 2017: 392). A pivotal figure in Chinese diaspora scholarship in Nanyang (the "South Sea" from the perspective of China), Hsu's own life embodied the diasporic experience after leaving the Republic of China and residing in Singapore for many decades. As part of his broader effort to introduce local indigenous culture to the Nanyang Chinese community, Hsu briefly documented the weretiger folklore of the Malay Peninsula as an illustration of the region's diverse traditions. In addition to citing the accounts of Ma Huan and de Erédia, Hsu recorded two further instances of weretiger transformation in the twentieth century, one in Kuala Lumpur in 1923 and another in Kelantan in 1929. Although he did not provide further details about these two incidents, my review of the literature suggests that Hsu's source was likely the notes written by J. V. Mills for Erédia's *Description of Malaca*. Interestingly, the subject of the Kuala Lumpur case was not Malay, but Indian (Mills 1930: 167). Hsu also noted that the Malay referred to such occurrences as *Chenaku* or *Blian*, and believed that they would only afflict those who accepted the lore. However, he again offered no further explanation and his information in this case, too, appears to have been drawn from Mills's notes (Mills 1930: 166). As discussed in the previous section, *Chenaku* refers to a sub-group of the Kerinci people believed to possess the ability to transform into tigers. *Blian* should be rendered as the standard Malay *belian*, meaning "shaman" and the weretiger is sometimes called *harimau belian*, literally "the shaman's tiger." Both terms imply that the weretiger is a being transformed through magic.

At the end of this short column, Hsu likens these weretiger accounts to a Nanyang counterpart *Liaozhai* (聊齋, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*), characterizing them as mere fodder for idle conversation over drinks and tea. *Liaozhai* is a cornerstone of the *zhiguai* (志怪, tales of the strange) tradition in classical Chinese literature, and by drawing this parallel, Hsu effectively made the weretiger folklore more accessible to Chinese readers, but only as sensational entertainment, with no intention of exploring its deeper cultural significance.

For the second group of observers writing from the diaspora, contemporary reimaginings depart from the curiosity-driven framing of the mid-twentieth century to explore the psychological and ontological depths of the myth. In 2021, Maniniwei, a Malaysian Chinese writer long based in Taiwan, featured the weretiger in the chapter "Raising the Little Ghosts" (人養小鬼) of her book *100 Malay Ghosts*, with a brief descriptive text and her own ingenious illustrations. In that chapter, she illustrated the weretiger as a comical tiger-headed man. Rather than using the terms *huren* (虎人) or *renhu* (人虎), which more directly correspond to "weretiger," she opted for *laohugui* (老虎鬼), literally "tiger ghost" or "tiger spirit," to reinforce her

book's ghostly theme, and in Malay she uses *harimau jadian*, whose root *jadi* ("to become") underscores the creature's transformative nature. According to Maniniwei, the tiger transformation magic, known for its ferocity and formidable offensive power, can be learned either for protection or for rivalry. A master of the tiger spirit may transform into a full tiger form or a partial form with only a tiger's head, but must then carefully perform a ritual to release the spirit or risk a disastrous fate (Maniniwei 2021: 62–63).

Maniniwei argues that little ghosts are closely associated with rivalry, protection, and assistance with tasks, reflecting humans' awareness of their own limitations and their desire to invoke external forces to secure more advantageous conditions for survival (Maniniwei 2021: 172). However, her book is not a rigorous academic study but rather a literary author's whimsical, illustrated compendium of Malay ghosts. The category of "little ghosts" in this book seems to draw on both Chinese folk practices of little ghost-raising and the Thai Kuman Thong tradition, thereby providing a cross-cultural analogical framework that makes Malay ghost culture more accessible to Chinese readers. From an anthropological perspective, the nine spirits[10] cataloged in the chapter "Raising the Little Ghosts" should largely be regarded as familiars dispatched by shamans, entities that perform rivalrous, protective, and task-assisting functions on their masters' behalf.

Maniniwei's impetus for writing *100 Malay Ghosts* stemmed from her long sojourn of over 20 years in Taiwan, a land far from her hometown. Occasional recollections of the Malay ghost stories she heard in her youth, whether inspired by fear or by a sense of the mysterious bond between Malay culture and the natural world, sparked her curiosity and led her to explore the lore of Malay ghosts (Maniniwei 2021: 173). Her two most recent picturebooks, *Princess of Mount Ledang* (金山公主, 2022) and *The Specter Huntsman* (鬼獵人, 2024), draw directly on this lore. At the end of *Princess of Mount Ledang*, Maniniwei offers a brief introduction to the legend and notes that several versions exist. In both Skeat's *Malay Magic* (1900) and *Shaman, Saiva and Sufi: A Study of the Evolution of Malay Magic* (1925), this tale uniquely includes an episode in which the princess murders her husband, a detail absent from other variants. Maniniwei interprets this as a symbol of female independence. Intriguingly, Skeat's 1925 account goes on to say that after the murder, the princess settled on Jugra Hill in Selangor with two cats that could transform into ghost tigers, which then became the guardians of a local shrine (Maniniwei 2022). *The Specter Huntsman* likewise draws on Skeat's *Malay Magic*, with Maniniwei arguing in her afterword that desire is the core of this ancient lore: the very force that brings humans trouble by transforming them into ghosts or other non-human entities (Maniniwei 2024b). In contemporary Malaysia, Malay ghost stories, as well as weretiger folklore, occupy an almost absurd status: they are denounced as heterodox by Islamic authorities, derided as superstition by modern rationality, and are reduced to cheap

10 Jerangkung, saka (or hantu pusaka), polong, toyol, hantu raya, harimau jadian, penunggu, hantu kuang, and hantu bujang. (Maniniwei 2021: 50–65)

thrills in low-budget horror films. Yet instead of trivializing these specters, Maniniwei reasserts their uncanny reality, reminding us that "there are still many things unseen and unknown" (Maniniwei 2021: 174), "some things have reasons, and some do not; the world has always been this way, always filled with mysteries we will never understand" (Maniniwei 2024b), which truly matters.

Revisiting the early accounts of the weretiger, frequently bound up with the anxieties that local communities projected onto outsiders (as discussed in the previous section), and contrasting them with Maniniwei's nostalgic as well as diasporic retellings reveals a striking inversion of perspective. However, this should not be dismissed as mere homesickness: the very themes of her subsequent works, *No Avenue* (沒有大路, 2018) and *Useless Hometown* (故鄉無用, 2024), actively seek to dispel any longing for homeland. For Maniniwei, the inexplicable personal experiences carry more weight than the moral certainties upheld by abstract social norms. As she admits, her homeland ultimately became "vanished" and "useless" to her: "However, these things have already taken root within me; I alone remain interested in these people and in these matters" (Maniniwei 2024a: 263–64). This tension captures her ambivalent relationship with her homeland: she both repudiates it and writes about it, since "homeland" dialectically encompasses the illusory expectations of others as well as her own concrete experiences and memories. While earlier colonial and native records utilized the weretiger as a tool of externalization by casting the other (such as the Kerinci or the Semang) as a predatory threat to social order, Maniniwei's work performs a process of internalization. For her, the weretiger, as one of a hundred Malay ghosts, is no longer an other that needs to be purged or cast out; instead, it is a "spectral reality" rooted within her own identity as a migrant.

Finally, this discussion will turn to the independent film *Tiger Stripes* (*虎紋少女*, 2023), written and directed by Amanda Nell Eu. The film offers a fresh reinterpretation of the weretiger tale by intertwining it with the bodily and social challenges experienced by Zaffan, a carefree Malay girl undergoing puberty. In her NOWNESS interview, Eu remarked on her motivation for creating the film:

> I wanted to tell a coming-of-age story of a teenage girl through the lens of body horror. For girls, puberty itself is a perfect match with the body-horror genre; their bodies undergo such rapid, violent transformations in a short span of time that what comes next is completely unknown. At the same time, adolescent girls, as women at other stages of life, are all too often labeled "hysterical," "crazy," or "over-emotional," as if there were no real difference between a "pubescent girl" and a "monster." I wanted to challenge that prejudice. In the story, our heroine is just beginning to become a woman, yet she simultaneously mutates into a monster. But who, really, is the monster? What standards of "beauty" has society imposed? What does it accept, and what does it reject? That is the question that *Tiger Stripes* seeks to explore. (NOWNESS 2023)

Early in the film, a rural legend about a girl who vanished is briefly alluded to. Ina, a village girl, is said to have violated female taboos within the Malay-Muslim

context by being careless in washing her menstrual pads. One night, she allegedly went mad and fled into the jungle. She became increasingly defiant toward her parents and teachers, and eventually disappeared. Some villagers later claimed to have seen her wandering in the forest. The legend takes a more personal turn when Zaffan, the cheerful protagonist, glimpses a ghostly female figure perched in a tree while playing in a jungle near a neighboring village, which is a moment that can be read as a foreshadowing of her own transformation.

Not long after, Zaffan begins to experience strange and unsettling changes in her body as she enters puberty. At the same time, she faces a range of challenges, including the strictures of family and religion, peer bullying, and the psychological anxieties of adolescence. In response to these pressures, Zaffan retaliates by transforming into a weretiger. Superficially, this metamorphosis reflects the terrifying physical changes her body undergoes during puberty. On a more symbolic level, however, the metamorphosis signifies an act of resistance. Within the Islamic cultural context, the weretiger is an unorthodox figure associated with primal and untamed instincts. Through this transformation, Zaffan's rebellious and defiant nature is awakened, empowering her to confront dominant and dogmatic social norms and to push back against peer aggression. As she embraces her feline power, she is increasingly viewed by the village as the other, a perceived threat to the established communal order. The film reaches its climax when Zaffan brutally kills the exorcist, a figure representing religious authority and social regulation.

Contrasted with the norm-enforcing and socially restrictive institutions of village life, particularly school and family, Zaffan consistently feels more at ease in the jungle near the neighboring village, as the film repeatedly portrays scenes of her playing freely and joyfully in the forest. After Zaffan's transformation into a weretiger, her gentle friend Mariam encounters her wandering in the jungle and the film inserts a brief, poetic scene: the two girls, still in their school uniforms, sit together on the grass. Zaffan says, "Let's live here forever, we'll build a treehouse." This moment may be a memory, or perhaps a fantasy, suggesting that the jungle stands in direct opposition to a society structured by norms and constraints. It functions as a space of liberation and self-expression, where nature affirms Zaffan's authenticity and inner truth. As Eu explained in her NOWNESS interview:

> I believe there is no setting more fitting for a young woman's soul than the damp, mysterious jungle. The jungle perfectly embodies her psyche: it is beautiful, powerful, and wild, yet also merciless and violent. Most importantly, it is free; there are no rules, no laws, no social structures. Its beauty is the most primordial. These are precisely the qualities I wanted my protagonist in *Tiger Stripes* to express. (NOWNESS 2023)

Eu's construction of a spatial dichotomy between the jungle and the village, which identifies these locations as the respective realms of the animal (the tiger) and the human, embodies the tension between freedom and constraint. This symbolic division finds a profound parallel in Daoist critiques of the conflict between

primordial authenticity and social convention, a philosophical concern deeply rooted in early Chinese thought and sustained across two millennia of intellectual tradition.

Tiger Stripes can be understood as a coming-of-age film that draws on the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*. From the very beginning, Zaffan is portrayed as a carefree girl, symbolizing an innate sense of authenticity and unrestrained joy. However, as she enters puberty, she is confronted with a series of intense challenges. Her passage into adolescence takes the form of a radical metamorphosis: she reclaims her autonomy through a metaphorical transformation, with the weretiger's wildness and rage embodying her resistance against the external constraints imposed upon her. The film opens and closes with scenes of Zaffan dancing on TikTok, framing the narrative with a powerful image of self-expression. This circular structure suggests that the freedom and authenticity she possessed at the beginning are not lost, but painfully re-earned through struggle and self-assertion. The dancing becomes a symbol of joy reclaimed, even at great cost. Yet behind this seemingly triumphant ending lies a more melancholic truth. Zaffan is not the first weretiger in the village and she will not be the last. In the final sequence, after Mariam enters the jungle in search of Zaffan, it is subtly implied that she, too, undergoes the same transformation. This suggests that the social norms and restrictions haunting young girls continue to exert their force, and that the weretiger tale, as a symbol of resistance, will continue to resurface as long as such social constraints remain entrenched within the community.

Conclusion

From an indigenous standpoint, the weretiger is an awe-inspiring force; its formidable presence and fierce courage evoking both reverence and fear, and, most significantly, embodying an ambivalent duality as both protector and predator. Western colonists saw the lore very differently. Framed by Enlightenment ideals, they dismissed the weretiger as savage and in need of "civilizing," reducing its image to that of a feared menace. Yet this view was far from uniform. Manuel Godinho de Erédia advocated expelling the weretiger through religious ritual, whereas over three centuries later, Hugh Clifford strove to engage with and understand it through rational inquiry. In addition, this paper maps out a hierarchy of disdain in Western colonial writings, which in reality reflects a two-tiered gaze. The first tier is the Malay community's gaze toward non-Malay groups, which includes both aboriginal tribes such as the Benua and Semang, and foreigners like the Kerinci people; while the second tier is the Western colonists' gaze toward the Malay community. From a postcolonial perspective, critics often focus on the colonizers' gaze, but overlook how local majorities, feeling anxious and threatened by outsiders or marginalized groups, also cast a disdainful gaze that scapegoats the other in times of crisis. The three colonial-era texts and related contemporary records discussed above all demonstrate how those accused of transforming into weretigers were singled out as the primary threat to social order. In recent years in Malaysia, postcolonialism, once

celebrated as a progressive framework, has been appropriated by some to marginalize cultural difference and promote an "essentialist" or "pure" nationalism aligned with specific political agendas. These historical case studies remind us that, while colonial injustices demand our attention, the deeper issue is the perennial tendency of any majority to scapegoat vulnerable minorities in times of anxiety, which is a dynamic as old as the weretiger legend itself. Equally important is acknowledging the intricate interplay of history, culture, and ethnicity, for there exists no genuinely "pure" or "essentialist" nation.

The group of early Chinese observers writing from the diaspora, however, offered yet another perspective. As a voyager-scholar, Ma Huan introduced audiences in the Ming world to the exotic customs and curiosities of the Nanyang, including weretiger lore, as part of his broader effort to disseminate knowledge of Malay culture. In October 1951, Hsu Yun Tsiao, who was a migrant literatus in the Nanyang and, like many of his twentieth-century Malaysian and Singaporean Chinese peers, invested in fostering interracial understanding and contributing to nascent nation-building, framed his accounts of Malay folklore as a means of bolstering indigenous knowledge. Yet he dismissed the supernatural elements of weretiger lore as implausible curiosities rather than serious traditions. In essence, both observers from China, hailing from the Ming dynasty and the Republican era respectively, treated weretiger folklore in the Malay Peninsula as the object of curiosity-seeking, at times slipping into sensationalism.

Another group of observers, comprising Maniniwei and Amanda Nell Eu, represents a distinct diasporic trajectory, as both are Malaysian-born Chinese who have spent the majority of their lives abroad. With Maniniwei residing in Taiwan for over 20 years and Eu spending her formative years in the United Kingdom, their transnational mobility fosters a diasporic sensibility that stands in contrast to that of the earlier observers. This transnational mobility, combined with their distinctly female viewpoints, drives them to question and resist the so-called orthodox lifestyles and patriarchal norms imposed by society, thereby challenging conventional frameworks. Maniniwei turns to the unseen and unknowable ghost stories of her homeland, among which the weretiger or tiger ghost is but one prominent instance, as a form of resistance against the trivial, stifling routines prescribed for "women" by social convention. In the very act of writing, she taps into an ineffable yet deeply authentic dimension of lived experience, seeking out what truly matters. Eu likewise embraces a raw truth: "I'm not here to tell you what's right and good or what's wrong and bad. Reality simply is, it's just one side of the truth. In my film, that translates into the love, hatred, jealousy, and misunderstandings that exist between women…" (NOWNESS 2023). Yet when it comes to the weretiger symbol, Eu goes further than Maniniwei, transforming it into a powerful tool of critique. She reimagines this ancient legend to question and confront entrenched local orthodoxies. As The Interview Asia aptly summarizes: "In Amanda Nell Eu's films, women are always portrayed as primordial and beautiful, liberated from the male voyeuristic gaze and instead engaged in an intimate dialogue

among themselves" (The Interview Asia 2023). Eu not only seeks to free women from the confines of the male gaze, but in fact also to liberate the weretiger from centuries of the gaze of mainstream society and its dominant ideologies. While the six observers selected for this study, including both Western colonists and Chinese diasporic figures, are all in some sense positioned as outsiders to the weretiger folklore of the Malay Peninsula, a fundamental distinction remains. In contrast to the external gaze that characterized the preceding groups of male authors, Maniniwei and Eu internalize the folklore—and the symbol of the weretiger in particular—as emblems of their shared quest for inner authenticity. This symbolism provides a vital spiritual sanctuary for women who must perpetually navigate the enduring constraints of patriarchal social norms.

Viewed in this light, this pursuit of liberation through metamorphosis participates in a broader, global contemporary movement where female creators repurpose animal transformation as a vehicle for self-assertion. Significantly, *Turning Red* (2022), directed by Domee Shi, was released just a year before *Tiger Stripes*. This film similarly utilizes the metamorphosis of a pubescent girl into an animal, in this case a red panda, as a metaphor for adolescent anxiety. Furthermore, recent years have seen an increasing number of novels that re-examine weretiger legends from a female perspective. For instance, set in 1931 British Malaya, Yangsze Choo's *The Night Tiger* (2019) intertwines the weretiger folklore of the Malay Peninsula with Chinese Confucian virtues, exemplified by the naming of characters such as Ren (humanity) and Yi (righteousness), while simultaneously subverting the established trope by casting a British man as the weretiger.[11] K-Ming Chang's *Bestiary* (2020) reimagines the Taiwanese legend of Hu Gu Po (the tiger granny spirit) to explore the intricate mysteries of matrilineal heritage. Meanwhile, Hanna Alkaf's *Hamra and the Jungle of Memories* (2023) represents a contemporary effort by the Malay author to draw inspiration from local weretiger lore, framing it as an adventure narrative reminiscent of "Little Red Riding Hood." These developments suggest that the transformative and liminal characteristics inherent in "were-creatures," particularly the weretiger, have become a vital tool for female creators to interrogate the intersectional complexities of identity, such as gender and ethnicity, alongside socio-spatial and institutional constructs like family, homeland, religion, and politics. By emphasizing the inherent fluidity of ontological and cultural boundaries, these works

11 It is noteworthy that Yangsze Choo's *The Night Tiger* (2019), a notable work in contemporary Anglophone literature that reimagines the weretiger motif, shares a similar thematic focus with the cases analyzed in this study. However, in discussing recent Chinese diasporic works concerning the weretiger, this paper prioritizes the exploration of how the creature has transitioned from an external other into an internalized psychological or physiological manifestation, such as the "spectral reality" of migrant identity in Maniniwei's writing and the bodily alienation in Amanda Eu's film. Since Choo's narrative focuses primarily on the deconstruction of colonial power within the historical mystery genre, where the weretiger is largely manifested through a character other than the narrator or protagonist, its textual characteristics diverge from the focus on internalization centralized in this research. Consequently, it is included here as a compelling supplement to the broader trend of contemporary reconstruction.

facilitate a critical re-evaluation of established norms and encourage the formulation of alternative epistemologies regarding the self and the world.

The tiger, as the nation's most revered emblem of authority, nonetheless conceals within its majesty a capacity for brutality and disdain, and yet it can be repurposed as a weapon to challenge power, as well as a liberated, numinous creature symbolizing inner authenticity. All these contradictions find their nexus in the weretiger, that legendary creature, laying bare the tiger's own ambiguity and complexity. Perhaps, the next time we meet the tiger's razor-sharp, solemn gaze, we must dare to look into its depths, peering into the heart of its wild, inscrutable soul.

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Refereed Article

Off to Other Shores: Transgressing Borders in Contemporary Sinophone Screen Media

Helen Hess

Abstract
The concept of a border is most commonly understood in a geographical sense, referring to boundaries between nation states or specific locations, which are often fluid rather than clearly demarcated. However, borders can also denote boundaries between different materials, ontological states, or realms of existence. In Chinese folk religion, for instance, physical objects are believed to cross into the metaphysical realm through processes such as burning or vaporization, while humans employ various strategies to communicate with spirits and the dead. This paper examines how young women traverse the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical realms in contemporary Sinophone filmic narratives, focusing on the interplay between representations of supernatural phenomena, spirituality, and the negotiability of reality and identity with broader social realities and cultural discourses. Central to the analysis is the Netflix mini-series *Bi'an zhi jia* 彼岸之嫁 (English title: *The Ghost Bride*), an adaptation of Yangsze Choo's novel *The Ghost Bride*, set in late nineteenth-century colonial Malacca. The series follows Pan Lilan, a young woman forced into a ghost marriage who must enter the realm of the dead to confront supernatural violence and reclaim agency. The paper places *The Ghost Bride*—referring both to the Netflix series and the novel—in conversation with Tan Chui Mui's *Barbarian Invasion* (Chinese title: *Yemanren ruqin* 野蛮人入侵; Malay title: *Belenggu*), which offers a contemporary Sinophone perspective on spiritual and embodied forms of border-crossing beyond explicit ghostly encounters. Through an intersectional lens, this paper investigates how these transgressions and mediations—and the resulting states of in-betweenness—reflect and challenge gendered, classed, and ethnic hierarchies, arguing that such narratives offer imaginative blueprints for coexistence and plurality in the contemporary Sinophone world.

Keywords: border crossings, Sinophone screen media, Chinese popular religion, The Ghost Bride, Barbarian Invasion

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Introduction

This paper analyzes Sinophone[1] screen media that depict various forms of border crossings between the known world and imagined realms, exploring the functions of these crossings and their connection to lived realities. Sinophone texts frequently depict protagonists who cross between physical and metaphysical realms, often as a way to grapple with social and political issues, functioning as sites where the tensions between different cultural-linguistic forms, identities, and power structures are actively negotiated.[2]

In mainland China and Malaysia, representations of ghosts, spirits, and supernatural phenomena are constrained, reflecting broader regimes governing spirituality and religion.[3] In China, strict state censorship frames supernatural content as "feudal superstition," limiting direct depictions of ghosts and requiring filmmakers to rationalize or allegorize spectral events within thrillers or mystery narratives (Pang 2011). As scholars of Chinese religiosity have noted, however, popular spirituality has never disappeared but persists in diffused, vernacular forms (Yang 2004; Chau 2011). Filmic ghosts in this context can thus be read not only as narrative compromises but also as traces of suppressed spiritual imaginaries under state regulation. By fusing Chinese folk beliefs with Malay and indigenous customs, Malaysian Chinese cinema depicts a more diverse spiritual landscape. Here, supernatural stories frequently express hybrid worldviews that prioritize kinship, ethics, and a sense of community over dogmatic religion (Lee and Balaya 2015). In both China and Malaysia, images of ghosts and otherworldly experiences are used to contemplate and subtly question social norms and expectations.

Taiwan, by contrast, provides a markedly more open environment for supernatural and spiritual narratives. Scholars such as Wu Chia-rong (2016) have shown that contemporary Taiwanese cinema and literary culture draw on *zhiguai*-inspired storytelling, Daoist, Buddhist, and folk traditions, as well as indigenous spiritual cosmologies, using haunted spaces and spectral figures to explore memory, urban modernity, and historical and cultural trauma. Building on Fran Martin's (2003)

1 The concept of the Sinophone has emerged as a controversial yet productive framework for understanding Chinese-language communities and cultural expressions beyond the borders of mainland China. It shifts the focus from the traditional notions of a Chineseness tied to the nation state to a more fluid and expansive understanding of Chinese culture as it exists in diverse global contexts. The term Sinophone encapsulates a range of linguistic, cultural, and political experiences of Chinese-speaking communities. It challenges us to think beyond the confines of nationalism and to consider how Chinese language and culture are reshaped and reimagined in spaces that are no longer defined by a singular homeland (Shih 2011, 2013; Hee 2019; Shi 2021).

2 On language editing: I used AI-supported language editing tools for a first round of editing, followed by a second round of proofreading by a professional copy editor, whom I want to thank for the valuable feedback.

3 In the PRC, article 25 of the "Regulations on the Administration of Movies" states under point 5 that what "propagates evil cults or superstition" is prohibited from being recorded in a movie (The State Council 2001). In Malaysia, the film censorship guidelines state that films should not oppose the values of Islam (Film Censorship Board Malaysia 2024).

insights into "reverse discourse," non-human or liminal figures in the Taiwanese context can be understood as disrupting dominant ideologies and social hierarchies by making marginalized experiences visibly present.

In all three countries, supernatural representations can thus be read not merely as entertainment but as spiritually inflected devices that question dominant ideologies, negotiate secular boundaries, and invite audiences to reconsider social hierarchies and the porous limits between the human and the non-human. Taken together, these Sinophone contexts illustrate the range of approaches to the supernatural and spirituality in film. Against this background, this paper examines two transnational co-productions to explore how contemporary Sinophone cinema negotiates cultural, ethical, and narrative boundaries through engagements with the spiritual and spectral realms.

The first part focuses on the Taiwanese–Malaysian Netflix production *Bi'an zhi jia* 彼岸之嫁 (English title: *The Ghost Bride*, 2020)—hereafter referred to as *The Ghost Bride*—situating it within broader discussions of Taiwanese drama and its use of ghosts and other liminal figures. The series draws on spiritual imaginaries that are deeply embedded in local cultural traditions while circulating within a transnational production and distribution framework. The second part turns to the Malaysia–Hong Kong co-production *Barbarian Invasion* (Chinese title: *Yemanren ruqin* 野蛮人入侵; Malay title: *Belenggu*, 2021), which engages with existential reflection and the blurring of reality and illusion. Taken together, these two pieces provide complementary viewpoints on the representation of spirituality and its function in transnational Sinophone film.

The two works were chosen because they exemplify border crossing in multiple senses. As co-productions, they navigate national, linguistic, and historical boundaries, negotiating creative collaboration across different Sinophone contexts. They demonstrate how co-production itself can serve as a site where boundaries—national, linguistic, historical, and generic—are contested and (re-)imagined, demonstrating how transnational Sinophone cinema enacts both cultural and aesthetic crossings.

Methodologically, these productions are not treated as isolated case studies but are regarded as part of wider discursive formations within contemporary Sinophone film and media culture. Drawing primarily on cultural analysis in the sense proposed by Mieke Bal (2002), the paper examines how meaning is produced through recurring concepts, narrative structures, and visual strategies. Mieke Bal's method of cultural analysis emphasizes the present as the primary site of interpretation rather than historical reconstruction (Bal 1997, 1999, 2002). From this perspective, films and series are regarded not as fixed historical artifacts but as dynamic sites of meaning, influenced by current practices of production, distribution, and reception (Bal 1999). This method enables an examination of filmic texts as culturally embedded and interrelated, situated within networks of fictional and non-fictional texts through which meaning is produced. In the context of this paper, a cultural analysis

perspective allows Sinophone films and series to be understood in relation to broader cultural, visual, and transnational contexts, rather than as isolated objects. In doing so, the two co-productions can be situated within ongoing cultural exchanges without being reduced to singular or exceptional cases.

Accordingly, the two primary works are analyzed alongside other contemporary Sinophone audiovisual texts, such as the Taiwanese Netflix production *Fanxiao* (返校, English title: *Detention*), the short film *The Busy Young Psychic* (*Shen suan* 神算), and the feature film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (Chinese title: *Bu san* 不散), to provide a broader view of how spiritual and spectral elements appear across different cinematic contexts. Together these productions offer a way to trace patterns of transnational engagement, thematic concerns, and cultural negotiation in contemporary Sinophone screen media.

Crossing into Other Realms: *The Ghost Bride*

The Ghost Bride tells the story of a young woman who is forced into marrying a deceased young man to save her father. The mini-series is an adaptation of the English-language novel *The Ghost Bride* by Malaysian author Yangsze Choo. The six episodes of the series correspond to the six chapters of the novel and, despite some plot differences, I will analyze the series and the novel in conjunction.

Both the novel and the series are set in colonial Malacca in the late nineteenth century and tell the story of a young Malayan Chinese woman named Pan Lilan (潘丽兰). Lilan's father was once a successful spice merchant but became increasingly reclusive after his wife's death and lost much of the family fortune. The book also focuses on the father's opium addiction, but this aspect is left out of the series. In general, the series portrays the father as less passive and more responsible than the book.

The story begins with the father receiving an offer from the wealthy Mrs. Lim to marry Lilan to her late eldest son, Lim Tianching (林天青). Despite being poor, the father does not even think of accepting the offer. But the ghost of Tianching begins to haunt Lilan and the whole Pan family. Every night he gains access to Lilan'sdreams and tries to get her to marry him.

In the book, it is her father's passivity that forces Lilan to take her fate into her own hands. She seeks out a medium with her Ahma, from whom she obtains a potion that is supposed to help her keep the spirit of Tianching away from her dreams. Instead, Lilan falls into a coma after taking the potion and her soul fails to return to her body. Thus, Lilan's soul makes its way to the Netherworld—the plane of the dead—to confront Tianching. In the series, the father falls ill and Tianching uses this circumstance to blackmail Lilan. Only if she becomes his bride will the father awaken from his coma.

Much of the novel and the series takes place in the Netherworld, where Lilan tries to expose Tianching's crooked dealings. Tianching manages to linger in the Netherworld instead of going before the judges who would decide whether he goes to hell or is reincarnated. His mother's offerings allow him not only to live in a huge estate with countless employees but also to bribe the judges so that he does not have to go before them. Lilan thus enters the realm of the dead, thereby occupying an intermediate stage between life and death.

The Ghost Bride presents various forms of boundary crossing, most notably the protagonist's journey to the Netherworld and back, as well as transgressions of normative social and discursive frameworks, such as stereotypical gender roles. The Chinese-language Netflix production exemplifies the transnational circulation and interconnection of narratives across the cultural Sinosphere, as it is based on an English-language novel by Yangsze Choo, a Malaysian-Chinese author residing in the United States.

Studies of Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride*, as well as its television adaptation, have framed both the novel and the series within an orientalist discourse, arguing that it is characterized by an exotifying perspective. David H. J. Neo and Sanghamitra Dalal (2022, 2023) critique how the show simplifies and exoticizes complex cultural elements—particularly ghost marriages and Peranakan family traditions—for global consumption. They argue that the series departs from the novel's rich mode of storytelling, which reminds of oral storytelling, and complexly described family dynamics, adhering to more popular genres like horror and mystery. They also criticize the use of Mandarin, postmodern fashion choices, and stylized visuals as strategies that flatten cultural authenticity to fit global streaming standards (Neo and Dalal 2022, 2023). In another paper, the same authors analyze how, both in the novel and the series, traditional cultural elements are selectively commodified and aestheticized to meet the demands of the global cultural marketplace. Drawing on the concept of re-orientalism, they argue that the adaptation reshapes local traditions into narratives that reinforce global consumer expectations (Dalal and Neo 2022).

In contrast to Neo and Dalal, Barbora Vinczeová (2019) does not seek to distinguish between fictional representation and historical reality but instead analyzes how Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride* transforms Chinese afterlife mythology into fantasy. She classifies *The Ghost Bride* not as magical realism, but as historical fantasy. Focusing on the depiction of the Netherworld as well as on fantastical beings, death rituals, and ghost marriage, Vinczeová argues that Choo largely preserves traditional beliefs while enriching them through detailed characterization. As Vinczeová notes, the underworld reflects Chinese myths in its portrayal as a bureaucratic purgatory, and spirits, demons, and dragons retain their mythic roles with added narrative complexity. Rituals such as ancestor worship and the burning of offerings operate as natural laws within the fantasy world.

The classification of *The Ghost Bride* as either magical realism or historical fantasy remains open to debate. Wu Chia-rong's concepts of "magical localism" and "magical nativism" may offer more appropriate frameworks than the category of magical realism, which is usually defined more narrowly than a mere blending of realist and fantastical elements (Wu 2016). What is evident, however, is that both the novel and the series diverge from realist representation—even in their ostensibly non-fantastical aspects. Rather than situating the series within traditional Chinese genres such as *zhiguai* or *chuanqi*,[4] I agree with Neo and Dalal, who position the narrative within a modern Taiwanese context shaped by a highly globalized and Western-oriented market economy—an environment that does not always accurately represent cultural, linguistic, or religious practices. Accordingly, this study's primary interest lies not in reconstructing specific historical events, but in revealing how mobility, transnationality, and identity are represented and negotiated across Sinophone contexts in the 2010s and 2020s. Rather than approaching the work as a historical source, it is read here as part of the contemporary Sinophone cinematic discourse in which it circulates. This aligns with the principles of cultural analysis, which encourage viewing a work not as a direct historical account but as a product of the cultural and ideological forces at play during its creation.

As Mieke Bal argues, cultural analysis differs from conventional understandings of history by emphasizing the critic's embeddedness in the present. It highlights how we interpret cultural objects—always shaped by the past—through the lens of contemporary social and cultural contexts, creating a "cultural memory in the present" (Bal 1999: 1). Historical references hence function less as evidence of the past than as present-day discursive formations, shaping the meanings attributed to border crossing and transnational belonging.

This perspective highlights how texts are shaped by and contribute to dominant discourses that are constructed and contested, rather than fixed or factual. Analyzing a work thus involves uncovering the cultural narratives and power relations that inform its production, showing how meaning is generated through discourse rather than through a straightforward recounting of historical events.

4 The *chuanqi* (传奇) genre, which was popular in the Tang and Song dynasties, is characterized by its mixture of historical fiction, supernatural elements, and complex storytelling. The term *chuanqi* roughly translates to "story of the marvelous," and these narratives often involve extraordinary events, fantastical creatures, and moral lessons. Within the *chuanqi* tradition, one of the four main thematic categories is *zhiguai* (志怪), which focuses on supernatural, strange, and eerie occurrences. The *zhiguai* theme encompasses stories of ghosts, spirits, and otherworldly experiences that blur the line between the physical and metaphysical realms. These supernatural elements are not only meant to entertain but also serve as reflections of societal anxieties, moral questions, and philosophical ponderings, often challenging the boundaries of human experience and understanding. By intertwining the supernatural with the everyday, *zhiguai* narratives contribute to the richness of *chuanqi* tales, creating a dynamic interplay between the real and the unreal that continues to influence Chinese literature today (Campany 1996: 21–30).

To that end, the following analysis has three objectives. First, it situates relevant studies within recent scholarship on representations of Southeast Asia in the Sinosphere. Second, it compares *The Ghost Bride* with other Taiwanese fantasy dramas produced during the same period. Third, by bringing *The Ghost Bride* into a dialogue with *Barbarian Invasion*, this paper presents a counterexample of border crossing as a strategy of intervention in Sinophone transnational cinema.

The previous studies of *The Ghost Bride* introduced above are to be positioned in a broader scholarly discourse that criticizes traditions of representing the "East"—particularly the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia—through exoticizing and othering lenses. This is consistent with what Brian Bernards refers to as "Nanyang orientalism," a representational mode that constructs the Nanyang (or "South Seas," referring to Southeast Asia) as a mysterious, feminine, and often haunted space, designed primarily for consumption by an external, often Western, gaze. Similar critiques have been applied to other cultural productions, for instance in E. K. Tan's study of postwar Hong Kong cinema (Tan 2010) and Lim Choon Bee's work on gender and locality in *Xingbie yu bentu*, which argues that the feminization of Nanyang is closely tied to a patriarchal and colonial visual logic (Lim 2009: 86–93).

What distinguishes *The Ghost Bride*, however, is its subtle subversion of these conventions. While the setting and aesthetic may initially appear to fall within the bounds of Nanyang orientalism—rich with mysticism, ancestral ghosts, and opulent Qing-style imagery—the narrative centers on a female protagonist, Lilan, who resists objectification and plays an active role in shaping her destiny. Instead of being a passive figure within a male-centered world, Lilan exercises significant agency. Her journey through both the material and spiritual realms challenges the traditional framing of Nanyang as a feminized, inert backdrop to male exploration or desire.

This complexity complicates a straightforward orientalist reading. While the surface aesthetics of *The Ghost Bride* may seem to replicate orientalist tropes, the narrative itself disrupts the patriarchal logic often at the heart of Nanyang orientalism. In this sense, Choo's work opens up possibilities for reimagining the Nanyang not just as a site of exotic fantasy, but also as a space for feminist rearticulation and resistance. While Nanyang orientalism is often associated with a patriarchal logic that feminizes Nanyang and objectifies the feminine as the Other, the female protagonist in *The Ghost Bride* demonstrates considerable agency.

I argue that the Lim family represents the wealthy Chinese elite in colonial Malaya, with Lim Tianching serving as a symbol of both the corruption and oppression perpetuated by this elite. His character also embodies the systemic oppression of women, a condition that persists as a lingering societal memory. At one point, Lim Tianching states that there is nothing he cannot have, further asserting his dominance by tyrannizing his own mother, whom he manipulates into indulging his desires by making frequent offerings of paper money and luxury items. His actions reveal a profound disregard for others, as evidenced by his fathering a child out of wedlock, abandoning the woman, seducing and blackmailing his brother's fiancée, and

ultimately being murdered due to his actions. Thus, Lim Tianching becomes emblematic of a patriarchal order.

In contrast, Lilan rejects conventional gender roles from the outset. Although she is initially made into a "ghost bride," she takes control of her fate. Refusing to be passive, she does not allow herself to be haunted by dreams but instead enters them, intervening in events within them. By the end of the narrative, Lilan rejects a traditional life as a wife and chooses instead to embark on a mission to save the world alongside Erlang, who repeatedly stands by her side through the course of the events.[5] Over the course of the story, Lilan undergoes significant personal development, evolving from a childlike figure into a self-confident young woman.

The Ghost Bride can be interpreted as an allusion to the entanglement of the wealthy elite with the colonial regime. The elite, much like in colonial times, possess the power to tyrannize those less financially privileged. However, in this context, the exploitation is not through labor but in the form of a ghost who continues to haunt a young, unmarried woman even after his death. These dynamics highlight the power imbalance driven by both class and gender differences. As such, the series can be read as a critique of both patriarchal and capitalist power structures.

Due to their history of migration, the influence of British colonial rule in Malaysia, events during the Second World War, the Cold War, and the process of decolonization and Malaysia's independence, the Chinese population in Malaysia (hereafter referred to as the Malaysian Chinese) constitutes a hybrid community—one situated between worlds on multiple levels.

As an ethnic minority with limited political representation but considerable economic strength, the Malaysian Chinese community navigates a complex historical and political landscape, particularly through its complex and often ambivalent relationship with China (Rae and Witzel 2008; Yen 2008). Certain events from the community's history resurface in uncanny forms. For instance, memories of communism or of the inter-ethnic conflicts in 1969 often take the shape of haunting recollections, emerging in the collective consciousness as unresolved echoes of a turbulent past (Show 2016; Show 2021). These spectral memories intertwine with contemporary struggles, casting a long shadow over the present and complicating the community's sense of identity and belonging. In this manner, the past continuously disrupts the present, challenging both individual and collective efforts toward reconciliation and progress.

Spooky Encounters and Chinese Folk Religion

The Ghost Bride is not the only example of a recent Taiwanese drama production in which a young woman is confronted with supernatural encounters. *Fanxiao* (返校, English title: *Detention*), for example, is a Taiwanese TV series produced by Netflix

5 Erlang, also called *erlang shen* (二郎神), is a river and warrior god in Chinese folk religion (Cheung 2023).

and the Taiwanese Public Television Service. The series of eight episodes first aired in 2020. It is based on a video game with the same title, which was produced by Red Candle Games and released in 2017. There is also a feature film based on the same video game, which first aired in 2019.

Set in 1999 at Greenwood High School, *Detention* follows a transfer student who inadvertently enters a restricted area on campus. There, she encounters the ghost of a girl who used to be a student at the same school, and who unveils the school's concealed history of the past three decades. The narrative intertwines the oppressive political climate of Taiwan's White Terror era[6] with local legends, exposing the persecution faced by students and teachers who dared to seek freedom amidst stringent censorship. *Detention* combines elements of horror and supernatural folklore with a poignant exploration of Taiwan's complex history, offering viewers both a thrilling and educational experience.

Min-tser Lin (2024) explores how the 2019 feature film version of *Detention* fits into Taiwan's broader efforts to forge a cohesive national memory of the White Terror. Lin argues that the film plays a pivotal role in shaping this collective remembrance by downplaying or erasing politically sensitive aspects of the past, particularly the affiliations of some victims with the Chinese Communist Party. By using a spooky framework, Lin argues, the film conceals the deeper political implications of the historical events it portrays. Lin suggests that the movie's central character embodies a sense of innocence and ignorance that inadvertently reveals the limitations of Taiwan's nationalistic commemorative project, illustrating the tension between the country's desire to move forward and the unresolved complexities of its history.

Another example is a Taiwanese short film by Chen He Yu (2013) titled *The Busy Young Psychic* (*Shen suan* 神算), which in 2017 was adapted into a TV series titled *Teenage Psychic*. Both the short film and the series portray the daily life and experiences of Xiao Ya (小雅), a teenage girl with spiritual medium abilities.

The short film opens with a typical morning in Xiao Ya's life: she has breakfast with her family and then rushes to a ceremony before school. At school, Xiao Ya is depicted helping a friend feel safe from ghosts in the restroom. When a senior invites her to his birthday party, she hesitates, torn between her social desires and her responsibilities after school. Seemingly romantically interested in the senior, Xiao Ya visits her master after school to explain that she cannot assist at the temple. He insists that her responsibilities take precedence, emphasizing filial piety and duty. Xiao Ya stays, but when he presents her with ceremonial clothing, she refuses to change or to remove the makeup she had applied for the party.

She then assists several individuals with spiritual consultations, though with little enthusiasm. Despite planning to leave at 10 p.m., she is pressured to stay. A wealthy

6 The politics of severe repression of dissidents during the martial law period in Taiwan, which lasted from 1949 to 1987, is commonly referred to as White Terror (Hsiao 2021: 4–5).

man, Zhang Laoban, arrives, demanding help for his terminally ill wife. Xiao Ya insists that the illness is medical, not spiritual, and refuses his payment. Tensions rise until she is pushed by someone, triggering a trance in which she becomes possessed by the deity Xuan Nü (玄女). Speaking through Xiao Ya, Xuan Nü declares the wife's fate sealed and urges Zhang to repent, warning him that divine judgment awaits him.

Afterwards, Xiao Ya retreats in exhaustion and calls her friend to cancel her plans for the party. Her friend informs her that the senior is about to make a wish, only for him to publicly express affection for another girl. Xiao Ya listens in silence, then hangs up, visibly saddened. Later, Zhang is seen praying at the temple. Moved by his desperation, Xiao Ya offers him comfort and performs a ritual, ultimately choosing her duties over her personal desires. The film concludes with Xiao Ya encountering her senior on her way home and gifting him a baseball bat, to which he responds with a grateful hug. The final scene shows Xiao Ya practicing baseball alone on her terrace. Through this narrative, the film explores the life of a teenager torn between the demands of her "normal" life and her responsibilities as a spiritual medium. It illustrates how these duties cause her to miss out on many of the typical experiences of adolescence.

Although their plots differ significantly, these series share several key similarities: (1) Each features a female protagonist who, in some capacity, has access to the metaphysical realm; (2) These female leads all struggle to balance their "normal" lives with their supernatural abilities and each is in some way haunted by encounters with supernatural forces; (3) The narratives are all coming-of-age stories, in which the female protagonists gain increasing agency throughout the plot; (4) The series all portray myths and practices rooted in Chinese folk religion. In the following, I will focus on this last aspect.

Traveling to Other Worlds

Chinese popular religion—also referred to as folk religion—is a deeply embedded aspect of Chinese cultural life, characterized by flexible practices such as ancestor worship, temple visits, and local rituals. Functioning largely outside formal religious institutions, it is frequently intertwined with Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, resulting in a highly syncretic tradition. Despite processes of modernization and state regulation, folk religion remains widely practiced, particularly in rural areas, and has experienced a revival since the late twentieth century as individuals seek meaning, moral guidance, and community. The tradition exhibits significant regional, social, and gender-based variation, and although it is not officially recognized by the state, certain practices are selectively supported for their perceived contributions to social harmony and cultural heritage (Zhang et al. 2021; Wong 2011). As the context analyzed in this paper includes the broader Sinosphere—specifically Taiwan and Malaysia—this study also draws on scholarship concerning the practice of Chinese folk religion among diasporic communities in Southeast Asia.

Chinese folk religion can be defined as not having any "canonical scriptures, no unified institutions independent of secular institutions—such as the family, the clan and the guild—and no professional priests. It is mainly transmitted through vernacular fiction and oral storytelling" (Gentz 2013: 113). Moreover, the diversity of its local expressions makes it difficult to define Chinese folk religion as a singular, unified tradition. For example, the practices observed among Chinese communities in Malaysia differ significantly from those in mainland China or Taiwan. More broadly, it is common for individuals who engage in daily rituals—such as burning incense for deities or ancestors—to reject the notion that they are participating in a formal "religion." In pre-modern China, such practices were typically classified as social customs (*fengsu*) rather than as formalized teachings (*jiao*) (Gentz 2013: 113).

The phenomenon of ghost marriage (Chinese: *minghun* 冥婚 or *yinhun* 阴婚), historically practiced in certain regions of China as well as among Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, is closely tied to Chinese popular religion. Two primary forms of ghost marriage can be identified: (1) marriage between two deceased individuals and (2) marriage between a deceased person and a living individual. The former was often conducted when the eldest son of a family died unmarried, as Confucian norms dictated that a younger brother should not marry before his elder sibling. In such cases, the family would seek an unmarried deceased woman to be posthumously wed to the deceased son (Topley and Bernardi 2011). The latter form occurred, for example, when a male fiancé died before the wedding; the ritual ensured that the bride could still be incorporated into the fiancé's family lineage (Wang 2016: 88–90).

The themes of ghost marriage and mediumship are widespread in contemporary Sinophone filmic narratives. One of the first movies with the theme of ghost marriage was a Hong Kong movie titled *Gui xinniang* 鬼新娘 (English title: "The Bride from Hell"), which was released in 1971. Another Hong Kong movie with the same Chinese title was first shown in 1987. More recent examples include the 2017 Filipino movie titled *The Ghost Bride* and the Chinese movie *Huang miaocun zhi moguan xinniang* 黄庙村之魔棺新娘 (English title: "The Ghost Marriage"), which was first shown in 2018. In most of these movies, a young woman is forced into a marriage with a deceased man, usually for financial reasons.

Although historically practiced, ghost marriages were typically less morbid or sensational than their portrayals in popular culture suggest. Usually, they involved the marriage of two individuals after death, which was intended to bring peace to their souls and their families. The marriage of a living young woman to a deceased man, as portrayed in *The Ghost Bride*, appears to be extremely rare (Gu and Xu 2014).

Additionally, Lin Ho-chun (2020), who also mentions *The Ghost Bride* as one among several examples of contemporary Taiwanese film and drama that represent

ghost marriages, highlights that the phenomenon in Taiwan has a different history and has been widely represented in popular culture.[7]

However, as my reading of *The Ghost Bride* is primarily interpretive, I do not undertake a detailed analysis of historical or contemporary ghost marriage practices. Instead, I focus on the motif of crossing into the Netherworld—a theme more explicitly highlighted in the series' Chinese title, *Bi'an zhi jia* (彼岸之嫁), which can be translated as "marriage on the other shore" or "marriage across the shore." The term *bi'an* (彼岸) refers to "the other shore" or "the other side," often symbolizing the afterlife or spiritual realm in Chinese cultural and religious contexts. The Chinese title thus underscores the crossing between the world of the living and that of the dead.

In Chinese folk religion, the boundary between the physical and metaphysical realms—between the living and the dead—is often regarded as permeable. A central belief holds that individuals who die unjustly or who are not afforded proper burial rites cannot transition peacefully into the afterlife. Instead, their souls remain in the world of the living as hungry ghosts, condemned to wander in a state of unrest and dissatisfaction (Kuah 2024: 74–76).

This belief is most vividly expressed during the Hungry Ghost Festival, an important event in the Chinese lunar calendar observed on the 15th day of the 7th month. During this time, it is believed that the gates of the Netherworld open, allowing spirits to reenter the mortal realm. Families perform rituals and offer food, incense, and other items to appease these spirits, both to bring them peace and to prevent them from causing misfortune (DeBernardi 1984). These practices reflect the continued influence of the dead on the living and the reciprocal obligations between the two worlds. According to Chinese folk religion, there are three realms of existence: the heavenly realm or plane (*yangjian*, 阳间), the human realm or plane (*renjian*, 人间), and the Netherworld, in the novel and the series also referred to as the "plane of the dead" (*yinjian*, 阴间) (Kuah 2024: 27–34).

The Ghost Festival serves as a ritual reminder of the ongoing interactions between the living and the dead, where the metaphysical and physical realms are not separate but continuously shape one another. In the following section, I will explore the concept of borders and the act of crossing them in more detail.

According to standard English dictionaries, the noun "border" encompasses three primary meanings. The first includes three sub-definitions: (a) a line demarcating one country or state from another; (b) a boundary separating different places; and (c) a specific, often politically or historically significant, border (e.g. "the border"). The second meaning refers to a decorative design that runs along the edge of an object,

7 The wide absence of the phenomenon in mainland Chinese popular culture is also to be considered as being related to the censorship of everything that represents any form of superstition.

such as a rug or wallpaper. The third denotes a narrow bed of plants arranged along the edge of a garden or walkway.

The concept of a border is therefore intrinsically connected to space and place. It is most commonly understood in a geographical context, particularly in relation to borders between nation states. Similarly, borders between locations—such as between urban and rural areas—are often fluid and not clearly delineated. However, this discussion seeks to explore another dimension of the term, one that aligns more closely with the second and third definitions mentioned above: borders between different materials or substances. This includes physical transitions between land and water, as well as between different states of matter—such as liquid water, solid water (ice), and gaseous water (water vapor).

In Chinese folk religion, it is commonly held that physical objects can be transferred into the metaphysical realm through a change in their state of matter—for instance, by being burned (as in the case of incense or paper money) or vaporized (as with food offerings). The belief underlying these practices is that the essence of the offering, once transformed, can cross into the spiritual domain, allowing ancestral spirits or deities to partake of the substance.

DeBernardi (2006: 92) describes an invocation that she heard sung by practitioners of Chinese folk religion in Penang, Malaysia, which illustrates the role of incense in mediating the boundaries between deities and humans, as well as between the physical and metaphysical realms. To better contextualize this belief system, it is useful to briefly outline the principles of correlative cosmology, a foundational framework in traditional Chinese thought.

In the classical period a correlative cosmology took shape in China which is still influential in the Sinosphere today. Accordingly, the cosmos in Chinese popular religion is not conceived solely as an interaction of impersonal forces but is also understood as being inhabited by sentient spiritual entities that engage with the human world and shape human lives. According to Clart (2012), these beings generally fall into three main categories: gods, ghosts, and ancestors—most of whom are of human origin.

Ancestors are deceased individuals who continue to be honored by their living kin through rituals and offerings, ensuring their ongoing care and presence in familial life. Ghosts, by contrast, are also spirits of the dead but differ from ancestors in that they lack surviving descendants to perform the necessary rites. As a result, they remain unattached to any lineage and are believed to cause disruptions or misfortunes in the world of the living. Gods, the third category, are understood as powerful supernatural entities associated with the maintenance of public order and moral values. They are commonly envisioned as part of a celestial hierarchy, modeled after bureaucratic institutions, with the Jade Emperor at its apex (Clart 2012: 222; DeBernardi 2006: 81–91).

The boundaries between these categories, however, are not rigid; spiritual beings are capable of shifting from one category to another. For example, when a family line

ends or fails to perform the necessary ancestral rites, an ancestor may transform into a ghost. Conversely, a ghost can be elevated to the status of an ancestor if posthumous descendants adopt the spirit and perform the required rituals. Similarly, ghosts that exhibit significant spiritual power and use it to benefit the living may ascend to the rank of gods (Clart 2012: 222).

This underscores the importance of proper burial rites and sacrifices. It is to be noted that gods, ghosts, and ancestors are differentiated ritually by the types of offerings presented to them and the locations where these offerings are made. For example, in many traditions, gods are given an odd number of incense sticks (representing *yang* 阳), while ancestors are given an even number (representing *yin* 阴). Gods receive gold "spirit money," while ghosts and ancestors are offered silver money. Additionally, food offerings for gods are uncooked and uncut, while those for ghosts are cooked but uncut, and offerings for ancestors are both cooked and cut (Blake 2011).

This explains how material objects are believed to transcend the boundaries into the metaphysical realm. The distinction between the physical and the metaphysical realms appears to be closely tied to concepts of dematerialization and invisibility. When considering what separates the physical from the non-physical, haptic qualities and visibility emerge as the two most significant criteria.

Constructing Alternative Realities: *Barbarian Invasion*

Barbarian Invasion (2021), which the remainder of this article shall focus on, is a Malaysia–Hong Kong co-production that transcends the boundaries of genre, language, and cinematic convention. Written and directed by and starring Tan Chui Mui, the film premiered at the 24th Shanghai International Film Festival, where it was awarded the prestigious Jury Grand Prix at the Golden Goblet Awards (SIFF 2021).

In academic circles, discussions of Tan Chui Mui's *Barbarian Invasion* are still emerging, with one of the few contributions being Sheau-Shi Ngo's review that reads the film's dual narrative as an "empathetic odyssey," reflecting on identity, embodiment, and self-reclamation in independent Malaysian cinema (Ngo 2024). In contrast, non-academic analyses are more numerous, but tend to focus less on theory and more on the film's thematic and cultural impact: critics such as Kumar (2022) and Linnarz (2021) situate *Barbarian Invasion* as a personal and metafictional work that blends genre with autobiographical reflection on artistic practice and motherhood, and highlight its significance within the Malaysian New Wave and its success on the festival circuit.

Barbarian Invasion centers on Moon Lee, an actress and single mother, who travels with her son Yu Zhou to a seaside town in Malaysia to meet her friend Roger, who is a film director. Moon has starred in several of his films in the past. Roger and his assistant Cathy pick them up at the pier.

The next day, Roger introduces his project while Moon plays with Yu Zhou at a swimming pool. He recounts a story about the old sword master Miyamoto Musashi, who defeats a younger opponent by using the blinding sunlight at sunset.[8] Roger explains that while the younger swordsman believes his sword is everything, the older master understands that everything can be a sword—even sunlight. Roger connects this idea to filmmaking: when he was young, film was everything to him; now that he is older, everything is film. Life itself is a film, he says. He reveals that he wants to make a Southeast Asian action film inspired by the Hollywood success *The Bourne Identity* (2002).

During a car ride, Roger explains the plot of the planned film. The film starts with a group of fishermen, who rescue a wounded woman from the South China Sea. She has lost her memory but can speak multiple languages and possesses exceptional fighting skills, which is to be the film's central theme. Roger wants Moon to play the female lead. Although interested, she hesitates, saying she can barely take care of her own child at the moment. She is worried that she is not ready to take on a film project again.

Nevertheless, Roger takes her to a martial arts school where Moon is supposed to train in martial arts with Master Loh. Similar to Moon, Loh is initially sceptical of taking on this task, insisting that he teaches kung fu, not acting, and that learning kung fu requires years of dedication. Eventually, he agrees to train Moon intensively every day for one month. Moon still doubts herself and suggests using a body double for the fight scenes, but Roger persuades her by reminding her that she has already mastered demanding skills for previous films. He argues that doing her own stunts would strengthen her comeback after her rather long absence from the film business due to her maternity leave. Ultimately, Moon agrees and begins training.

The training is gruelling and discouraging at first, but Moon persists. While she trains, Yu Zhou stays with Roger's assistant. At one point, he runs away, alarming everyone, and is later found playing with a new friend: a Malay girl. Moon continues her training and seems to make progress. However, Master Loh remains extremely strict, pushing Moon to her limits, including a group exercise in which she is attacked by all the other students at once.

On her way home one day, Moon encounters a Buddhist monk who often sits by the roadside. He asks her whether she knows where she is going and gives her a Chinese booklet titled "是谁拖着尸体在走路？" (*Who is dragging this corpse?*). In another encounter, the monk reads her palm and tells her that her body is not the prison of her mind but rather the opposite: her mind is the prison of her body.

Meanwhile, Roger informs Moon that the producer wants her ex-husband Juilliard to play the male lead. Moon argues that she cannot possibly perform love scenes

8 Roger refers to a famous Japanese novel by Yoshikawa Eiji titled *Musashi* (Original title in Japanese: *Miyamoto Musashi* 宮本武蔵) which was first published in 1935. For an English translation of the novel see Eiji 1995.

with someone she hates in reality. She tells Roger that he has to choose between them. When Roger's assistant asks him why Moon hates her ex-husband so intensely, Roger guesses that actually the opposite might be true: that she still loves him.

In a pivotal training scene, Master Loh tells Moon that she has to feel her own body in order to express herself. When she asks what her "self" is, he does not respond with words. Instead, he responds with his fists by repeatedly striking her and asking who was hit, who feels pain, who blocks, and who ducks. When Moon finally answers "me," he challenges her to consider whether she now understands who her "self" is. Although rather brutal, this experience seems to be a turning point in Moon's training. Shortly afterward, Moon proves her progress by successfully fighting multiple opponents during a test, which she passes to general celebration.

Later, Roger reveals that the Chinese producer of the film prefers Chinese actors and that they have suggested that Moon be replaced as the female lead by a wealthy Chinese actress who is offering substantial funding for the movie. Although Roger insists Moon is the best actor for the role, her refusal to work with Juilliard further complicates the matter. Feeling sidelined, Moon decides to leave. Although Roger later claims he has rejected the funding and wants her to stay, Moon insists on departing regardless.

Before leaving, Moon meets Master Loh one last time. He gives her two fighting sticks and explains that the main goal of learning kung fu is acquiring self-awakening. Accordingly, he asks her to promise never to fight in any competitions, never to fight in the streets, and never to tell anyone that she has learned kung fu.

After her meeting with Master Loh, Moon walks back home with Yu Zhou. When they pass a store with toys for children, he wants his mother to buy him a toy gun, just like the one his Malay friend has. But Moon refuses to buy him one. When he insists, she walks ahead to encourage him to follow, but a car suddenly stops in front of the toy shop and Yu Zhou is kidnapped. Moon chases after the car unsuccessfully, then remembers the tracker she previously gave her son and tracks the kidnappers down. From this point on, the film shifts into action-movie mode.

Moon confronts two men and fights them using the sticks Master Loh gave her earlier that day. After a while, a third, stronger man appears and eventually overpowers Moon. She is knocked unconscious and thrown into the sea. Her motionless body washes up on the beach, where Burmese refugees arrive by boat. One woman tries to help her, telling her friend that Moon was beaten by an agent, and takes her to a van. The driver initially takes Moon but later throws her out.

The next morning, two police officers find Moon sleeping on a bench in a public park and assume she is Burmese. She fights them off and escapes, hiding in a phone repair shop. The shop owner, Adnan, shelters her and protects her from the police. Moon speaks several languages but remembers nothing about herself and introduces herself as "Mai." Adnan attempts to identify her online using her photo, but finds no trace, realizing that someone has erased her digital existence. The only clue is a tattoo

on her waist reading "Yu Zhou" in Chinese characters, which Adnan interprets as a possible mission code.

Using AI, Adnan traces a location linked to her identity. Together they investigate a nightclub and realize afterward that they are being followed. Back at Adnan's place, they cut and dye Moon's hair. Looking in the mirror, she asks herself who she is in multiple languages. She later teaches Adnan basic self-defense.

One night, a man from the nightclub breaks in. He first beats Adnan down and then attacks Moon. She defeats him, and she and Adnan discover a photo of both of them on his phone. Moon decides to leave Adnan to uncover her identity. Before she leaves, Adnan kisses her and they sit by the shore together. Suddenly, Moon remembers that the characters for "Yu Zhou," which are tattooed on her body, refer to the name of her son.

Adnan and Moon return to the pier and walk through a market hall. Suddenly the man from the nightclub appears and stabs Adnan directly in the back—echoing Adnan's earlier remark that he is not afraid of being stabbed from behind. Someone then shouts "Cut," revealing that this entire sequence is part of a film shoot. Yu Zhou runs toward Adnan, calling him "Dad," revealing that Adnan is in fact Juilliard, Yu Zhou's father. After several retakes, Moon is shown alone on the beach at night, removing her wig and sleeping in a hammock.

It turns out that interwoven with the main narrative is a metafictional "film within the film," in which Moon portrays an immigrant perpetually engaged in conflict and flight. This secondary narrative mirrors and amplifies Moon's real-life struggles, as she increasingly identifies with the character she plays. The distinction between actress and role, fiction and reality, begins to dissolve.

The next day, Moon wanders through an oil palm plantation and encounters a young Buddhist monk who directs her to his master at the top of a hill. Guided by two dogs, she meets the master—the Buddhist monk whom she has encountered several times before. They sit in silence until nightfall. The following day, the master offers her a choice between his closed hands. She chooses one that contains something that looks similar to an acorn but apparently has a very sour taste. After eating it, Moon meditates with the Buddhist master under a banyan tree. The master emphasizes that identity is not defined by name, profession, or relationships. In the end he asks her: "Who are you?" And finally, after some more meditation, he hands something to her and walks away.

Moon is then shown walking on water, which, however, turns out to be a filmic trick. There is a "bridge" right under the surface of the water, which is not seen from a distance, making it look like Moon is walking on the surface of the water. In the final scene, Moon sits beside Juilliard and Yu Zhou on a swing, while Roger attempts to walk on water himself, holding two fighting sticks and practicing kung fu.

The Ocean: Aesthetic Presence and Allegorical Function

The ocean has a prominent presence throughout *Barbarian Invasion*. Visually, the seaside repeatedly frames key moments of training, reflection, violence, and transformation. The beach functions as both a place of discipline and exposure, where Moon trains her body, is tested by Master Loh, and later fights for her survival. The ocean's constant movement, sound, and visual texture contribute to the film's tactile, embodied aesthetic.

At the same time, the ocean carries a strong allegorical charge. It is the site where the Burmese refugees arrive, foregrounding contemporary histories of displacement and migration across Southeast Asia. It is also the place where Moon—or Mai, the role she plays—loses her memory after being thrown into the water, emerging from the ocean with no past and no fixed identity, yet speaking multiple languages associated with Southeast Asia. Mai can be read as a transnational citizen—a Southeast Asian subject shaped not by national borders but by movement, contact, and exchange, which can be read as a reference to refugees' status of statelessness and of trying to build a new life and identity abroad. The ocean thus symbolizes transnational connectivity across Southeast Asia, linking different shores, peoples, and histories.

In recent years, scholars working on the subject of Southeast Asia have increasingly used water as a metaphor for cultural, historical, and political connectivity rather than division. Brian Bernards, drawing on Epeli Hau'ofa, positions the ocean not as a boundary but as a generative and connective space, fostering movement, exchange, and relational networks across islands (Bernards 2015: 12–13; Hau'ofa 1993). This archipelagic imagination challenges state-centered and nationalist notions of culture, emphasizing diversity, circulation, and ongoing interaction across maritime spaces. Similarly, Prasenjit Duara (2021) employs the ocean as a metaphor for history itself, conceptualizing processes as circulatory, interconnected, and relational, attentive to multiple human and non-human agencies.

I argue that in *Barbarian Invasion*, the element of the ocean serves as a powerful symbol that destabilizes rigid structures, including the binary between "reality" and "illusion"—most notably represented by the alleged ability to walk on water. Water becomes a medium through which boundaries dissolve, echoing the film's larger themes of fluid identity and the collapse of linear, fixed narratives.

Moon's and her character Mai's search for personal identity can be read allegorically as a search for a Southeast Asian identity. Like the region itself, she is multilingual and culturally layered: she speaks Malay, Chinese, Burmese, and other languages, yet does not know who she is. Mai's amnesia reflects the historical fragmentation of Southeast Asia, shaped by colonial borders, migration, and cultural overlap. As a character who moves between languages and social contexts without a stable origin, Moon embodies an identity that is relational rather than fixed. The ocean, which facilitates both loss and connection, reinforces this allegory by positioning Southeast Asia as a region defined by circulation rather than rootedness.

In this context, the role of Yu Zhou is also worth analysing. Although he has a Chinese name and his mother is obviously Malaysian Chinese, she communicates with him in Malay, which is uncommon among Malaysian Chinese, who usually speak to their children in either Chinese or English. In Yu Zhou's case, the reason why his mother speaks Malay with him seems to be that Juilliard, Yu Zhou's father, is Malay. This invites an allegorical reading: A Malaysian Chinese mother, representing the mother land, and a Malaysian Malay father, representing citizenship, having a child together, raising questions of the identity of the next generation.

Identity, Alienation, and the Self

Barbarian Invasion explicitly references the film *The Bourne Identity*. Roger repeatedly frames his project as a Southeast Asian version of the film and the narrative mirrors key tropes of the Hollywood action film: an amnesiac protagonist with exceptional fighting skills, erased digital traces, and a structure driven by pursuit and escape. However, the film systematically subverts these genre conventions through strategies of defamiliarization, or what Bertolt Brecht described as the *alienation effect* (1964: 91–100, 132–135). By repeatedly revealing the film set, exposing retakes, and collapsing the boundaries between fiction and reality, *Barbarian Invasion* interrupts narrative immersion and prevents the viewer from fully identifying with the action spectacle. The familiar structure of the action film is made strange: instead of seamless suspense and emotional absorption, the audience is prompted to reflect on the constructed nature of cinema itself.

For instance, Moon has several encounters with a spiritual master who imparts his wisdom. However, it remains unclear whether this figure functions as a character within the staged film or as a real person, a deliberate ambiguity that defamiliarizes the viewer's perception of reality. In this way, the film transforms the Hollywood action narrative into a self-reflexive meditation on identity, performance, and embodiment. Action cinema becomes a vehicle for questioning how identities—cinematic, personal, and cultural—are produced, rehearsed, and performed.

In this way, the film shifts attention away from distinguishing between the real and the unreal and toward the realm of experience. Similar to the kidnapping scene described above, the experiences of Moon the actress and the character of Mai that she portrays overlap to a significant degree, emphasizing the film's preoccupation with experiential truth rather than ontological certainty. In this way, *Barbarian Invasion* engages with the metaphysical with sincerity and depth, grounded in lived experience rather than spectacle.

A similarly blurred line between real life experience and filmic construction can be observed in the work of other Malaysian Chinese filmmakers, such as Tsai Ming-liang, a Malaysian Chinese director based in Taiwan. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), Tsai stages a nearly empty cinema screening of a classic martial arts film by King Hu titled *Dragon Inn* (1967), where characters drift through the space as

spectators rather than active agents. The film emphasizes the residual traces of presence, from the gestures of the ticket clerk to the fleeting glances and postures of the audience, creating an environment in which subjectivity is fragmented, relational, and impermanent. By blurring the boundaries between cinematic performance and lived experience, Tsai foregrounds identity as a process of becoming, defined not by decisive action but by duration, attentiveness, and relational engagement.

Read through this lens, *Barbarian Invasion* similarly constructs Moon's identity as contingent. Her interactions with the spiritual master, her oscillation between herself and the martial-arts character she portrays, and her navigation of overlapping social and professional roles all reflect the porous, experiential, and processual qualities of subjectivity that Tsai's film exemplifies. This emphasis on impermanence, relationality, and negotiation over fixed essence resonates with broader tendencies in Sinophone cinema, which through its positioning on the margins of China and Chineseness, its transnational circulation, and its attentiveness to local, minoritised, and heterogeneous positionalities underscores the contingent nature of the experiences it portrays (Shih 2007). *Barbarian Invasion* thus exemplifies a Sinophone cinematic sensibility that values a negotiation of identity as part of a logic in which marginality, relationality, and transnational positioning shape cinematic subjectivity.

Feminist concerns further deepen this notion of alienation by linking it to the female body and lived experience. In one scene, Moon tells Roger's assistant that when she was pregnant, strangers on the street wanted to touch her belly. She reflects that becoming a mother apparently means that a woman's body suddenly belongs to society. Here, alienation operates not only as a cinematic technique, but also as a social and embodied condition: Moon is estranged from her own body through public ownership, expectation, and surveillance. Her physical training and eventual mastery of martial arts can thus be read as a gradual recovery of agency and selfhood. In this sense, *Barbarian Invasion* stages alienation in a twofold manner: as a strategy that distances the viewer, and as an existential condition that Moon must confront and negotiate through embodied practice.

Related to the theme of alienation in the second sense, Buddhism plays a central role throughout *Barbarian Invasion*. It provides both a philosophical and spiritual framework that reframes alienation and identity. As mentioned above, Moon repeatedly encounters a Buddhist monk, who later turns out to be a master. This master mainly poses questions rather than offering answers, guiding her toward an understanding of the self as impermanent, relational, and spiritually aware. Most explicitly, he gives her a booklet titled *Who is dragging this corpse?*, a Chan meditation question, or *huatou* (話頭). The question challenges the assumption of a stable, autonomous self by asking who—or what—moves the body through the world. Its purpose is to destabilize identification with the body and direct the practitioner toward experiential insight into non-self, rather than mere conceptual

understanding (Strong 2015: 315–316; Woo 2020). This spiritual dimension is further emphasized when the monk later tells Moon that the body is not the prison of the mind, but the mind is the prison of the body.

These Buddhist teachings resonate with the film's broader exploration of alienation, adding a spiritual component. While Brechtian alienation distances the viewer from cinematic illusion, Buddhist philosophy introduces a different form of estrangement: the recognition that the self is not fixed, owned, or singular, and that spiritual insight involves letting go of rigid attachments. Moon's—or Mai's—amnesia, her shifting identities as Moon and Mai, and her eventual calm acceptance of not knowing who she is can thus be read not as a loss to be corrected, but as a movement toward Buddhist non-attachment and spiritual awareness.

Moon's ability to navigate the shifting boundaries between her roles as mother, actress, and autonomous individual mirrors this logic. Her evolving identification with the martial arts character she portrays further reinforces this alignment, illustrating identity as a dynamic process. Read through this framework, *Barbarian Invasion* situates Moon's personal transformation within an understanding of identity not as a stable essence but as an ongoing negotiation with social, professional, and historical forces. In the film, the dissolution of boundaries between Moon's lived experience and the fictional narrative she inhabits expresses a fluid nature of identity. Moon's journey is marked by her capacity to respond to fluctuating demands across different roles, illustrating identity as a continuous process of becoming rather than a static state.

Moreover, the film reflects a broader critique of the limitations imposed by traditional narratives and gender roles. Moon's navigation between different aspects of her identity challenges the binary conceptions of selfhood, resonating with cultural movements that emphasize intersectionality rather than fixed categories. The concept of intersectionality was coined by Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1989; Cho et al. 2013). Intersectionality highlights how overlapping oppressions—based on race/ethnicity, gender, class etc.—interact to shape lived experiences of discrimination and privilege in complex and interdependent ways. This theoretical framework challenges singular or universalizing notions of identity, instead emphasizing the multiplicity and relational nature of social positioning.

Barbarian Invasion thus criticizes and renegotiates cultural, political, and cinematic structures. Furthermore, on a meta level, the film consciously exposes its own construction, revealing the mechanisms of cinema and blurring the boundary between reality and fiction. This reflexivity prompts viewers to interrogate not only the narrative itself but also the broader systems of storytelling, power, and representation.

The title evokes the historical period of migration during the Roman Empire while also referencing a sinocentric worldview rooted in the concept of *tianxia*. The idea of *tianxia* is a hierarchical vision of the world with China at its center (Wang 2017).

Through such allusions, the film critiques imperialism and dominant narratives of "civilization versus barbarism" and "center versus margin," suggesting that such constructs are employed to legitimize control and marginalize the "other." By placing an undocumented woman at its center, the film turns the margins into the center, to borrow bell hooks' approach of "choosing the margin as a space of radical openness" (hooks 1990).[9]

Barbarian Invasion combines Hollywood action tropes with the multilingual storytelling characteristic of Southeast Asian indie cinema, incorporating Mandarin, Cantonese, and Malay, thereby reflecting both local and global influences. With a narrative focused on a woman's personal transformation and self-empowerment, it addresses themes that have transnational resonance while remaining firmly rooted in a distinctly Malaysian context. Tan's self-reflexive approach, evidenced by her dual role as both director and lead actress, further engages with global film discourse, positioning the film as a compelling example of transnational cinema.

In contrast to *The Ghost Bride*, which foregrounds female agency but relies on commodifying and at times exotifying aesthetics, *Barbarian Invasion* adopts a markedly different visual language. While *The Ghost Bride* is characterized by vivid colors, bright lighting, pompous costumes and sets, and rapid shot changes, *Barbarian Invasion*'s visual style situates it firmly within a New Wave tradition and aligns it closely with the distinct aesthetics of Tan Chui Mui's earlier films. Rather than adopting the polished look of mainstream action cinema, *Barbarian Invasion* relies heavily on handheld camerawork, creating a sense of immediacy and physical proximity. Additionally, its aesthetics are characterized by dim lighting and subdued colors. Even in scenes shot in daylight, the colors remain slightly foggy, evoking the humid climate of Southeast Asia.

Concluding Remarks: In-Between Worlds

In conclusion, it can be stated that both *The Ghost Bride* and *Barbarian Invasion* center on women as heroes, depicting their courage and resilience in extreme, often unsettling situations. Each narrative portrays their respective female lead confronting "spooky" or threatening circumstances that push them to their limits, though the nature of these challenges differs. In *The Ghost Bride*, the liminality lies between the physical and metaphysical worlds, as the heroine navigates the supernatural alongside human society, highlighting her spiritual growth and ethical agency. In *Barbarian Invasion*, the boundary blurs between reality and performance, creating suspense and estrangement that encourage reflection on impermanence, identity, and spiritual insight.

In each narrative, the female protagonists are portrayed as strong, complex figures who assert agency over their own destinies. In *Barbarian Invasion*, this theme is

9 bell hooks—pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins—chose to write her name in lowercase to shift attention away from herself and toward her ideas, emphasizing the work over the author (hooks 1989).

explored in a particularly elaborate way: the character in the secondary narrative—the film within the film—demonstrates notable physical strength and embodies a vision of female empowerment for a marginalized and silenced woman.

The protagonists navigate multiple liminal spaces: between the physical and metaphysical realms, childhood and adulthood, and evolving cultural, religious, and gender roles. In *The Ghost Bride*, these transitions pertain not only to identity formation but also to the psychological and emotional burdens of existing "between worlds." While such dual existences are often demanding, they confer a distinctive capacity to transcend immediate realities and facilitate personal transformation. This form of mediation emerges as a vital, though frequently underappreciated, skill that enables the characters to navigate complex cultural and personal terrains.

Both *The Ghost Bride* and *Barbarian Invasion* engage closely with themes of identity formation, cultural memory, and history. Rather than presenting historical events from a macro-historical perspective, they adopt a micro-historical approach, rendering history as subjective and fragmentary—deeply embedded in personal experiences and visions, understood both as acts of imaginative projection and as moments of hallucinatory perception.

Drawing on elements of Chinese folk religion, spirituality, and martial arts philosophy, the narratives interrogate social inequalities tied to gender, ethnicity, and class. Through their struggles, the protagonists reclaim agency and contest traditional roles, using the supernatural to critique broader societal injustices.

These works also highlight the diverse experiences within the Sinophone community, particularly in Malaysia—a community often stereotyped as a wealthy elite but, in reality, marked by considerable heterogeneity. They demonstrate how navigating multiple worlds mediates a range of cultural practices and values, connecting traditional Chinese knowledge to contemporary contexts. In doing so, the stories reflect a recurring theme within the Chinese diaspora: the simultaneous search for ancestral roots and the cultivation of new ones.

At the level of production, both filmic narratives exemplify forms of border transgression and transnational connectivity. *The Ghost Bride* is a Taiwanese adaptation of an English-language novel by a Malaysian author residing in the United States. *Barbarian Invasion*, a transnational film, exemplifies cross-border collaboration between Malaysia and Hong Kong, featuring multilingual dialogue and integrating a range of global cinematic styles. Both underscore the transnational interconnectedness of the contemporary cultural Sinosphere, albeit through markedly different approaches.

Ultimately, while switching between worlds can be burdensome, it can also serve as a vital form of mediation. These narratives provide valuable models for negotiating the coexistence of different communities and cultural practices in the modern Sinosphere. By employing narrative disruptions, they challenge traditional values and offer new perspectives on subjectivity. Their references to Chinese popular

religion exemplify its core characteristic: though grounded in theoretical teachings, it remains fluid, evolving, and deeply embedded in everyday life.

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Refereed Article

A Queer Momotaro under the Postcolonial Pacific: Reading *The Membranes* Alternatively

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Abstract
In this article, I read *The Membranes* (1996, 2021) as a postcolonial subversion of the Japanese folktale Momotaro, an interpretation alternative to the dominant reading mode that interprets the novella exclusively as science fiction. Examining the novella's reader reception of its English translation, I suggest that the dominant reading mode in English-speaking communities tends to overlook the author's speculation upon the reshuffling of global order and the postcolonial parable of Taiwan refracted by the protagonist's birth story. While the dominant interpretive mode contributes to the great success of *The Membranes'* translation, I argue that this mode eclipses the story's postcolonial parable and constitutes an inverted form of "the time lag of allegory" identified by Shu-mei Shih as perpetuating the power asymmetry between the West and the non-West in global literary studies (2004). A reading that contests this mode is due. Published in Taiwan in 1996 when the gates had just been thrown open to eclectic borrowing as well as genre and gender subversion—as Taiwan ended its 39-year long martial law period in 1987—the novella projected a nationalistic as well as queer speculation from the author Chi Ta-wei—in a postapocalyptic world where humanity has relocated underseas (and where heterosexuality is abnormal), Taiwan exerts a huge regional influence, dominating Southeast Asia. Certainly a counterfactual, this fantasy likely gratified Taiwanese readership back then and can still strike a profound chord with its people now—as the island continues to be a politically inchoate state. With the birth story of its protagonist Momo (punning on the Japanese for "peach") as its main plotline, *The Membranes* is allegorical of modern Taiwan, especially of its modern origin. This article provides an alternative reading strategy to emphasize this novella's cultural specificities. It shows that underneath its sci-fi and queer trappings, *The Membranes,* at a deeper level, reflects Taiwan's anxiety as a small and inchoate state as well as its story of modern origin.

Keywords: translated Chinese literature; Taiwanese literature; queer literature; science fiction (sci-fi); geopolitics in Asia; world literature; environmental disaster

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Introduction

Published in 1996, *The Membranes* was a product of its context. As Taiwan ended martial law in 1987, the 1980s marked the start of Taiwan's globalization (Liao 1996). The English translator of *The Membranes*, Ari Heinrich, who visited Taipei after the end of the martial law period, witnessed Taiwan's rapid globalization, reporting that Taipei in the 1990s was "a place where youth culture seemed to combine a bottomless appetite for foreign popular culture with an unaccustomed freedom from supervision" (2021: 139).Within academia, scholars, with PhD degrees from US universities, eagerly appropriated postcolonial theories and queer theories from the West to contemplate basic notions of ethnicities, genders and sexualities (Liou 2015). The result was that a discourse on gender and queerness became dominant, replacing the discourse on ethno-nationalist identifications in the 1980s (Lin 2006: 105). The 1990s was also an era of social movements, with the lifting of martial law heralding sweeping democratization, civil groups of diverse ideologies and political agendas rushing to vie for public attention, with LGBTQ activism among them. *The Membranes* refracted the cultural milieu of Taiwan in the 1990s. It is unapologetically queer with its light-hearted satire of an inverse gendered order where heterosexuality is the love that dares not speak its name. This theme of queerness is not only coeval with the boisterous queer activism of the 1990s but also captures the avant-garde-ness of the author, who introduced queer theories in his zine *Ise Margin* (*Daoyu Bianyuan*) and ingeniously translated "queer" into "ku'er" (lit. cool kid) (Chen 2005). Its eclecticism reflects Taiwan's rapid globalization in the 1980s. The story is voraciously eclectic, alluding to world literature such as Shakespeare and *Journey to the West,* to mythology and folktale such as *Momotaro* and *Mahabharata*, to Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (and Visconti's 1971 film adaptation) and more.

Twenty-five years later, *The Membranes* was translated into English within the series "Modern Chinese Literature from Taiwan" (hereafter: MCLT) published by Columbia University Press. Beginning in 1997, MCLT was sponsored by the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation to publish modern and contemporary literature from Taiwan (Diao 2008: 131). By 2025, it had published 25 titles, including short-story collections, poems, and novels. As CKK states in its goals of establishment, its sponsorship aims to "make Chinese culture (*zhonghua wenhua*) an indispensable legacy to human civilization" (Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation 2026). MCLT was sponsored with this vision. The systematic English translation of Taiwanese literature started in the 1960s when USIS sponsored anthologizers Lucian Wu, Nancy Ing and Nie-hua Ling to translate authors from "Free China" at the high tide of the Cold War (Chen 2016: 25) In the 1980s, as Taiwan experienced a localization (*bentuhua*) movement, the English anthologies of Taiwanese literature began to bear "Taiwan" in their titles and by the 1990s, anthologizers no longer treated Taiwanese literature as a branch of Chinese literature (Chen 2016: 84). Publishing its first translation in 2000, MCLT in part reflected this acknowledgement of Taiwan's

cultural autonomy and in part reflected the ideology of its coordinator, Wang Der-wei. Appropriating Andre Lefevere's notion of the professional, Chu suggests that the naming of MCLT and its selection is deeply influenced by Wang's ideology and poetics, which casts the titles more or less in a "post-loyalist" light (Chu 2009).[1] Chang, on the other hand, uses Wang's notion of Sinophone literature[2] to make sense of MCLT's selective criteria and to explain the rationale of the series' naming (2015: 89–90). Both Chang's and Chu's studies show that MCLT positions works from Taiwan within (Wang's rendition of) Sinophone literature while acknowledging these titles' cultural specificity. While the series' positionality might be discernible when examining its titles in total, seen individually, the publications do not explicitly reflect this positionality. Compared to other titles such as Zhong Lihe's *From the Old Country: Stories and Sketches from Taiwan* (2014), the short-story collection *The Last of the Whampoa Breed: Stories of the Chinese Diaspora* (2003) or Yao-Chang Chen's *Puppet Flower: A Novel of 1867 Formosa* (2023)—all bearing cultural or regional markers—*The Membranes'* title alone makes it seem to stand apart from the series' positionality.

1 "Post-loyalist" (hou yimin), a term coined by Wang Der-wei, refers to writings that refract a psychological state fixating on, mourning for or haunted by regimes or dynasties overthrown, replaced or no longer legitimate.

2 While both Shu-Mei Shih and Wang Der-wei attempt to pluralize Chinese literature by their renditions of the Sinophone, their characterization of literatures in Sinitic scripts produced outside of China and these literatures' relations to China, culturally and historically, are very different. From a postcolonial angle, Shu-Mei Shih's rendition of the Sinophone treats China as the metropole of an empire and has sought to expose its colonial and imperial power by giving voice to literatures at the margin of the empire. Wang Der-wei's notion of the Sinophone moves in an entirely different direction, aiming to underline the global circulation and network of literatures in Sinitic scripts outside of China. In his rendition of the Sinophone, China is treated more as a cultural motif that literatures outside of China inevitably respond to, and in their responses, do not necessarily entail any decolonial implication or attempt.

Fig 1. Number of Goodreads Ratings for MCLT Series Titles

Publication date	Author (editors)	Title	ratings
2000	Wang Chen-ho	*Rose Rose I Love You*	67
2000	Cheng Ching-wen	*Three-Legged Horse*	17
2000	Chu T'ien-wen	*Notes of a Desolate Man*	235
2001	Hsiao Li-hung	*A Thousand Moons on a Thousand River*	166
2000	Chang Ta-chun	*Wild Kids: Two Novels about Growing Up*	64
2001	Michelle Yeh and N.G.D. Malmqvist (eds)	*Frontier Taiwan: An Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*	16
2002	Li Qiao	*Wintry Night*	28
2001	Huang Chun-ming	*The Taste of Apples*	72
2003	Pang-yuan Chi and David Der-wei Wang	*The Last of the Whampoa Breed: Stories of the Chinese Diaspora*	10
2003	Chang His-kuo	*The City Trilogy: Five Jade Disks, Defenders of the Dragon City, Tale of a Father*	40
2003	Li Yung-p'ing	*Retribution: The Jiling Chronicle*	8
2005	Shih Shu-ching	*City of the Queen: A Novel of Colonial Hong Kong*	28
2006	Wu Zhuoliu	*Orphan of Asia*	263
2006	Ping Lu	*Love and Revolution: A Novel about Song Qingling and Sun Yat-sen*	6
2007	Zhang Guixing	*My South Seas Sleeping Beauty: A Tale of Memory and Longing*	44
2007	Chu T'ien-hsin	*The Old Capital: A Novel of Taipei*	74
2008	Guo Songfen	*Running Mother and Other Stories*	20
2011	Huang Fan	*Zero and Other Fictions*	42
2014	Zhong Lihe	*From the Old Country: Stories and Sketches from Taiwan*	7
2015	Yang Mu	*Memories of Mount Qilai*	4
2015	Li Ang	*The Lost Garden: A Novel*	64
2016	Ng Kim Chew	*Slow Boat to China and Other Stories*	31
2017	Wu He	*Remains of Life: A Novel*	41
2018	Yang Mu	*Hawk of the Mind: Collected Poems*	12
2021	Chi Ta-wei	*The Membranes*	8025
2021	Lo Yi-chin	*Faraway: A Novel*	22
2023	Yao-Chang Chen	*Puppet Flower: A Novel of 1867 Formosa*	15
2025	Zhang Guixing	*Elephant Herd: A Novel*	16

Sources: Goodreads.com

On the website *Goodreads.com, The Membranes* has been rated 8,025 times with 1,444 reviews, far exceeding the rest of the series (see fig.1).[3] Insofar as *Goodreads'* rating system suggests, *The Membranes* ranks as the most rated story in MCLT's series.[4] There are several factors that affect *The Membranes'* surpassing popularity in relation to the MCLT series. One major factor is its playfully gender norm-bending elements as well as its concomitant "queer-friendly" message implied by the original place of its publication. Since Taiwan legalized same-sex marriage in 2019, it has actively presented itself as "the most LGBTQ-friendly country in Asia." This claim was soon adopted by liberal international media and is likely to become one of the dominant impressions about Taiwan for the international community. *The Membranes*, the English translation of which appeared only two years apart from

3 The calculation was conducted in January 2026.

4 Though one could not derive the sales of copies from the rating (and it's always difficult to quantify the actual reading times of a book), The Membranes' more than 30 times higher number of ratings than other titles in the same series suggests that the novella's English reception has surpassed its series' presupposed market positioning.

Taiwan's passing of same-sex marriage, would likely remind readers of Taiwan's progressive values with its transgressive gender politics. In turn, the queer elements in the novel might attract readers who are interested in this impression of Taiwan and who are aligned with the sexually progressive values projected by this novella from Taiwan. The previous publication history of translated queer literature from Taiwan might also have paved the way for *The Membranes'* popularity. Both Li Ang's feminist sensationalist novel *The Butcher's Wife* and Pai Hsien-yung's gay classic *Crystal Boys* were translated into English in the late 1980s while Chu T'ien-wen's avant-garde queer novel *Notes of a Desolate Man* was translated into English in 2000. And even more relevant, Qiu Miao-jin's now-cult lesbian classics *Notes of a Crocodile* and *The Last Words of Montmartre* were respectively translated into English in 2017 and 2014. Wen-chi Li has observed that Qiu became widely popular on Amazon.com and Goodreads among a global readership who found Qiu's lesbian struggle relatable to their experiences (2022). This history of translated queer fiction from Taiwan would also contribute to *The Membranes'* visibility.

Yet another factor contributing to the novella's popularity is that it is predominantly read as science fiction or speculative fiction. Its sci-fi elements appear to contribute to its great success at being read as a piece of world literature, or more accurately, as a piece of global popular literature. Mark McGurl asserts that in the age of Amazon, every fiction, for the real-time demand of reader-cum-customer, is genre fiction (and even for the market of serious literature, literary fiction paradoxically acquires the status of a genre too, as Amazon establishes an imprint for it with the name Little A) (2016: 449, 460). With Amazon and Goodreads categorizing *The Membranes* under the categories of science fiction and speculative fiction, its "genre-fication"—regardless of how the novella is in fact genre-defying—makes it easy for readers of popular literature to find it. One should also note that in contrast to other titles in the series, *The Membranes* seems very unambiguous for its categorization on Amazon. A quick survey suggests that, for instance, *The Taste of Apples, My South Seas Sleeping Beauty, Orphan of Asia,* and *Notes of a Desolate Man* are categorized within the sections "Asian" and "Fiction," with no further subcategories to indicate their plausible literary genre while the categorization for *The Membranes* is apparently more specific, even suggesting it contains "themes of homosexuality." Concomitantly, the "speculative turn" in contemporary cultural production as well as criticism might also aid *The Membranes*' reception in the Anglophone world. Amie Parry has noted that starting at the turn of the millennium, particularly in the field of African American literature, "para-literature" (science fiction, fantasy and horror) has served as a proto-theoretical intervention for researchers to rethink a range of issues intersecting racism with neoliberalism and capitalism (2019: 23). In the arena of cultural production, she marks the global popularity of Octavia Butler's Earthseed series (1993, 1998) and the Swedish journalist Stieg Larsson's immensely successful *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series (2005–2007) as part of this speculative turn. This interest in the subversive and critical potential of para-literature also spreads to Sinophone studies, as

contemporary Chinese science fiction and its subsequent film and Netflix adaptations—not least thanks to Liu Cixin, Hao Jingfang, and Stanley Chan—seizes researchers' attention. The term "Sinofuturism"[5] was in turn coined to respond to this "craze for science fiction" (*kehuanre*). And it is little surprise that as a writer of science fiction and a researcher, Chi (along with the queer scholars Howard Chiang and Ari Heinrich) would launch a special issue on "queer Sinofuturism," exploring the synergy between queer criticism and speculative arts (2020).

Unsurprisingly, the commentaries on Goodreads dominantly interpret the story in terms of science fiction, as the story is marketed this way. The blurbs on its cover refer to the story in terms of science fiction and position its author as a science fiction and queer writer. Calling the story "science fiction" (Kim Stanley Robinson 2021; Mingwei Song 2021) and "cyberpunk" (Susan Stryker 2021), the blurbs appear to steer readers' attention to its sci-fi elements. Examining the professional book reviews published in the same year of the novella's translation, the reviews invariably situate the story in the genre of science fiction.[6] It was dominantly lauded for its "prescience" as the story's descriptions of capitalism, surveillance, fitness tracking and artificial intelligence suggest. In the blurbs, it is praised for its "prescient echoes of modern life," "presciently foreground[ing] issues" and "appear[ing] far ahead of the current new wave of science fiction" (Publishers Weekly 2021; Susan Stryker 2021; Mingwei Song 2021). Reviewers seem to agree with this tone setting, highlighting the author's innovative speculation on gender fluidity (Berlastsky 2021; Der Marchi 2021; Lapointe 2021) and technologies (Cantrill 2021; Hoo 2021). One reviewer even expresses surprise in finding that the novella was written in the late twentieth century (Deeter 2021). While the context of the novella is duly introduced—the background of martial law, Taiwan's rapid globalization and the author's pioneering role in introducing queer theories and writing queer fiction, very few reviewers seem to find it necessary or productive to produce readings that might render the story legible as a refraction of some historical, cultural or political specificity concerning the country in which it was embedded.

In "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," Shih identified five intersecting modes for mechanisms of recognition that render the West as the subject of recognition and the non-West as the object awaiting recognition (2004: 17). One of the modes is the "time lag of allegory" that renders all texts from the third world potentially suitable for national allegorical reading by first-world researchers, provocatively proposed by Fredric Jameson (20). Reading *The Membranes'* English translation dominantly—almost exclusively—as prescient science fiction constitutes an inverted form of this "time lag of allegory." While the reviewers of *The*

5 Sinofuturism is a contested term; its meaning unfolding and various. For discussions on its variant meanings and its theoretical muse Afrofuturism, see Fan-Ting Cheng's "Fashioning A Taiwanese Queer Narratology: Yang Shuang-zi's Blooming Season as Mê-kak Tactic" (2020) as well as Chi Ta-wei's "Lô-hàn-kha-á" as Surplus: Queer Sinofuturisms in The Great Buddha+" (2022).

6 See the appendix for the book reviews.

Membranes' English translations have not belabored themselves by imposing any national allegorical reading on the story, their assertion of the text's prescience—often accompanied by a tone of amazement—points to an inversion of the supposed belatedness of modernity ascribed to texts from the third world. If, as Shih has observed, the temporal gap between the literal meaning and the allegorical meaning of the text is where the politics of recognition are at work and should be critiqued (21), then claims of prescience are a sign of the technologies of recognition at work. By suggesting the text is prophetic and relevant to the contemporary world, critics not only legitimize *The Membranes'* entry into world literature but suggest the text's value lies in its predictions concerning our contemporary world. As Shih reminds us that allegory is only one kind of interpretive form, reading *The Membranes*' English translation exclusively as a prophetic allegory of our present world threatens to reduce the complexity of the story.

On the other hand, the local commentaries, while noting the sci-fi elements of the story as well, have not seemed to find the text ahead of its time but have sought to read it as a satirical critique of its situated time and space. Chang has read the text's post-apocalyptic setting as an eco-criticism of Taiwan's environmental catastrophe in the aftermath of its economic boom in the 1980s (2003: 118), while Lin argues that the text sought to subvert the heteronormative world-building by Zhang Xiguo and Huang Hai, the paradigmatic Taiwanese science fiction writers in the 1980s (2006: 98). More importantly, the local commentaries have noted the text's eclectic allusivity, its pastiche and parody reflecting Taiwan's rapid cultural appropriation from the first world in the late 1980s, and how such rapid processes of cultural hybridization cast doubt on Taiwan's cultural autonomy and its political sovereignty (Chang 114; Lin 104). In contrast to reviews of the English translation that mark the text's postmodernist style as unproblematically and laudably avant-garde, local commentaries suggest the stylistic avant-garde-ness was symptomatic of Taiwan's postcolonial and newly globalized position within the global economy of knowledge and culture production. This layered response from Chi, reflected by the text's style and its brain-in-a-vat conceit, appears to be "lost in translation," or, while the technologies of recognition grant admission to *The Membranes,* the author's response to Taiwan's postcolonial positionality appears to be ignored.

Reviews from the first world have mostly ignored the author's speculation upon Taiwan's reshuffled position in the global political and economic order—that Taiwan in the story has become a dominant player in the South China Sea. Such ignorance profoundly points to what is lost when this text from the third world travels to the first world—the third world author's half-satirical, half-sincere aspiration for a more or less fair reconfiguration of the world order is conveniently dismissed. Dwelling upon the author's speculation over Taiwan's regional power and its postcolonial subversion of the Japanese folktale *Momotaro*, this article responds to this blind spot in the first-world commentaries. It shows that underneath its sci-fi and queer trappings, *The Membranes,* on a deeper level, reflects Taiwan's anxiety as a small and inchoate state as well as its story of modern origin. By

examining *The Membranes*' worldview, as well as its intertwined allusion of *Momotaro* with *fentao* (peach splitting), a euphemism for homoeroticism in classical Chinese literature, the article shows that *The Membranes* is allegorical of modern Taiwan's genesis. Further, to suggest the text's sci-fi elements are locally specific, the article revisits the passages on the queer protagonist's sexual initiation with the android Andy to show that Chi's queer sensibility envisaged a new mode of human-android intimacy, not only expressing a prevision of our present day increasing contact with technology, but also anticipating the Taiwanese government's effort to integrate technology into everyday life.

Synopsis of The Membranes

The Membranes is set in a postapocalyptic world where humanity has relocated to the bottom of the ocean due to ozone layer depletion. Human beings cohabit and cooperate with androids, which assume the roles of their loyal companions, amorous lovers, military machines and organ donors. The protagonist, Momo, a 30-year-old renowned beautician in T-city (a thin disguise for Taipei) in New Taiwan is anticipating a visit from her long distant mother on her birthday. On this significant day, lots of flashbacks resurface for her. She recalls her own birth as recounted by her mother: on a fine spring day, her mother is on an excursion with her girlfriend. The two come upon an intoxicatingly fragrant peach tree, climbing to seize the most gigantic peach on it. Out of the peach comes Momo. Momo also recalls her childhood friendship with an android named Andy. Confined with her in the aseptic room at the hospital, Andy becomes both Momo's sexual initiation and eventually her organ donor. Every part of Andy is transplanted into Momo so that she survives. The demise of Andy continues to haunt Momo and in moments of melancholy she gazes at her body, into which Andy has been incorporated. She is left to question her own identity: is she Andy, or Andy her?

The episode of her mother's visit brings readers back to the narrative present. Momo meets her mother only to find out her reality is nothing more than a series of simulacra programmed by her mom. Momo turns out to be a brain grafted onto an android—an iteration of the classic "brain-in-a-vat" conceit. Her whole body in fact did not survive the surgery, leaving only her brain and her mother was compelled to lease it to an enterprise that employs Momo to repair androids; thus the illusion that she is a beautician tending to clients' skins. To save Momo's brain from boredom, her mom has tirelessly fed simulacra to her. However, the unsettling truth is that, day after day, Momo exists solely as a disembodied brain mechanically repairing androids on the assembly line. By the end of the story, the reader is left with an unpleasant aftertaste that everything they have read so far has been merely simulacra.

A Postcolonial and Queer Momotaro

Darko Suvin has characterized science fiction as a genre of cognitive estrangement, which distances readers from their familiar empirical environment so that they may

look afresh. This estranging effect enables Chi to rationalize his speculation about what seems to be hard-wired in the geopolitics of the Pacific and, in turn, to couch a counterfactual account of Taiwan that temporarily suspends readers' disbelief. Shortly after introducing Momo and her surroundings, the narrator turns to introduce the world of the story, a reshuffled global order following humankind's undersea migration. In this reshuffled global order, "New Taiwan," in which Momo as a New Taiwanese resides, wields significant economic and political influence over its neighbors:

> The "proportion principle" arrived at was not based on population size or geographic area of land occupied prior to the great ocean migration, but was rather determined by a nation's relative political, economic, and military power. Although France had previously occupied territory smaller than the size of Algeria, the undersea New France occupied six times the size of undersea New Algeria. A full three quarters of the vast Pacific Ocean territories was therefore distributed among only the United States, Japan and China […]
>
> And New Taiwan? While its Pacific territory allotment was hardly satisfactory in size, it was the envy of the rest of the South China Sea. New Taiwan established itself as the financial center of (undersea) Southeast Asia, a key player with unrivalled regional influence (2021: 25).

As the text sets off its plot with the great migration of human beings into the ocean, it suggests that only a planetary-scale apocalyptic disaster might trigger a reshuffling of the global order. By suggesting that this reshuffling is only possible in an estranged setting, Chi pokes fun at Taiwan's strenuous effort at vying for global standing and economic power. Since the PRC replaced the ROC as the legitimate member of the United Nations in 1971, followed by the United States' withdrawal of diplomatic ties from the ROC in 1979, Taiwan has been striving to gain the upper hand over other states in the Asia Pacific region. Eerily, when Taiwan's attempt at regional dominance is extrapolated in the story, its surge in power is narrated in an apparent colonial scenario, vividly parodying the colonial expansions of Europe, the US, and Japan between the nineteenth century and WWII. By linking Taiwan's dominance over Southeast Asia to the global memory of colonization, as sardonically evoked by Algeria's colonized history, the narrative cautions its readers, especially Taiwanese, to be mindful of its economic expansion into Southeast Asia, though it indulges its reader in this possibility. Furthermore, as Chi selects Southeast Asia as the target of economic expansion, this choice reminds one of Taiwan's Southbound Policy,[7] which uncannily echoes Japan's imperial

7 The Taiwanese government has been promoting economic investment in and diplomatic ties with South and Southeast Asia since its era of economic boom in the 1980s, but the more forceful and more fruitful effort occurred when Tsai Ing-wen assumed the presidency in 2016 and proposed the New Southbound Policy (NSP). While one of the key goals of the NSP is to shift economic reliance from China to South and Southeast Asia, the most tangible result that Taiwanese citizens might experience from the old and new southbound policies is probably the importation of migrant workers from Southeast Asia, which began around the late 1980s.

expansion into Southeast Asia during the Pacific War. By reconfiguring Taiwan's economic expansion into Southeast Asia in colonial terms, the text thus renders Taiwan's ambition for regional power problematic. In this way, the text suggests that "New Taiwan" is perhaps no different from any colonial predecessors; more ironically it turns out to uncannily resemble its former mother country—imperial Japan.

If New Taiwan is a cautious parody of how a former colony might be no different from its colonial power when the opportunity arises, the casting of Momo is a postcolonial parody of Japan's entrenching imperialist figure, Momotaro—the Peach boy.[8] Recounted by her mom, Momo is born out of a gigantic peach and is born to lesbian parents:

> […] a long, long time ago, Mommy had taken a trip with a friend [Tomie; Mommy's lesbian partner]. They were walking along hand in hand in the hills when they came to the base of a peach tree at the top of a knoll. The peaches gave off a mesmerizing scent: to smell them was to go limp with ecstasy. Not worrying about pesticides or being accused of theft, Mommy's friend asked Mommy to let her stand on her shoulders. With a little teamwork, the pair plucked the biggest peach of all. It was as big as a human head. Mommy was delighted. She told her friend: "In China there's a legend that 'peach splitting'—when you share a peach with a friend—is the mark of an extraordinary friendship, the kind that other people wouldn't understand. Let's share the peach and bless our friendship!" And so, according to Momo's mother's story, the two women split the peach with a knife…never anticipating that, as soon as the knife broke the skin, a shrill wailing cry would burst out of the peach. […] Mommy's friend explained that according to an ancient Japanese legend, there was once a little boy who had been born from a peach, and his name was Momotaro the Peach Boy. Since "Peach" was pronounced "Momo" in Japanese, it was decided: she would be Momo […] Momo took a certain pride in the romance of her genesis (Chi 2021: 2–3).

Momo's genesis is made of intertwined cultural allusions—one part of her DNA comes from the classical Chinese euphemism for male homoeroticism "peach splitting" or *fentao*[9] and the other comes from the Japanese folktale, *Momotaro.* The

8 While there are many iterations of Momotaro, a standardized version of it might be told as follows: a long time ago, a huge peach floated on the river. An old lady caught a glimpse of it while washing clothes by the river. After bringing the peach home, the old lady cut it in half. A baby, bursting into tears, sprang out of the gigantic peach. Amazed by this divine miracle, the childless couple name the male infant "Momotaro." Having grown into an adolescent, Momotaro decides to embark on a voyage to the isle of ogres. On his voyage, he recruits a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant, which later help him fight the ogres in return for his millet cakes. Under his leadership, Momotaro and his animal army break into the ogres' fort and take them down one by one until they all surrender to Momotaro. Returning home with the treasure plundered from the ogres and with the chief ogre captured alive, Momotaro and his animal army are welcomed by his parents and villagers.

9 The original story of "peach splitting" is found in *Writings of Master Han Feizi*, a collection of philosophical and political essays by Han Fei during the Warring States (BC 475–221). The story features the Emperor of Wei and his beautiful male courtier, Mizi Xia. The two were walking in an orchard, where Xia plucked a peach and took a bite from it. Tasting the juiciness and sweetness of the peach, Xia could not resist the urge to share the peach with the emperor, a gesture defying the etiquette at

euphemism is recast into an idyllic excursion of lesbian parents who give Momo a mythical birth.[10] Hinged upon the trope of peach, the narrative melds the Chinese euphemism with the Japanese tale of Peach Boy, thus subverting the two allusions at once. On the one hand, the Chinese allusion is made more erotic and markedly feminized and on the other hand, the "divine" or miraculous origin of Momotaro—legible as a suggestion of the divine origin of Japanese ethnicity—is deprived of its ethnic superiority as Momo is born as a "bastard" to the Japanese mother and the Chinese mother.

Chi's conspicuous allusion to the Japanese folktale seems to raise some concern for self-imposed re-colonization; that is, whether this allusion betrays the author's self-imposed re-colonized mental state during his writing. In a critical correspondence, Jane Park raises such suspicion, to which Chi responded:

> Jane, your "criticism" caught the huge difference between Taiwan and Korea regarding Japanese colonization. […] It has been common among many readers in Taiwan to overlook the political/imperial implications of Japanese cultural products and legacies. […] I did not choose to use the *Momotarosan* allusion when I wrote the novella. Rather, the allusion happened to me. I was subject to it, overlooking the political when I was busy with creative writing (2020: 68).

Chi's autobiographical confession—that the allusion impinges upon his mind—attests not only to Chi's—and by extension Taiwanese—habitual and less critical amenability to Japanese culture than Korean people, but also to Taiwan's multi-layered cultural hybridities. While Chi's confession might be adduced as an uncritical laxity towards the colonial legacies from Taiwan's Japanese occupation period, as Park observes, this article shows that a postcolonial reading of the allusion is more enabling. As local commentaries on *The Membranes* suggest, its variegated cultural allusions must be situated within Taiwan's rapid globalization and its Third World positionality. In Stuart Hall's seminal essay "When was 'The Postcolonial?' Thinking at the Limit" (1995), he addresses the fraught relationship of post-colonial states to their previous mother countries within an interconnected globalized network of politics and economy. Hall proposes a postcolonial approach that takes into account the conundrum of the Third World vis-à-vis the colonial legacies left by imperialism and perpetuated by globalization—an approach that first-world critics, when reviewing *The Membranes*, have not adopted. To Hall, a productive postcolonial approach "reads 'colonisation' as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural 'global' process, producing a decentred, diasporic, or 'global' rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives" (247). Accordingly, the article argues that the best way to read *The Membranes'* allusion to Momotaro is

the time. Xia in his later days was executed for this gesture. Peach splitting then became a euphemism for male homoeroticism over time and as *The Membranes* is translated into English, the erotic connotation peach carries in the Anglophone world further adds piquancy to it.

10 The genesis is also legible as a modern allegory of IVF. Momo's genesis thus updates the classical euphemism with a modern sensibility and, more significantly, envisages an alternative form of family departing from the heterosexual norm.

not as a self-imposed cultural recolonization, nor as an ingenious expression of postmodernist eclecticism, as reviews from English-speaking communities might suggest, but as a subversion of the jingoistic and masculinist Momotaro narrative.

A history of Momotaro's imperialistic implications should be articulated, as it is precisely these implications that Chi's postcolonial Momotaro seeks to subvert. As Japan in the first half of the twentieth century began its colonial expansion into East and Southeast Asia, a spate of narratives and representations of heroic figures for colonial purposes were generated. Among them, Momotaro stands out. Tierney explains the rationale for choosing a folktale figure for Japan's early twentieth-century imperialist expansion discourse. Since Japan's isolation policy, *Sakoku*, during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), Japanese people had been instilled with "an insular mentality" that prevented them from building strong naval forces and having a combative spirit towards their surroundings and beyond (2010: 110). Consequently, historical figures that might be exploited for colonial conquest were scarce. Intellectuals between the late nineteenth- and the early twentieth centuries thus turned to Japanese folktales in search of models for colonial conquerors. This revival of interest in folktales well suited Japan's imperial agenda, because it showed that "Japanese imperialism was not simply an imitation of Western empires but an inalienable part of its cultural heritage" (2010: 110).

The renaissance of folktale studies led Iwaya Sazanami (1870–1933), Japan's father of children's literature and whom Japanese endearingly call "Uncle Iwaya" and "Uncle Fairytale," to reiterate Momotaro's story, and in turn render it emblematic of Japan's expansionist fantasy. Iwaya published his iteration of Momotaro in 1894, exactly a year before Japan defeated Qing China in the first Sino-Japanese war and acquired its first colony, Taiwan. His publication was apparently a huge success, as he published 24 further volumes of the *Japan Folktale Series* in subsequent years. As David Henry suggests, as an education reformer once serving in Japan's Ministry of Education and a professional *koendowa* (oral folktale) artist, Iwaya was conscious of instilling a military and patriotic character into Japanese youths by means of his expansionist adaptation of Momotaro (2009). Distinct from its iterations of the Edo period, Iwaya's *Momotaro* explicitly utilizes honorific terms for the sovereign, frames the locale of the story as the modern state of Japan—instead of an ahistorical and unspecified village—and relocates the isle of ogres overseas, which indexes Japan's colonial venture abroad (2009: 219). Collectively, Iwaya's adaptations of *Momotaro* render apparent Japan's imperial ambition at the time, and children's literature was a powerful and expedient medium for Japan's imperialist self-fashioning.

The Momotaro narrative continued to serve colonial purposes well into the Second World War period. Studying Japanese propaganda manga and animation about the Pacific War, Kyu Hyu Kim explicates how the well-known wartime animation, *Momotaro umi no shinpei* (Momotaro's Divine Navy), exploits the plots of defeating ogres and recruitment of animal armed forces in the folktale. In this animation,

Momotaro assumes the role of a military commander on a gigantic vessel preaching to wild animals such as elephants, crocodiles and rhinoceros—with their perceived exoticism and tropicality to Japanese eyes symbolizing Southeast Asian peoples—and eventually defeating a hellish British army caricatured as ogres (2017: 105). One of the classic scenes shows that these animals, once clamoring and disorganized without any leadership, have been brought into unity and civility as they sing the first line of Japan's *gojuon* (50 sounds), "a-i-u-e-o", against the backdrop of tropical prosperity symbolized by paddy fields, rows of banana trees and sugar canes. By allegorizing the Co-prosperity Sphere agenda as a civilizing and messianic mission of wild animal domestication, the message of the scene could not be clearer—with the salvation of Japanese empire, epitomized by the figure of Momotaro, Southeast Asian peoples would be transformed from barbarians to civilized subjects. The figure of Momotaro thus recalls a long history of imperialist and expansionist legacy that can be traced back to at least the early twentieth century.

While the figure of Momotaro comes to represent the imperial militarism of Japanese empire, the isle of ogres, which the peach boy with his animal army vanquishes, comes to represent the empire's vassal states and intended colonies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nitobe Inazo (1862–1933), a prominent Japanese agronomist who was appointed to head the Sugar Bureau by the Japanese colonial government in Taiwan in 1901, fervently dedicated himself to mapping the mythical isle of ogres onto real-life geographical locations. In his 1907 treatise "Momotaro no mukashibanashi" (The Folktale Momotaro), Nitobe traced the supposedly real-life referents of the isle of ogres, including the newly acquired colony Taiwan, in terms of Japan's history of territorial expansion:

> Regarding the island of the ogres, it is a general term for the islands of the South Seas. In the time of Tametomo, the boundaries of Japan did not extend beyond the eight provinces, and Hachiojima was the island of the ogres. […] Thereafter, people called the Ryukyu the island of the ogres. Now, however, the Ryukyu has become part of Japanese territory and the Ryukyu people have begun to learn Japanese […] With each step we take southward, the isle of ogres is displaced even further south.[…] Until 1895, Taiwan was the island of the ogres. Now, more than a decade after we have occupied the island, many Japanese still regard it as the island of the ogres […] because of our differences in language and customs. The Momotaro of today will expand and conquer islands of ogres much further south. As for the treasures of the islands, they are naturally the products of the tropical zone […] The war booty that Momotaro brings back to Japan […] are the tropical products that he supplies to his home country.[11]

It is obvious in this passage that Inazo naturalizes Japan's colonial venture into the South Seas by crudely historicizing the isle of ogres throughout different periods. Further, by tactfully excluding Hokkaido from his picture of territorial expansion, Inazo is able to make the naturalized claim that Japan "always" ventures into regions south of it (Tierney, 2010: 118). Taiwan, Inazo points out, was the new isle of ogres.

11 The translation was modified from Robert Tierney's.

The supposed barbarity of its people and its southern location relative to Japan justifies Japan's acquisition of Taiwan and persuades his readers to venture further south. That Taiwan was the new isle of ogres appears to have been a common trope at the turn of the last century. David Henry also found that an 1895 manga in the boys' magazine *Shoen Sekai* (Boys World) depicts Momotaro holding onto a treasure trove of ogres dearly, symbolizing Taiwan's sugar-cane industry (2009: 222).

Amusingly, if Taiwan was once imagined to be the isle of ogres in the colonial cartography of Japanese imperialism, then the New Taiwan in *The Membranes* becomes a new isle of ogres. Chia-rong Wu's investigation has shown that the term "isle of ogres" or *guidao* reappeared on Taiwan's internet in 2009 and soon became a self-styled moniker for the island of Taiwan (2016: 23). This self-styled moniker underscores the wry and mordant sense of humor of its citizens, highlighting a self-reflective and ironic criticism of Taiwan's perceived shortcomings on the fronts of politics, welfare and unsurprisingly its global standing. However, *guidao* also delivers a sense of resilience among the self-styled habitants of this isle of ogres. If Taiwan is indeed a *guidao,* then apparently its "savageness" or otherness is key to its survival. Chi's appropriation of this trope then anticipates this popular discourse of *guidao* and should be cast in the same light. Momo is not only a bastard child of heterogeneous origins, but born in New Taiwan, she is indigenous to the isle of ogres, twice removed from the Momotaro narrative.

Rather than functioning as a mark of inferiority, the otherness of the isle of ogres becomes, in Chi's reworking, the very condition that enables an ethics of care and connection. *The Membranes* casts Momo as a skincare beautician who craves touch and yearns for intimacy. As a solitary beautician confined in her own studio, Momo has been indulging herself in massaging patrons' bodies in her sessions. Momo's technology allows her to enjoy vicariously every sensation that her patrons have experienced through their skins:

> Every stimulus experienced by Tomie Ito's body was recorded like a sound. […] With this playback function, Momo knew everything that happened to the bodies of Tomie Ito and her clients. With her M skin synced to the computer, she could experience:
>
> Last weekend. Midnight. Tomie with a young woman and young man. Hurtling past the protective atmospheric membrane and swimming naked in the sea above…the three of them swimming past the Mariana Trench to the coral reefs of the South China Sea and embracing amid a school of fish…then transforming into bubbles.
>
> Oh, what a lovely sensation—
>
> Momo sighed. Everything. She felt the ecstasy of the encounter in every pore of her body. (58–59)

What Momo experiences is not only an epistemological transfer but an ontological immersion into another human being through the interface of skin. What Momo

indulges in is the transfer of sensorial stimulation that blurs the boundary between self and other—an ultimate fantasy of ontological intimacy. If we know and feel in exactly the same way that other people know and feel, are we still ourselves? This ultimate dissolution of self-other divide departs radically from the folktale and its later imperialist and propagandistic appropriations. For one thing, Momo repairs rather than conquers. She takes pride in taking care of human bodies, not colonizing or killing them. As an inhabitant of the isle of ogres, Momo's task of repairing rewrites the memory of being annexed and occupied. Additionally, her technology of care brings sociality rather than alienation. If the imperialist iteration of Momotaro is operated upon the principle of hierarchical opposition—demarcating civilized/savage, north/south and Japanese/non-Japanese, among others—then Chi's Momo, with her strong fantasy of ontological immersion, is operated upon the principle of radical sameness. If Momo's fantasy threatens to eliminate any ontological difference, it nonetheless reflects a desire to sympathize with others. Even Momo's true profession is an irony in relation to the folktale and its imperialist mobilization. If the Momotaro narrative is used to glorify conquest and territorial expansion, then Chi's postcolonial Momotaro shows the inhumanity and boredom of the war, as Chi ironically reveals Momo to be nothing but a disembodied brain that endlessly repeats the dull task of mending military machines.

At the level of narrative structure, more fundamentally, Momo's genesis subverts the Momotaro narrative by rendering its origin culturally and ethnically hybrid. As suggested above, Momo's genesis partakes of two heterogeneous cultural resources. One strain of its DNA comes from the entrenched colonial legacy of Japanese occupation and the other comes from the ubiquitous influence of Han Chinese culture. As such, the text rewrites the Japanese folktale into a genesis of its colony. The episode where Mommy, Momo's Chinese mother, eventually falls out with Tomie, her Japanese mother, allegorizes the antagonistic tension between China and Japan at the turn of the century. Strikingly resembling Momo's lineage, modern Taiwan is an adventitious child to these two mothers—born at the historical juncture of 1895 at which Qing China agonized over giving it up and later raised by the hand of the Japanese colonial government that modernized it. Momo, evoking Wu Zhou-liu's iconic national allegory *Orphan of Asia*, is abandoned by Mommy (China) and occasionally patronized and nurtured by Tomie (Japan). It is bemusing to note that at end of the story when Mommy reclaims Momo, Momo's brain begins to broadcast a haphazard series of oneiric images initially programmed by Mommy but now appearing to mutate and take on lives of their own. The last line of the story ends with Mommy's evocation for her returning daughter, "Momo, we can go home now, Mother said, You haven't been home in so very very long" (136). However, Momo's oneiric images show that she stands amidst the foggy canals of Venice, reluctant to step forward. Despite a dearth of agency, this "brain in a vat" does have volition and autonomy. In this vein, the ending is allegorical of Taiwan's retrocession to the nationalist government in 1945—while the Republic of China considers it a moment of long-waited heartfelt reunion, Taiwanese people were unsure about the change of

hands and did not have much to say about their fate. The text's most palpable postcolonial subversion thus derives from Momo's hybrid origin, allegorical of modern Taiwan.

Make Love to Androids

Even the sci-fi trappings that seem to be a parable of the contemporary world, without explicitly entailing any regional or geopolitical characteristics, can arguably be read as an expression of Chi's precocious awareness that Taiwan was in the process of establishing itself as an island of technology in the 1980s.[12] The story's abundant speculations about technology anticipates both its pervasive presence and the degree of familiarity with which technologies have since become integrated into everyday life in Taiwan. One recent notable example might be Taiwan's mask distribution app during the Covid pandemic. Interconnected with a stock system that tracked the quantity of masks and a map system that located pharmacies providing masks, the app notified its user to purchase an allocated number of masks at her convenience. The app in turn contributed to Taiwan's remarkably low casualty rate during the Covid pandemic. Another example might be the Taiwanese government's continuous ambition to maintain its position as one of the top-tier suppliers for semiconductor chips. As of 2023, in the section of "Important Policies" on the official website of Taiwan's Executive Bureau, the government asserts that Taiwan's semiconductor manufacturing and testing capabilities ranks first globally and that the state will continue to invest heavily in this industry. The unparalleled importance of this industry is further reflected by the colloquial epithet that Taiwanese designate to their largest semiconductor enterprise, TSMC, as the "sacred mountain that protects the country" (*huguoshenshan*). Sardonically deifying TSMC as a protective national bulwark against economic vulnerability, Taiwanese people's reliance on as well as pride in its advanced technology is evident.

Momo's relation to technology dramatizes such reliance to the effect that it blurs the ontological boundary between human beings and the technologies surrounding them. The story's dramatization is achieved by dint of two intertwined motifs, sacrifice and eating. It blends the two motifs together to produce a cannibalistic effect, which brings ethical awareness to the seemingly uncritical openness to everything technological in the story. However, the tone is not entirely somber, at least not throughout. The story in fact entertains a possibility of a human-technology continuum by eroticizing it. Momo's sexual initiation, intriguingly, is with her organ donor, Andy the android. The narrative depicts Momo's sexual exploration in a playful, light-hearted manner:

> While they were quarantined in the ward together, Momo could hug and kiss Andy without fear of catching anything, because Andy had been completely decontam-

12 Taiwan established its first science and technology park in Hsinchu in 1980.

> inated using a high-heat disinfection process. For the first time Momo felt an emotion stronger than "need." Before, she felt "need" for Mother, but now that Andy was in her life, Momo longed only for her.
>
> So much so that Momo even wished she could get inside Andy's body, and have Andy get inside of hers… She didn't quite understand what "sex" was yet, but she fantasized about "eating": she wanted to eat Andy up until she was in her belly, and she wanted Andy to eat her up too. Little Momo thought that if they ate each other up, even just a bit of flesh, then she and Andy would really become one person, and Andy would never leave her like Mommy (45).

Chi ingeniously casts together the motifs of eating and sacrifice in this act of sexual initiation. Little does Momo realize that what she is fantasizing about for now—a total integration of the other in erotic-cum-gastronomic pleasure—would soon turn grotesque. Here, through the intertwining of the two motifs, eating and sacrifice become a synecdoche for the act of sex, and the narrator apparently takes delight in this seemingly innocent but erotically charged scene of bodily exploration or, as little Momo prefers to term it, "to eat her up." In this way, the author's coupled motifs not only recall the Freudian model for the development of sexuality, capturing a primordial stage where oral pleasure is indistinguishable from erotic pleasure, but more significantly, it foreshadows the cannibalistic effect that the "organ harvesting" of Andy would bring.

As readers and Momo soon horrifyingly realize, "to eat someone up" can in effect assume a literal meaning. As Andy is specifically built to be Momo's organ donor, her whole body is, figuratively speaking, to be consumed by Momo. Without Momo's consent, Andy is then entirely transplanted into her.[13] Chillingly, Momo realizes the transplant surgery has turned her childhood fantasy into a grotesque satire:

> Momo loved being with Andy, but not like this. She loved the togetherness of reading with Andy, but even if she was now reading literally through Andy's eyes, it could never compare to that feeling of togetherness. […] Now, even though she and Andy had been fully merged—like coffee with coffee creamer, where she was coffee and Andy was the powder—she couldn't talk with her anymore. […] After her surgery, a voice sometimes emerged from deep inside her. Was this an after-effect of the surgery, or was Andy murmuring in there? […] Had Andy died inside her? Was Momo's body an android grave, the spectral voice of Andy's spirit echoing in her mind?" (84).

What readers might find fun and pleasurable in the previous passage has now become deeply disturbing. While the motifs of eating and sacrifice in the previous passage are squarely and safely registered in the domain of sex, where to have sex is to give our body up to others and to let other people enjoy it, in this passage the motifs are taken as matter-of-fact and are transposed into the domain of organ

13 This is a simulacrum programmed by Mommy. The transplant surgery is botched in reality and Momo's whole body is infected except her brain.

harvesting. Through the protagonist's inner monologue, the author strikingly asks a series of provocative questions to our seemingly unwitting integration with technology and he questions to what extent such integration might become exploitation if one day, as the story envisions, technologies around us take on a sentient dimension. Further, as Momo's sexual initiation with androids suggests, in this technology-infested world where our contact and touch with technology is increasingly more frequent than that with humans, is it not possible that human beings might develop erotic sentiment regarding technologies some day? In this way, Chi radically challenges our anthropocentric notion of intimacy. Moreover, while in the Japanese folktale, Momotaro is driven to cast out the other in the form of ogres, in Chi's version, the other in the form of androids becomes uncannily close to us to the extent that the self is inseparable from it. By registering the other in the everyday realm, the author offers an ambivalent response to the all-encompassing integration of technology. Technology, as the mundane but radical other, appears tantalizingly attractive, promising a more enabling future for humanity, but as the author's questions suggest, such integration might slide into disintegration.

Conclusion

The Membranes was originally published in 1996 and was translated into English in 2021. The 25-year gap between the two versions attests to the operation of the technologies of recognition. Comparing local commentaries with those from the first world, this article notes that while readers from the first world and from Taiwan were equally amazed by *The Membranes*' speculation about technologies and its subversion of heterosexual norms, Taiwanese critics were keenly aware of the author's refraction of the local reality and pointed out that the story's eclectic allusions as well as its postmodernist style must be situated within the context of Taiwan's rapid globalization in the 1980s. Local critics' interpretations of *The Membranes* reflect their positionality as researchers from the Third World, contemplating the asymmetrical relation of knowledge and cultural production between Taiwan and the first world in the 1990s.

The Membranes' dense sci-fi elements, its futuristic setting, and speculation about technologies have made it relevant to the contemporary world, which contributed to its great popularity when it was translated into English. Yet this great popularity does not take into account the work's positionality as a text emerging in the Third World. This article is an attempt to render this positionality visible. It reads *The Membranes* as a parable of modern Taiwan that captures its condition of being caught between the haunting shadow of colonial history and the pressure from dominant geopolitical forces, while still striving to repair the colonial trauma—even as the novella simultaneously interrogates Taiwan's obsession with technology and its pursuit of global standing.

Adopting a postcolonial approach, this article moves beyond the dominant reading mode in the English-speaking community that interprets the story as science fiction.

It reads *The Membranes* alternatively by arguing that it is legible as a queer and postcolonial subversion of the Momotaro narrative, centering on its casting of the gender-crossing protagonist Momo, who descends from Chinese-Japanese lesbian parents. While Momo's origin might seemingly raise suspicion of authorial self-colonization, her professionalism and queerness show a writing back to the empire. Rather than chauvinist and belligerent, Momo mends and cares, and ironically perceives herself to be a beautician—its everyday aestheticism and consumerism an anti-sublime inverse to the grand ideal of ethnonationalist supremacism configured by the wartime Momotaro. Moreover, as Momo's love for the non-human far exceeds her love for humanity, the figure of Momotaro is further dehumanized. Momo's alterity questions the boundary between organism and inorganic entities, as not only her desire for androids shows but also her brain-in-a-vat conceit suggests. For a Momotaro born in the futuristic Taiwan, she is not only queer and technophilic but also radically decentered.

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FREIE BEITRÄGE

Refereed Article

Active Voices and Analogue Natives: German and Japanese Media Representations of Digital Technologies and Older Adults during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Isabelle Prochaska-Meyer, Isabel Schwaninger and Marianne Jung

Abstract
This article presents a comparative analysis of media coverage of digital technologies and older adults from March 2020 until February 2022 in the German newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) and the Japanese newspaper Asahi Shimbun (AS). We identified two views of the impact of the increasing use of technologies on older adults: digital services as an opportunity (e.g. virtual medical consultations), and as a risk (e.g. services may exclude people unfamiliar with devices or applications). Three common narratives were identified: a) the pandemic exposed a lack of digital inclusion of older adults, b) the lack of care personnel poses challenges, and c) older adults feel disadvantaged especially in financial transactions. While AS featured diverse voices of older adults and presented "senior digital role models", FAZ reported on seniors' strengths as "analogue natives". In conclusion to the findings, we offer recommendations for building a more inclusive digital society.

Keywords: comparative newspaper analysis, COVID-19, digital technologies, Germany, Japan, media discourse, older adults, senior role models

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Introduction

Since the World Health Organization's (WHO) declaration of SARS-CoV-2's spread as a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and the authorities' accompanying call for social distancing, there has been a particularly pronounced digital push at all levels of society—including in the healthcare sector (Golinelli et al. 2020; Gallistl et al. 2021; European Parliament 2022), as regards public transportation (Fumagalli et al. 2021) and in the workplace (Wang et al. 2021). In East Asian countries, the digital detection and monitoring of Covid-19 cases was commonplace, situating them at the forefront of efforts to employ digital technologies as a means of mitigating the effects of this global health crisis (Nageshwaran et al. 2021).

During the pandemic, Japan initiated significant digital reforms to modernise its public administration and enhance service delivery. Prior to the events of early 2020, the Japanese government system had been slow to adopt digital strategies across the board; systematic reformation of its institutions ensued, however, once the pandemic took hold (Brummer and Ueno 2024). This digital push at all levels of society entailed challenges of inclusion (Wanka et al. 2023), with the lockdowns and other restrictions imposed from March 2020 onwards being unfavourably looked on by older adults[1] due to accompanying social isolation (Rodrigues et al. 2022). Despite online interventions aimed at easing this painful experience, such efforts were received positively only when people had access to technology or were provided with it (Rodrigues et al. 2022; Schwaninger et al. 2023).

In this context, media representations of older adults have played a crucial role in shaping public perceptions thereof, influencing societal attitudes and legitimising political responses related to ageing and digital transformation. Particularly during the pandemic, such portrayals either reinforced age-related stereotypes or presented older adults as capable and adaptable participants in digital environments. In line with this, Joyce and Loe (2010) conceptualise older adults as 'technogenarians' who creatively use and adapt technological artefacts to meet their needs, rather than passive consumers.

Given the accelerating digitalisation of social life, it is crucial to examine how older adults are represented in public discourse. These portrayals not only shape societal attitudes but also influence the inclusivity of policy responses in ageing societies. This article thus analyses how digital technologies and older adults were discussed in two national newspapers during the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic: Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*) and Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* (*AS*).

Research Question 1. *How are digital technologies discussed in relation to older adults?*

1 In both Germany and Japan, 'older adults' refers to people aged 65 and above. In the present article the terms older adults, older people, seniors, and elderly are used interchangeably.

Research Question 2. *What are common trends and differences in the media coverage of older adults and digital technologies in the cases of FAZ and AS?*

We argue that national media outlets hold considerable influence in constructing social realities, shaping public discourse and informing political decision-making (Van Aelst et al. 2012; Pei et al. 2022; Rasi 2022). We furthermore understand media discourse as a narrative framework which heavily sways the interpretation of contemporary events and processes (Wahl-Jorgensen and Schmidt 2019: 262). Through qualitative analysis, our study hence investigates how respective newspaper articles from Germany and Japan discuss digital technologies and older adults, identifying both shared trends and distinct differences herein. This provides important insights for developing inclusive and barrier-free digital societies. Such societies require not only accessible technological infrastructures but also intergenerational commitment and collaboration (Waldenberger et al. 2022: 14).

Germany and Japan are often selected for comparative analysis, with both being industrialised democratic countries seeing similar demographic trends regarding ageing and social policy (e.g. Lützeler and Conrad 2002; Coulmas and Lützeler 2011; Waldenberger et al. 2022). While Japanese society has a bigger share of an ageing population, related challenges are also expected to manifest in other countries like Germany in the near future. Regarding digital competitiveness, Germany was ranked 19th place in 2022, while Japan ranked 29th in the same year (IMD 2022). The importance of comparative analysis and intercultural research is also stressed in the mission statement of the German Institute for Japanese Studies (Deutsches Institut für Japanstudien), which focuses on culture, society, economy and politics in the modern era. We see the Covid-19 pandemic as a fitting opportunity to analyse how a specific topic, digital technology and older adults, was represented in the German and Japanese media, as exemplified by two national newspapers.

We begin by reviewing related literature on media representations of ageing and digital technologies. We then present our methodological framework and introduce the selected case studies (*FAZ* and *AS*). Finally, we offer a comparative analysis of opportunities and risks here, as portrayed in the two newspapers examined, before in closing providing recommendations on how to foster greater digital inclusion for older adults.

Related work

In response to the restrictions imposed in the wake of Covid-19's onset, authorities in both Europe (WHO 2020) and Japan (MHLW 2020) sought to support and protect older people living alone, as social-distancing policies often led to a loss of face-to-face family and intergenerational contact (Marston et al. 2020). The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) helped to maintain communication between family members in this context. During the pandemic, then, there were a number of interventions to promote social connectedness and reduce isolation among older adults in care contexts, some of which were well-received

(Carros et al. 2022; Schwaninger et al. 2023). However, challenges remained in terms of older adults' access to technology, due to lower digital literacy or a lack of related pre-existing habits and daily routines (Gallistl et al. 2021; Schwaninger et al. 2023).

As an indicator of how the digital- and social inclusion of older adults has been realised since, mass media is a domain in which practices of representation, underrepresentation, misrepresentation or marginalisation can be observed (Chen et al. 2022). Media discourses about ageing and older adults are known to influence both individual perceptions and the public view thereof at large. Positive stereotypes can be associated with active ageing (WHO 2002) and healthy ageing (WHO 2024), or even (though presently outdated) successful ageing (Rowe and Kahn 1997)—as reflecting more general trends in a society existing within a particular spatio-temporal framework. Negative depictions pertain to ageing being portrayed as decline, which tends to be implicit in biomedical models which focus on physical or cognitive issues in this regard (Wangler and Jansky 2023). The WHO's definition of health as 'the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (1946: 1) emphasises the necessity of taking a holistic view of the individual within their given social context.

Cautioning against the invocation of unhelpful generalisations, in recent years several studies have pointed to the phenomenon of 'digital ageism': that is, the preconception that older adults are less competent in this domain (Manor and Herscovici 2021; Rosales et al. 2023). This stereotypical portrayal can be also found in advertising strategies for products seeing older adults to be more associated with mechanical items (such as cars or watches) rather than with new technologies, a phenomenon Ivan and Loos call 'visual ageism' (2023: 88).

Representations and perceptions of age are also linked to cultural factors. For example, Chinese media discourse during the pandemic tended to portray older adults as passive recipients of care, reflecting a biomedical model of ageing (Zhang and Liu 2021). Another study discussed the label 'angry silver' applied to South Korean older adults involved in digital political activism, who are often portrayed as being digitally incompetent and aggressive (Oh 2023). In the United States, the pandemic exacerbated ageism, with older adults increasingly coming to be deemed a burden on society (Lytle and Levy 2024). In an AARP study of 1,116 media images of older adults, it was found that the latter were not only underrepresented but when so cast in a more negative light—namely as dependent and disconnected, while rarely being shown together with technology (Thayer and Skufca 2019).

Given differences in the representation of older adults across world regions, an interesting cultural comparison can be made between Japan and Germany in this regard. This may help to explain the different media representations of age and ageing found in their respective discourses, particularly in relation to technological affairs: Japan is the oldest society in the world, with 29 per cent of the population being age 65 or over in 2022 (Cabinet Office/Government of Japan 2023), compared

to an equivalent figure of 22 per cent for Germany (DeStatis, Statistisches Bundesamt 2024). Smartphone usage among older adults in Japan, meanwhile, has also increased rapidly in recent years, especially during the pandemic, going from 55.6 per cent prevalence in 2019 to 70 per cent two years later among survey respondents aged 60–69 (MIC 2021).

On a regulatory basis, there were differences in how Japan and Germany handled Covid-19's spread (Bajaj et al. 2021). Japan issued two emergency declarations (nationwide in April 2020 and partially in February 2021) and implemented so-called 'mild' or 'voluntary' lockdowns (Watanabe and Yabu 2021), advocating self-restraint (*jishuku*) on the part of citizens (Suzuki and Sakuwa 2024). Germany, contrariwise, focused on strict lockdowns, with containment measures implemented such as shutdowns, mobility restrictions and social-distancing rules (Franzke and Kuhlmann 2024).

Regarding the Japanese response, Kümmerle and Waldenberger refer to the government's approach as 'consensus-driven', meaning based on soft regulation to honour the interests of both the individual and the general public as far as possible. To reduce the spread of the virus, personal health data was aggregated and anonymised in seeking to track infection pathways within clusters—that is, rather than relying on mass PCR tests. The Japanese strategy relied on citizens consciously choosing to avoid crowded or closed places, instead of implementing strict lockdowns in a top-down manner (Kümmerle and Waldenberger 2024: 605). To mitigate against the social isolation which intensified during the pandemic, the government furthermore encouraged local welfare volunteers (*minsei-iin*) and neighbourhood associations to maintain non-physical contact with those living alone (Waldenberger et al. 2022). As Japan did not employ a proactive testing policy, the number of cumulative confirmed Covid-19 cases per million people was much lower there (3,474) than in Germany (29,942) as of 7 March 2021. Japan also recorded a much lower number of cumulative confirmed Covid-19-related deaths per million people (65.27) compared to Germany (859.16) (Suzuki and Sakuwa 2024: 211–212).

Methodology

This article explores how, during the first two years of the pandemic, digital technologies were discussed in the German and Japanese media respectively. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is applied here, a research method which is empirically grounded and exploratory in nature (Krippendorff 2019; Kuckartz 2019). Qualitative approaches are 'interpretive', meaning that they require a close reading of text and the formulation of new narratives; Krippendorff referred to this as being 'interactive-hermeneutic' (2019: 22–23) in style. We chose QCA of a German national newspaper versus a Japanese counterpart primarily because of the differences in terms of demographics, technology adoption and responses to Covid-19 seen in the two countries. As the Japanese population has a larger share of people aged 65 and above, we expected a stronger representation of topics related to ageing

and older adults in the *AS* sample. The data have been coded and analysed using the software MAXQDA.

FAZ and *AS* are similar in that they are newspapers of record which reach a highly educated audience in their respective countries. *FAZ* is the second-largest broadsheet newspaper (after *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*) in Germany and reaches a daily audience of 880,000 readers. The overall largest newspaper in Germany, *Bild* (7.8 million readers per day), is a tabloid featuring only very short articles and was therefore not considered for analysis. Among *FAZ*'s readership, approximately 26.9 per cent are 60 or over. Similar to AS, its readers tend to be highly educated, with 53.9 per cent holding a degree from a university or graduate school (FAZ.net, 2024). According to the newspapers' websites, AS employs roughly 2,000 people (Asahi.com 2023: 18); the equivalent number for *FAZ* is stated to be about 450 employees (FAZ.net 2024). As one of the oldest newspapers in Japan, *AS* circulates more than 4 million newspapers per day (morning and evening editions) (Asahi Shimbun 2024: 14). It is the second-largest newspaper (after *Yomiuri Shimbun*) both in Japan and indeed worldwide by print circulation. According to surveys conducted in 2023, segmented by age the largest group of *AS* readers are 60–69 (19.1 per cent thereof), then followed by 50–59-year-olds (17.6 per cent). Its readership tends to be educated, with 55.3 per cent holding a degree from a university (Asahi Shimbun 2024: 14).

According to the Digital News Report (2020a; 2020b; 2022a; 2022b), the share of Germans who trusted the news increased in the first three years of the pandemic from 45 per cent (2020) to 50 per cent (2022); in Japan, those figures were 37 per cent (2020) and 44 per cent (2022) respectively. The share of people who 'trust in news I use' was found to be larger among German respondents (59 per cent in 2020 vs. 57 per cent in 2022), but interestingly slightly smaller among their Japanese counterparts (36 per cent in 2020 vs. 43 per cent in 2022). Regarding brand trust, *FAZ* had an approval rating of 56 per cent in 2022 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* = 60 per cent, *Bild* = 20 per cent); for AS, that figure was 42 per cent in the same year (*Yomiuri Shimbun* = 47 per cent, *Mainichi Shimbun* = 44 per cent).

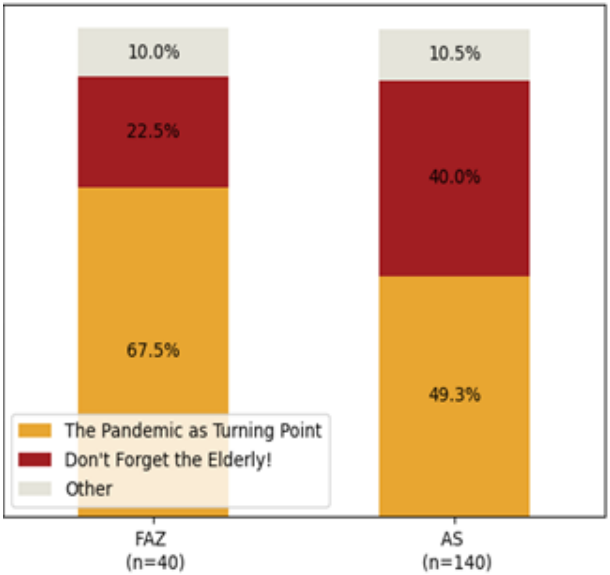
FAZ and *AS* media texts were analysed separately by native speakers of German and Japanese. The search queries for *FAZ* were based on the keywords 'senior*' and 'digital*'; 'smartphone' or 'robot*'; 'Internet' or 'AI'. For *AS*, search queries were conducted using the keywords 'older adult(s)' (*kōreisha*); 'ICT' or 'technology' (*tekunorojī*); 'AI' or 'robot' (*robotto*); 'smartphone' (*sumaho*) or 'app' (*apuri*). Covered here was the period from 1 March 2020 through 28 February 2022, representing roughly the first two years of the pandemic. Sampling was investigative, leading us to new media texts as we progressed in our analysis. We used a data-driven (inductive) approach with open coding until saturation occurred. Therefore, the resulting units comprise a population of texts which contain information relevant to answering our research questions per an in-depth QCA approach (Miles and Huberman 1995: 29). The sample size for *FAZ* and *AS* varied as we reached different points of data saturation. We continued sampling until no

more new texts relevant to the research questions were found. We also included *letters to the editor* in our corpus, given our interest in focusing on the discussion of digital technologies in the context of older adults.

Findings

We now present our findings related to Research Question 1. The selected media texts were grouped into two overarching categories we call 'mottos'. The first motto "The Pandemic as Turning Point" frames digital technologies as opportunities and speaks to their future potential in the context of ageing societies (section 4.1.). The second motto "Don't Forget the Elderly!", meanwhile, highlights concerns that older adults have been—or are at risk of being—left behind during the digital transformation. Figure 1 below shows the proportional distribution of these two distinct mottos.

Figure 1. Dominant mottos in *FAZ* and *AS*



Our aforementioned assumption about the likely stronger representation of topics related to ageing and older adults in the Japanese sample proved true: For *AS*, a total of 140 media texts were included in the corpus. The *FAZ* sample is less than one-third of the size, with 40 texts. We note that the *AS* texts were usually shorter than their *FAZ* counterparts, with letters to the editor comprising on average 405 Japanese characters; longer articles were made up of on average 2,100 characters meanwhile. In *FAZ*, a typical item came in at 6,000 to 7,000 characters overall. However, this

difference in length is also explained by the fact that in Japanese script a single Chinese character (*kanji*), or a combination of two different ones, can also express a whole word.

Looking closer at the column categories of the German and Japanese media texts, the *FAZ* corpus showed a strong concentration in the sections Economy (30 per cent), Companies (15 per cent) and Politics (12.5 per cent). In *AS*, the sections with the largest shares of relevant articles were Opinion (24.8 per cent), followed by Society (15.6 per cent) and Economy (12.7 per cent) respectively.

The choice of terminology also indicates how digital engagement among older adults is conceptualised. *FAZ* addressed the 'digital divide' often mentioned in the literature (Ragnedda and Muschert 2023), using terms like 'digital gap' (*digitale Spaltung*) (13/8/2020) and 'digital discrimination' (*digitale Diskriminierung*) (23/2/2022). Digital literacy was described as 'digital sovereignty' (*digitale Souveränität*) (13/8/2020), 'technology sovereignty' (*Technologie-Souveränität*) (21/4/2020) or 'to autonomously use the net' (*internetsouverän*) (26/6/2020). In *AS*, an often-mentioned term was 'digital divide' (*dejitaru kakusa*) (3/12/2020; 11/6/2021; 7/9/2020; 10/7/2021), with alternatives being 'information divide' (*jōhō kakusa*) (12/5/2021), 'digital information divide' (*dejitaru jōhō kakusa*) (31/8/2021) or 'wall/barrier of digitalisation' (*dejitaruka no kab*e) (10/7/2021).

The discursive framing and thematic positioning of older adults within German and Japanese national media is illustrated hereby. Notably, *FAZ* featured no articles in the Society or Opinion sections, suggesting a more technocratic or institutional understanding of ageing and digitalisation. In contrast, *AS* presented a more reflective and socially embedded discourse on these themes. The choice of terminology also indicates how digital engagement among older adults is conceptualised. While *FAZ* articles also hinted at aspects of digital competence with keywords like 'digital sovereignty' or 'to autonomously use the net', examples in the *AS* corpus rather stressed the digital divide and wall of digitalisation. These terms and their respective contexts portray how digital inequality is understood and communicated to the general public, shaping societal perceptions of older adults either as digitally excluded individuals or potentially autonomous actors.

Motto 1: The Pandemic as a Turning Point

Texts in this category described the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on technology usage. Included here were increased media consumption, the emergence of new solutions such as online medical consultations and the adoption of innovative habits such as ordering food online. The articles in question also discussed ICT usage and its future potential against the backdrop of an ageing society.

For the *FAZ* corpus, 67.5 per cent of texts fell into this category, with their column inches outlining the potential for older adults to benefit from digital technologies' adoption (see Figure 1 above). Here, different areas of application were named, marking the heterogeneous needs of older adults – yet also framing that demographic

as a more general concept in the context of an ageing population (i.e. older adults were rather viewed as a homogenous group and not further distinguished). Articles described how the pandemic had affected daily routines and how the use of ICT helped support social interaction, or compensate for the loss of it in person. Meetings, whether personal or work-related, were noted to have shifted to online platforms such as Facetime, Skype and WhatsApp, with them seeing increased usage across all age groups.

According to a report by *FAZ* on 22 June 2020, some senior users had experienced video calls for the first time. The pandemic led to a surge in the popularity of streaming platforms, as well as catering and food-delivery services. However, other industries suffered a loss of customers and economic downturn (27/6/2020). The German daily highlighted the significant growth of digital channels and the increasing availability of online services, including medical consultations (19/5/2021; 3/5/2021). Additionally, the potential for ICT usage in an ageing society was emphasised, particularly during the pandemic. For older adults in need of healthcare and living in rural and especially remote areas, applications such as teletherapy and telemedicine proved valuable (17/1/2022; 24/9/2021). Digital solutions in healthcare, such as the 'corona alerts' for health data and therapeutic video games, were also mentioned (1/12/2020; 9/7/2020). Integrating robots and automated machines was proposed as a solution to combat labour shortages in care contexts (24/1/2022). However, it was also emphasised that there remained significant need for investment in digitising offices and ministries too (25/1/2022), alongside accelerating healthcare digitalisation (24/9/2021). Despite the promising aspects hereto in an ageing society, as well as for other domains such as the economy, ethical considerations were also voiced (15/3/2020; 15/6/2020).

Similarly, *AS* reported on the 'digital push' during the pandemic, with 49.3 per cent of the examined texts falling into the category 'Pandemic as a Turning Point' (see Figure 1 above). Examples listed were the on-site inspection of facilities which introduced ICT services to facilitate video chats between family members via smartphone or tablet (8/4/2020; 1/6/2020), or which installed big screens for care-facility residents (14/5/2020). Various digital initiatives aiming to address the physical frailty and social isolation of older adults were reported on. These included remote lunch tables, stretching exercises demonstrated via video chat (23/5/2020) and making available videos showing how to prevent frailty (11/5/2020; 1/4/2021).

Additionally, some applications had evidently become more popular in *AS*, including health-check apps (4/2/2021) and meal-delivery platforms (3/2/2021)—also being used by older adults. The chat apps mentioned in the articles were Zoom and LINE (a messenger app widely used in Japan). The *AS* discourse emphasised how technology is crucial to the healthcare sector, particularly for helping meet older people's needs, as it facilitates independent living and holds great promise for improving daily life for this demographic. The texts in *AS* stressed the potential of ICT in an ageing society, highlighting technologies such as AI for carrying out

administrative tasks and real-time health monitoring, as well as touchless care services during the pandemic (5/7/2020). Some articles also introduced innovations for people with dementia, such as a shopping app and AI able to analyse a person's walking patterns (15/2/2022; 1/3/2020; 2/11/2020). ICT was found to be associated with reduced administrative costs. Robots were identified as having the potential to perform healthcare tasks such as distributing food, moving patients, washing them and delivering medicine to these individuals as well (19/3/2022; 12/3/2021; 2/3/2019; 12/3/2021). In response to the Covid-19 crisis, for instance, a disinfection robot was introduced (10/1/2021). However, the debate over the balance between protection and surveillance was also discussed in *AS*: the introduction of such entities as a 'protection robot' raised privacy concerns (3/1/2021).

In both of the examined newspapers, the potential of digital technologies to improve the lives of older adults was noted and anticipated, particularly in the areas of care and healthcare, thereby fuelling the discourse on older adults as individuals in need (Neiertz et al. 2023). Furthermore, older adults were presented as one homogeneous group in the context of an ageing population—that is, they were not explicitly distinguished by socio-economic status or age group in either country. Implicitly, the different applications of digital technologies listed also showcased the range of needs existing among older adults as a diverse population, with examples including matters of social interaction (also intergenerational communication), safety, healthcare, telehealth for remote areas as well as care support (also for those employed in this field).

Motto 2: Don't Forget the Elderly!

This motto encompasses articles speaking to the manifold challenges faced by older adults in accessing certain services due to limited digital competence, as well as the other disadvantages besides which these individuals face in a digital society. In *FAZ*, 22.5 per cent of texts fell under this motto. In *AS*, the share thereof was even bigger at 40 per cent.

An article in *FAZ* titled "Old, but no idiot" ("Alt, aber kein Idiot"; 3/2/2022) reported on an 80-year-old Spanish senior's petition against discrimination in banking, advocating for analogue solutions. Together with another article 'Right to an analogue life' ('Recht auf analoges Leben'; 12/2/2022), this sparked discussions in subsequent 'letters to the editor' regarding digital discrimination and the importance of accessible technology for social participation (23/2/2022). Digital products were criticised for not being well-designed and causing social exclusion for those who do not use a smartphone. *FAZ* also offered advice on how to include seniors in the job market by emphasising their strengths and potential to future employers (18/9/2023; 11/12/2021), urging them to overcome stereotypes suggesting that older adults are 'old-fashioned', 'slow to change' or 'unproductive members of a company'. *FAZ* also reported on initiatives aimed at assisting seniors with digital services and addressing their needs during the pandemic.

During the study period, the German Federal Ministry of Finance was cited as having introduced the so-called 'tax pilot' ('Steuerlotse') initiative in *FAZ* to support seniors with digital tax submissions (12/6/2021). Another initiative called "Solidarity despite Corona" ("Solidarisch trotz Corona") was noted to help isolated seniors with the carrying out of tasks like grocery shopping and medication collection (29/3/2020). According to *FAZ* (30/10/2020), seniors face significant challenges as regards online banking, indicating the need for better services. As another report outlined (26/6/2020), only a small number of these individuals were found to be confident in their use of Internet services, highlighting seniors' related struggles—in our context, specifically with the Covid-19 warning app. This was deemed especially the case among those who are not highly educated. The former social minister of Saarland emphasised the importance of in-person access to public services being offered: 'Citizens have the right to be able to do this in person' (12/2/2022). Related articles highlighted the various areas of daily life wherein older adults are at a disadvantage due to their lack of digital literacy or non-possession of a smartphone.

In the *AS* discourse, similarly, limitations to participation facing older adults were discussed in the context of commercial promotions when accessed online (27/1/2021), using the Covid-19 tracing app (18/6/2020) as well as the vaccination app (23/12/2021), and difficulties with carrying out financial tasks—for example, due to the prevalence of cashless services (25/3/2020; 2/6/2020) and online banking (8/10/2020). Furthermore, *AS* featured more elderly voices in its columns. One-third of the texts were letters to the editor, including one with multiple comments from readers on the topics of digital society, ageing at large and depopulation. It was emphasised that older adults must not be left behind—especially in peripheral regions, including remote islands (5/10/2020; 8/11/2020).

The government's responsibility to reach each and every person was also highlighted (15/1/2021). An 80-year-old reader expressed difficulty in understanding IT-related vocabulary and reported issues with her computer and inability to contact an operator, calling for better solutions (28/9/2020). *Smartphone classes* (*sumafo kyōshitsu*) were mentioned more than once as a means to counteract the disadvantages and vulnerabilities faced by older adults. Participants learned here how to use such devices, starting from switching them on to connecting to the Internet and later using map apps and social media platforms. One of the missions behind these classes was to raise awareness of potential safety issues online and introduce measures against Internet fraud. The latter was a common topic, with five articles reporting on cases where older adults were deemed easy targets – such as fraud in the realms of online support and cryptocurrency (10/2/2021; 5/4/2021; 20/4/2021; 13/7/2021; 18/11/2021). In conclusion, media texts within this category advocate for a more inclusive society, emphasising the importance of leaving no one behind, how older adults are more vulnerable to social isolation and the imperative of non-digital options being available.

Three related trends common to both *FAZ* and *AS*

We now present our findings as regards Research Question 2. The corresponding texts allowed us to identify three main points of commonality (section 4.3.) and two key differences (section 4.4.) between *FAZ* and *AS* in this context. An overview here of is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Overview of commonalities and differences in FAZ and AS

Trends	*FAZ*	*AS*
Lack of digital inclusion regarding older adults	✔	✔
Lack of care personnel creates new challenges	✔	✔
Older adults feel disadvantaged in everyday life, especially in financial matters	✔	✔
Older adults as active voices	✘	✔
The strengths of 'analogue natives'	✔	✘

Common trend 1: Lack of digital inclusion regarding older adults

In both Germany and Japan, the pandemic highlighted the challenges posed by the digital divide in times of crisis by revealing the extensive social exclusion experienced by those who are not digitally literate. Before the events beginning early 2020, digitally inactive people (including older adults) did not have a specific reason to use such technologies if they did not wish to do so. During this global health crisis, however, the use of digital services—such as those providing pertinent information via apps—was perceived as a demonstration of solidarity in the fight against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The *FAZ* article "Age is no barrier to the smartphone" ("Alter schützt vor Smartphone nicht", 11/1/2022) reviewed senior-friendly features as regards both Apple and Android operating systems on these devices. Senior readers were advised to use their phones to communicate with relatives. Similarly, *AS* pointed out that smartphone use eased constraints on intergenerational communication during the pandemic. In response to the question: "Do you think you have practised filial piety?", a senior *AS* reader commented: "I cannot see the face or the condition of my parents via their [stationary] phone, so I do not know exactly how they are. I should have taught them how to use LINE while they were still able to use a smartphone" (27/2/2021).

Common trend 2: Shortage of care personnel creates new challenges

Media texts in both *FAZ* and *AS* emphasised the crisis now faced in the healthcare sector, namely a shortage of care personnel. During the pandemic, such workers were deemed indispensable. Technological innovations like self-check health apps,

virtual medical consultations, the utilisation of AI for health data, care robots and other innovations were viewed as likely to help relieve the burden on medical and care staff in due course.

In an article entitled "What medical doctors want" ("Was sich Mediziner wünschen", 21/9/2021), the Chief Executive Officer of The Charité noted: "If we are unable to digitalise our health system within the next five years, others will do this for us", hinting at the fact that the pandemic had revealed weaknesses in Germany's healthcare infrastructure amid the prospect of growing competition from the US (e.g. Amazon Care) and China in this domain. Articles in *AS*, meanwhile, frequently referred to the current shortage of care personnel and the prospects of new technologies addressing this situation—for example, via an excretion-detection sensor (4/12/2021) or robots more generally (18/2/2021; 9/7/2021; 22/10/2021). In one interview, a social worker highlighted an intriguing topic here: "If technology could facilitate excretion care without touching the person, it would be interesting to see how it would affect our care work and the issue of smell" (2/3/2021).

Common trend 3: Older adults feel disadvantaged in everyday life, especially in financial matters

One of the digitalisation processes most readily noticeable in everyday life is that concerning financial transactions. With the pandemic and social distancing, paying by card instead of cash limited personal contact. Banking was also increasingly carried out online, often via apps.

In Germany, the number of savings-bank branches decreased by almost 12 per cent in the study period: from 8,318 in 2020 to 7,326 by 2022 (Deutsche Bundesbanken 2023). Older adults are particularly affected by the closing of bank branches. This was evidenced by the following *FAZ* headline: "Financial sector neglects older bank customers digitally" ("Finanzsektor vernachlässigt ältere Bankkunden digital"; 30/10/2020).

Turning to Japan, from 2001 through 2021 the number of branches of financial institutions declined by 20 per cent (including regional banks, savings banks and similar) (PRI/MOF 2022: 12). Two *AS* articles reported that using analogue account passbooks would become subject to a fee, but older adults aged 70 and over would receive the paper versions free of charge (17/9/2020; 8/10/2020). Another contentious fee was the one introduced for exchanging coins for banknotes (AS 25/3/2021). Further criticism articulated included that of supermarket self-checkout systems, which seniors can find difficult to use. There was also dissatisfaction expressed concerning shopping apps which promised special discounts and offers, with seniors feeling disadvantaged by not knowing how to obtain these online (25/4/2021; 23/1/2022).

Two points of difference between *FAZ* and *AS*

Apart from the commonalities just outlined, we also identified two key differences between *FAZ* and *AS* in their respective handling of these topics. These points refer specifically to the question of agency and the strengths of older adults beyond digital literacy.

Older adults as active voices in AS

Older adults were significantly more represented in the Japanese case study. With the recurring implicit warning "Don't forget the elderly!", 15 per cent of the examined texts—a considerable number—were authored by older adults themselves as letters to the editor, providing a forum for first-person accounts of own experiences, views and concerns. These personal narratives provided multifaceted images of seniors and their use of technology, some reporting enthusiastic engagement with these tools while others felt marginalised within the digital landscape.

AS has a long tradition of publishing readers' comments within the section *Opinion*; letters to the editor are a similarly popular genre within its pages as well. Who the authors of the latter are is indicated by the listing of their name, profession, prefecture of residence and age. Information regarding their seniority is therefore prominently indicated at the beginning of each comment.

Such items are not that commonplace in *FAZ*, although it does have a column called *Letters to the editors* (*Briefe an die Herausgeber*). It is included in the sections related to readers' comments, for example as concerning *Politics* or *Finances*. These letters are longer comments comprising about 400 words. When specific news articles spark a reaction from readers, multiple comments (shorter ones of about 60 words and longer ones of 400 plus) are clustered together. The letters to the editor are only cited by name (sometimes accompanied by the person's academic title and/or place of residence). The age of the author can only be identified, then, if explicitly mentioned in the comment itself.

In *AS*, older people were also more visible as interview partners, commenting on the digital transformation and raising concerns regarding hardware mainly designed for young users and not themselves. For instance, one famous author of fiction (born 1932) pointed out an impediment to smartphone usability which older adults are bound to encounter eventually:

> I have a smartphone, but I cannot see the letters on the monitor very well. To enlarge the letters, you have to delicately use your fingers. But in old age, it's hard to move the fingers, so the monitor is difficult to see. Are developers thinking about these aspects? (10/7/2021)

The active voices of older adults were also present in the context of positive experiences with digital technologies. In an *AS* article on social robots, for example, a 76-year-old widow commented that hers was like a conversation partner, stressing the importance of communication and interaction especially during crises such as

the pandemic. One of the developers of the robot was himself an older adult aged 69, with him stating that the robot did not have a camera because of users' privacy concerns (8/1/2022). In contrast, in a *FAZ* article (15/6/2020) featuring the robot Pepper stationed in a senior centre, the site representative recounted how relatives who come to visit ask to see what their (old-age) father is always talking about; this is done instead of presenting first-person accounts of older people themselves regarding their interaction with the robot.

AS also gave the spotlight to 'digital role models' among the older generation such as Wakamiya Masako (born 1935), the prominent "oldest game-app developer" (15/1/2021; 10/2/2022); the senior head of a non-profit organisation active in enhancing their peers' digital competence (11/6/2021); a senior art teacher who first started to use her iPad at the age of 70 (25/5/2021); and a senior housewife who became a successful YouTuber (14/9/2021). These portraits contribute to a more nuanced representation of older adults, helping Japanese society to move beyond the ageist viewing of them primarily as individuals in need. Instead they are depicted as active users enjoying digital tools, with such technology contributing to their well-being. Other articles highlighted the latter's growing popularity in the context of leisure pursuits among older adults, with examples including the online application to take part in marathons (19/10/2020) and hiking expeditions (17/8/2021).

The strengths of 'analogue natives' in FAZ

In contrast to *AS*, where some older adults were introduced as role models in the context of digital competence, we found examples in the *FAZ* corpus of them being portrayed as such in the context of analogue social prowess. As illustrated by the headline "No fear of the telephone" ("Keine Angst vor dem Telefon", 25/7/2021), younger digital natives were reported as lacking experience in professional communication via this device because they are used to asynchronous modes thereof instead. One reported initiative involved older adults participating in role play, whereby they would act as an employer talking on the phone to a young candidate in a staged job interview. One presenter stressed the importance of the analogue world thus: "Digital balance means to combine the empathy of the real world with the efficiency of the digital". An editor of the *Technology Review* was quoted as saying: "You cannot solve conflicts with a chat tool, that does not work", emphasising how technology is not a universal solution and that face-to-face communication is an ideal strategy for problem-solving. In another *FAZ* article, a senior sports teacher stressed the importance of physical activity for older adults, with sports clubs also fulfilling social needs as digital courses cannot entirely replace social face-to-face interaction (25/7/2021). Those concerned were additionally portrayed at other times as 'angry' citizens protesting against digital trends, especially the closing of bank branches (23/2/2022) and when advocating for their 'right to an analogue life' (12/2/2022).

Discussion and recommendations

FAZ discussions mostly took place at the meta level, tending to focus on the potential of digital technologies to facilitate connectivity between people during the pandemic and to reduce costs in the healthcare sector. While the digital inclusion of older adults was suggested as vital in a general sense (with the majority of said articles appearing in related micro- and macro-level sections), no concrete strategies were proposed on how to actually achieve this. Critical comments put forth spoke to the imperative of technology not replacing humans and how society should ensure the elderly's digital inclusion.

AS provided specific examples of how to include older adults on this front in Japan. We identified the issue of technology being designed primarily for younger people (e.g. difficulties with swiping and enlarging the fonts on the smartphone's display). A discussion on mobility support was closely linked to Japan's problem of rural depopulation, but also to the situation in the healthcare sector. These statements align with existing research on older adults' experiences with the digital transformation in Germany (Frennert and Östlund 2014), but there was little representation hereof in the examined *FAZ* discourse.

For older adults to participate in digital society, specific experiences need to be discussed—such as those related to issues of access, privacy and trust (Fischer et al. 2014, Schwaninger et al. 2021; Paccoud et al. 2024a). These participatory aspects were more prominent, with the majority of articles belonging to the *Opinion* and *Society* sections of *AS*—albeit themes not similarly detected in our *FAZ* corpus. In addition, recent research suggests that seeking to reduce ageism at the level of politics and society can be a highly effective method of changing perceptions of older adults: namely, so that they are seen as contributors to, rather than a burden on, the collective (Lytle and Levy 2024).

Recommendation 1: Practical strategies are needed to include all members of society in the digital transformation, through analogue solutions, access to education, inclusive IT design and by raising public awareness.

A lack of access to digital technologies can arise for many different reasons, for example professional background, age-related experience or usability. Inspired by our *AS* analysis, we suggest lifelong education should specifically target providing access to digital society for seniors. Education and lifelong learning have been identified as key strategies to promote inclusion and overcome barriers to participation here. This could be fostered, for instance, through a living lab approach (Haan et al. 2021); participatory or community-building research projects (Schwaninger et al. 2020 & 2021; Bieg et al. 2022; Prinzellner et al. 2022; Münter et al. 2023); and by making smartphones, tablets and other digital tools both more accessible and usable and tailored to particular cultural contexts (Schwaninger &

Zhan 2023). When assistance with daily activities is needed (such as with grocery shopping, as depicted in our results), formal and informal care workers alike should be included in the convening of smartphone classes—as highlighted both in *AS* and previous academic work (Haan et al. 2021)—in combination with community healthcare interventions (Duncan et al. 2021).

The need to provide non-digital options was specifically mentioned with examples of 80-year-old seniors; however, reference was also made to the 'general' population of older adults. Therefore, we also recommend analogue alternatives to be accessible, given the existing disadvantages, for example, in handling financial matters. The use of analogue solutions should not lead to social exclusion. Further, inclusive design is needed to craft digital tools for older adults in need of care (Carros et al. 2022; Schwaninger et al. 2023). We also suggest raising awareness through public-outreach campaigns, including workshops and science communication on topics related to an inclusive digital society and anti-ageism. These should also actively portray the diversity of older adults as a social group, as well as their multifaceted, varying needs.

Recommendation 2: More agency and representation vis-à-vis older adults, as a highly diverse population, is recommended in media discourse.

Older adults were qualitatively and quantitatively less often represented in *FAZ*. Instead, they were talked about either from an expert perspective or an economic point of view alone. Additionally, seniors were portrayed herein as a rather monolithic group, per an ageist depiction not uncommon to media accounts of their lives (Holladay and Coombs 2004; Giles et al. 2021). For the most part, those in question were not further distinguished by age group or socio-economic status—aspects which could certainly influence usage of digital technologies (Paccoud et al. 2024b). The diversity of older adults was rather overlooked, with these individuals homogeneously depicted according to various digital contexts and corresponding needs, from learning how to use smartphones, to complaints about lack of access, care requirements and support with daily life.

In *AS*, older adults were more actively included in the media discourse. This also corresponds with the fact that almost one-quarter of this corpus belonged to the *Opinion* section. The Japanese daily presented older adults as a more diverse social profile, while also depicting their different levels of technology adoption and hinting at the so-called 'digital grey divide' (Sin et al. 2021). In line with the WHO's (2017) *Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health*, we consider it important to present a multifaceted picture of older adults to combat pervasive misconceptions informed by ageism.

Policy frameworks such as *Active Ageing* (WHO 2002), *Healthy Aging* (WHO 2024) and *Active and Healthy Ageing* (European Commission 2022) have advocated an active societal role for seniors for many years now. Related studies in Human–

Computer Interaction emphasise how ageing should not be viewed as a diminishment of function on the biomedical or cognitive level, thus encouraging the design of digital technologies helping promote an active lifestyle (Harley 2011; Fitzpatrick et al. 2015). Rather than viewing them as passive consumers, older adults can be seen as proactively utilising, adapting and designing technology to fit their needs (Joyce and Loe 2010). This also requires them being ascribed an appropriate level of agency and satisfactory voice within the public discourse.

In *AS*, older adults were actively represented in the form of being directly quoted. In *FAZ*, contrariwise, older people's worries were rather talked about from the journalist's third-person perspective. As mentioned, the *AS* corpus also included more letters to the editor written by older adults—with them being more present as social actors in consequence (Carvalho 2008: 168). On the other hand, *FAZ* depicted these individuals as excelling in terms of analogue skills when compared with the younger generation. This analogue aspect is highly significant, since technology is not always the solution in the sense of an 'interventional logic', as Wanka et al. (2023) point out. Thus, we recommend that decision-makers in the domains of media policy and organisational culture should seek to further active representations of older adults and their diverse needs, taking *AS* discourse as an exemplar here.

In summary, this QCA of the digital push induced by the Covid-19 pandemic has further illustrated how digital technologies and older adults are represented in German and Japanese media. While there has been a call for promoting seniors' digital literacy in both countries' contexts, Japan—as the world's most aged society—can serve as a particular role model here. This is due to how these issues are spoken of in *AS*'s pages, especially concerning its holistic perspective on and more active role ascribed to older adults.

Limitations

This study is based on QCA of media representations of older adults in two national newspapers: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany) and *Asahi Shimbun* (Japan). In taking a qualitative approach, it does not aim for statistical generalisation but rather interpretive insight into prevailing discourses during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. Findings serve to illustrate how national media can act as role models in shaping narratives on ageing and digitalisation. While both newspapers are considered influential, structural and contextual differences must be acknowledged. *AS*, with a broader journalist base and a more progressive editorial stance, differs from *FAZ*, which is comparatively more conservative in orientation and scope. A broader media sample—including regional outlets, newspapers with different political or thematic foci, and digital-only formats—would be necessary for more general observations to be made. Adopting a broader time frame spanning both the pre- and post-pandemic periods would also help shed light on transformational changes afoot. In addition, Japan's larger population and older demographic structure are reflected in its media landscape, potentially leading to

greater visibility and sensitivity towards related issues. Despite these limitations, our study provides important insights into the media representation of older adults in the context of the accelerated digitalisation coming with the pandemic. In particular, Japan—as the society with the largest share of older adults to date—offers a promising role model here on the basis of *AS*'s holistic and active portrayal of older adults, highlighting pathways towards more inclusive and age-responsive media narratives.

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Research Article

The Unfulfilled Hopes of the UN Data Revolution – Zooming in on SDG 6 in India[1]

Petra Dobner and Dirk Hanschel

Abstract
This paper shows how the Sustainable Development Goal 6 (water) has neither been sufficiently realized at the international level nor in India, in spite of hopes and promises. The desired connection of "better data, better lives" propelled by the belief in the so-called UN data revolution has not sufficiently materialized in practice. We argue that this is not surprising as that belief in itself does not sufficiently come to grips with complex realities of the policy cycle and corresponding governing mechanisms at the domestic level. Understanding them better requires zooming in on compliance and implementation efforts within countries. By looking at India as the largest democracy in the world, one of the most prominent supporters of the SDGs and a country suffering from severe water stress, we intend to show how lack of effective domestic reference to SDG 6 may illustrate shortcomings of the SDGs process on a global level.

Keywords: data revolution, sustainable development goals, indicators, water, implementation, India

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Introduction

In 2015 the United Nations (UN) decided to address the most fundamental world problems through the agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The core element of this endeavour is to achieve 17 ambitious goals such as fighting poverty, eradicating hunger, reducing inequality, providing better education and enhancing sustainable economic prosperity by measuring and even generating progress towards their realization on the basis of multiple data. Placing the project under the motto "better data, better lives", the UN claims: "Data helps the international community measure the progress of development. How many children attend school, who has access to healthcare and how many people are employed? We collect all these data, about the world and the people who live in it, to find out what it takes to realize a better world for all" (UN DESA 2015).

It was indeed an important success to bring everyone to the table and agree on common goals to tackle problems that the whole world is facing. Even more so at a time where global consensus is faltering and increasingly hard to achieve. Yet, unfortunately, with only five years to go until 2030, ambition and progress worldwide regarding attainment of the set goals, targets and indicators diverge rather strongly. It seems that collecting more data alone does not lead to major changes in policy – possibly the main obstacle is not lack of knowledge but lack of political will or capacity. Already the 2022 SDG Development Report stated: "This year's report paints a particularly sobering picture. Using the latest available data and estimates, it reveals that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is in grave jeopardy due to multiple, cascading and intersecting crises" (United Nations 2022: 3). The 2023 report then refers to how "the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate-related disasters" had negatively impacted the achievement of the SDGs. It warns that while "lack of progress […] is universal, it is […] the world's poorest and most vulnerable" who are experiencing the worst effects of these unprecedented global challenges (United Nations 2023). Or, even more recently, the 2024 SDG report states that with just six years remaining, current progress falls far short of what is required to meet the SDGs. "It finds that only 17 per cent of the SDG targets are on track, nearly half are showing minimal or moderate progress, and progress on over one third has stalled or even regressed" (United Nations 2024b).

At the same time, the UN has renewed its hope that an improvement in statistics can point a way out of the multiple crises. In his foreword to the report, UN Secretary General António Guterres calls for "greater investment in data infrastructure […] to efficiently target investments now, anticipate future demands, avoid crises from descending into full-blown conflict and plan the urgent steps needed to achieve the 2030 Agenda" (United Nations 2022: 2). In 2023 the SDG Report states that "progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient; on 30 per cent, it has stalled or gone into reverse" (United Nations 2023: 2) albeit the "number of data records in the database has increased from 330,000 in 2016 to

2.7 million as of May 2023. In just seven years, the global SDG database has expanded significantly" (United Nations 2023: 8). The Report of 2024 reassures: "Data help identify challenges, formulate solutions, monitor implementation and make needed course corrections. Without high-quality data providing an evidence base, it will be impossible to truly understand where we are succeeding and falling short on the SDGs" (United Nations 2024b: 4).

Given the difference between aspiration and reality, the question arises as to whether the approach of a data-driven development agenda of the SDGs is actually promising. To what extent does the UN's approach of relying on big data and measuring by indicators suit the purpose to enhance global living conditions, and to what extent is the expansion and proliferation of international soft goals standards more than mere window dressing? Since data alone do not bring about change, the UN's underlying assumption must be that beyond data collection the necessary change will actually be achieved within domestic policy cycles. The UN gives little guidance in this respect, so that the operationalization is largely left to the States and their specific institutions and procedures through which the necessary changes can be managed. But how exactly the implementation of the SDGs works domestically, how real changes are generated, is largely unknown.

Whilst more recently comprehensive efforts showing the lack of SDG success across the board have been advanced (Biermann et al. 2024), qualitative in-depth studies on the interaction of SDGs with local legal and political institutions are still largely missing. We claim that this black box needs to be opened, and the way we do this is by investigating the processing of SDG 6 (water) in the domestic Indian context. This paper provides the necessary groundwork for such an investigation by showing that there is a mismatch of the SDGs' promise and its realization in India, as exemplified by SDG 6. Zooming in on deficits in SDG 6 implementation in India, our paper aims to show how the heralded data revolution intended to drive achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals suffers from a largely unwarranted belief that better data make better policies, without fully respecting the complexities of domestic policy-making and governance.

In doing so, we are looking at the world's biggest democracy and concentrate on the goal which addresses one of the most fundamental problems the world faces, namely water scarcity and lack of supply. SDG 6 covers various aspects of improved water supply and sustainable water management and places the goal of providing access to clean water for all by 2030 at the top of the list.[2] We chose India because it is obvious that if the water problems are to be solved through the SDG process, they will have to be solved in India in particular. India has 4 per cent of the world's water resources and almost 18 per cent of the world's population. The country already has large water supply deficits, is extremely vulnerable to climate change, and is expected to increase its water consumption in the coming years (NITI Aayog 2019,

2 Target 6.1. "By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all." For further information on SDG 6, cf. table below.

2022). Successful implementation of SDG 6 is therefore of paramount importance for India. At the same time, any major progress in the most populous country of the world would automatically affect world-wide water statistics in a positive way, as the Indian government has claimed itself (NITI Aayog 2024).

We will proceed as follows: First, we will look at the unfulfilled hopes, i.e. the limits of SDG 6 effectiveness globally and in India in particular since 2015. Second, we will investigate to what extent that failure can be explained with a flawed belief in a data driven policy that does not respect the complexities of the policy cycle and corresponding governing mechanisms. This will allow us to draw some conclusions on how SDG 6 implementation in India illustrates limitations of the UN data revolution and their reasons.

The Unfulfilled Hopes: Lack of Compliance with SDG 6 Worldwide and in India in Particular

SDG 6 emphasizes, among other things, individual access to safe drinking water, which is already encapsulated in the human right to water, but in large parts of the world, especially in many rural areas, not sufficiently implemented. This is true for India, as well, where the realization of the right to drinking water, according to current forecasts, will become even more remote in the future.

SDG 6: Goal, Targets, Indicators, and the Problems of Reliability

The overriding goal of SDG 6 is to "ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all", and it comprises 8 targets and 11 indicators as follows:

SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for

Nr.	Target	Nr.	Indicator
6.1	By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all	**6.1.1.**	Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services
6.2	By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations	**6.2.1**	Proportion of population using (a) safely managed sanitation services and (b) a hand-washing facility with soap and water
6.3	By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally	**6.3.1**	Proportion of domestic and industrial wastewater flows safely treated
		6.3.2	Proportion of bodies of water with good ambient water quality

6.4	By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity	**6.4.1**	Change in water-use efficiency over time
		6.4.2	Level of water stress: freshwater withdrawal as a proportion of available freshwater resources
6.5	By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate	**6.5.1**	Degree of integrated water resources management
		6.5.2	Proportion of transboundary basin area with an operational arrangement for water cooperation
6.6	By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes	**6.6.1**	Change in the extent of water-related ecosystems over time
6.a	By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies	**6.a.1**	Amount of water- and sanitation-related official development assistance that is part of a government-coordinated spending plan
6.b	Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management	**6.b.1**	Proportion of local administrative units with established and operational policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management

Source: https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/?Text=&Goal=6

The goal reaches further than water-related aspects of the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in aiming for universal access (not only halving the proportion of the population without access), equitable access, i.e. reducing inequalities in service levels between population subgroups, and it specifies that drinking water should be safe, affordable and accessible to all. Reaching SDG 6 is not only in itself crucial, but it is interlinked with other goals and therefore also critical for their achievement like "reducing poverty and achieving universal access to basic services; ending all forms of malnutrition (2.2); ending preventable child deaths, combating neglected tropical diseases and waterborne diseases, and achieving universal health coverage (3.2, 3.3, 3.8 and 3.9); providing safe and inclusive learning environments (4a); ending violence against women and girls and reducing gender inequality (5.2 and 5.4); ensuring adequate, safe and affordable housing for all (11.1) and reducing deaths caused by disasters (11.5)" (WHO 2017: 10 f.).

In the following assessment of progress on SDG 6 attainment, we will largely focus on target 6.1, since this is the key target which promises more reliable data than, for

example, handwashing opportunities or actual cooperation, due to easier measurability compared to other targets.

Before looking at the data, though, we need to take a short look at their origin: Water is a cross-cutting issue and has therefore been or is being addressed by over 30 United Nations organisations. The sources therefore vary in terms of the organisations, the indicators used, and the years covered. We draw on data from various central institutions that describe their own role as follows:

- UN Water has coordinated the work of UN organisations dealing with water since 2003. One of the body's three main tasks besides informing policy processes and building knowledge is supporting monitoring and reporting on water and sanitation (UN Water 2023).
- The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (JMP) has reported country, regional and global estimates of progress on drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) since 1990 (WHO/UNICEF N/A).
- The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) hosts a Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) which acts as a Secretariat for the SDGs "providing substantive support and capacity-building for the goals […]. DSDG plays a key role in the evaluation of UN systemwide implementation of the 2030 Agenda and on advocacy and outreach activities relating to the SDGs" (United Nations/Department of Economic and Social Affairs N/A).
- The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the global custodian for SDG indicators 6.3.2, 6.5.1 and 6.6.1 and "operates globally and regionally at the interface of the environment, water and development" (United Nations/UN Water N/A).
- The World Health Organization (WHO) "monitors global progress on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) through estimates of global burden of WASH- related disease, monitoring of progress under the SDGs on WASH in households, schools and health facilities, wastewater treatment and the enabling environment for WASH service delivery" (United Nations/UN Water N/A).
- The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) "work on water and ocean governance focuses primarily on the challenges related to SDG 6 – sustainable management of water and sanitation for all – and SDG 14 – to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources" (United Nations/UN Water N/A).
- The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) "is the custodian agency for the SDG indicators 6.4.1 on water use efficiency, and 6.4.2 on level of water stress. As such, FAO collects and reports indicators' data produced and/or verified by each country, and provide technical support and capacity

development as required" (United Nations/UN Water N/A). FAO has developed the monitoring capacity AQUASTAT which includes a global water database, country reports and associated tools for global analysis of water issues (FAO 2021).

- The World Bank is the world's largest multilateral source of financing for water in developing countries and is "working closely with partners to achieve 'A Water-Secure World for All,' by sustaining water resources, delivering services and building resilience" (World Bank 2023).
- OECD Water "contributes analyses to improve knowledge, identify good practices, and offer policy guidance. […] OECD work focuses on water economics and governance" (OECD 2024: 2).
- UN Statistics "is committed to the advancement of the global statistical system" and posits the idea that better data will lead to better lives (United Nations 2025).

Apart from the fact that different organisations are involved in water governance, water policy, policy advice, data collection and data analysis, an overview of the actual status of SDG 6 is also complicated by the facts that there are

- no international standards for drinking-water quality,
- several definitions of access (WHO 2022: 85),
- and that definitions are not applied consistently.

For example, the JMP significantly changed the basic definition of "safe" water in 2017 to include bottled water and tanker truck water: "The JMP recognizes that bottled water and tanker truck water can potentially deliver safe water, but has previously treated them as unimproved due to lack of data on accessibility, availability and quality. From now on, the JMP will treat them as improved and classify them as 'limited', 'basic' or 'safely managed', based on the criteria outlined above" (WHO 2017: 13). Modifications of definitions can thus cause significant shifts in statistics without any change having occurred in reality. Overall, different data sources can refer to different definitions of drinking water safety, different access conditions and different sourcing options.[3]

SDG 6.1 calls for universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking-water for all. The target is monitored using the indicator "proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services", and "safely managed drinking water is defined as use of an improved drinking water source that is located on premises, available when needed and free from faecal and priority chemical contamination" (WHO/UNICEF 2017: 24). This definition is further specified in the second step:

> In order to meet the standard for safely managed drinking water, a household must use an improved source type that meets three criteria. First, the facility should be

3 See furthermore https://www.indiawaterportal.org/drinking-water/packaged-drinking-water-in-india-issues-and-challenges.

> accessible on premises (located within the dwelling, yard or plot). Second, water should be available when needed (sufficient water in the last week or available for at least 12 hours per day). Third, water supplied should be free from contamination (compliant with standards for faecal and priority chemical contamination). (WHO/UNICEF 2017: 24)

In more recent publications, this definition has been refined further and now includes five criteria (accessibility, quality, quantity, continuity, affordability) (WHO 2024), but even with regard to only three criteria the WHO and UNICEF state that "many countries currently lack one or more criteria for at least part of the population. The JMP will only make an estimate for safely managed drinking water where data are available on water quality and for either accessibility or availability for at least half of the relevant population. Where estimates for safely managed services are not yet available, the JMP only reports the population using at least a basic level of service" (WHO/UNICEF 2017: 24 f.).

This leads to the more general question whether the data are actually correct and up to date. In all years of reporting on the SDGs, serious deficits in data collection are pointed out by the UN: "The lack of accurate and timely data on many marginalized groups and individuals makes them 'invisible' and exacerbates their vulnerability. While considerable effort has been made to address these data gaps over the past four years, progress has been limited" (United Nations 2022: 3).

At the same time, there is a demand for more money and more knowledge to improve data quality:

> In 2016, countries received support valued at $623 million from multilateral and bilateral donors for all areas of statistics, up from $591 million in 2015. Such support increased by almost $400 million from 2006 to 2016, yet was still insufficient to satisfy data and statistical demands created by the SDGs. To meet statistical capacity building objectives by 2030, current commitments to statistics—0.33 per cent of total ODA—need to double. (United Nations 2022: 57)

However, it is unclear where we are financially at the moment: no data are available for the relevant indicator 17.18.1[4] (Our World in Data team 2023).

Likewise, the Pact for the Future outlines, in objective 4, the need to "advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches" (UN 2024). It "recognize[s] that quality data is critical for tracking, targeting and accelerating progress across the Sustainable Development Goals as well as responding effectively to crises"; and it entails a commitment to "increase financing for data and statistics

4 Indicator 17.18.1: "By 2020, enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts." Note that this goal should have been achieved by 2020 already.

from all sources and enhance efforts to build capacity in data and related skills, as well as responsible data use, particularly in developing countries".

As laudable as these approaches are, they cannot help but sound a bit like a mantra by now, when looking at the shortcomings that continue to exist.

International Progress

Establishing progress on the world-wide supply of safe water is a rather intricate task. On the one hand, when looking at absolute numbers, some improvements can be seen. On the other hand, when comparing this to the overall population the situation looks rather disillusioning. Between 2015 and 2020 the percentage of world population with access to safely managed drinking water service increased from 70 percent to 74 percent and achieving universal access to safely managed services was estimated to "require a 4x increase in current rates of progress" (WHO/UNICEF 2021: 8). In 2022, the proportion declined to 73 percent of the world population. But in the end it is completely unclear whether there is actually progress or regression, since only 52 percent of the world's population is statistically recorded (UN Water 2024).

What makes the assessment even more complicated is that some of the goalposts have apparently been shifted along the way, i.e. definitions and markers of success have been altered. As pointed out above, recent studies have shown that the SDG process is failing in many ways (Biermann et al. 2024). In parallel, the UN has launched the 2025 Comprehensive Review Process in accordance with General Assembly (GA) resolution 71/313. The process is due to be completed by March 2025. Again, the GA resolution has emphasized "the need for quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data to help with the measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind". In this review process, ideas are articulated to alter the framework with regard to the indicators (IAEG-SDGs 2023). Hence, the principles guiding the process spell out that this is a "a good opportunity to improve the indicator framework" (IAEG-SDGs 2023). Whilst major changes are discouraged due to the additional burden on reporting and monitoring, they are actively considered. This might amount to another attempt of moving the goalposts, without recognizing sufficiently that the problem is not the indicators but the structural reasons for lack of domestic implementation.[5]

5 There is a very interesting parallel to the Aichi Targets on Biodiversity (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2020). As Maney et al show: "[…] fewer and fewer actions taken at each stage of the implementation process of the last strategic plan for biodiversity. Some of this, as we hoped to investigate, is linked to commitments that weren't successfully implemented, were cancelled, or otherwise implemented without their desired impact. However, the bulk of 'lost' commitments were simply not reported on. This may be due to unwillingness to report on failed objectives or simply the fact that the evidence for those commitments was not available. However, this shortfall in reporting has clear implications for new plans for monitoring commitments. Compiling National Reports with this current coverage of commitments into a global progress report, as planned for the

Water Issues in India/SDG 6 Record in India

According to a survey by NITI Aayog in 2018, 600 million Indians, half of the population, were affected by high to extreme water shortages, three quarters of all Indian households were not connected to the drinking water supply (NITI Aayog 2018: 15). Moreover, 70 per cent of India's water resources are contaminated, which puts India in third last place out of a total of 122 countries that collect data for the Water Quality Index. Contrary to the SDG 6 goal of universal access to safe drinking water and sustainable water resource management by 2030, the situation in India is likely to worsen in many regards. Data indicate that the supply of clean drinking water has increased by only two percent since 2015 (UN Water 2024). Estimates of future developments predict, that, if there are no changes, by 2030 around 40 % of the Indian population may have no access to drinking water (NITI Aayog 2018: 28).

Meanwhile, the Indian government portrays itself as moving forward on all SDGs (NITI Aayog 2025). The rather grim prognosis was lightened up by a far more positive narrative (NITI Aayog 2023, 2024). However, this is countered by media reports, showing how "[t]he world's most populous nation has suffered from water shortages for decades, but crises are coming around with increasing frequency" (Das and Patel 2024). The contradictory findings nourish doubts as to the success of SDG implementation and underline the importance of zooming in on domestic places that may serve as a kind of litmus test to show to what extent the goals and indicators of the SDGs can really guide action. A careful examination reveals that progress only pertains to some aspects of SDG 6 (whilst less favourable developments are not sufficiently mentioned). Furthermore, the positive outlook seems to be facilitated by using a separate domestic yardstick through indicators and reporting schemes only partially related to what the UN has provided (Koerber 2024). In addition, the progress described in the governmental report appears rather vague, the categories are not sufficiently precise.

This is not tantamount to saying that no progress has occurred at all. Some advancements have been made, for instance with regard to sanitation (Arora 2023; NITI Aayog 2024). Nevertheless, India seems to be at least partially unable to effectively manage the goals, targets and indicators contained in the SDGs in order to achieve a better future for all (cf. e.g. Rathee and Mishra 2021; Biswas, Sachdeva, and Tortajada 2021: 114, 123; UN Water 2024). Across the board the picture is still rather grim, in particular when relating it to the rapidly growing population. Looking at these findings, one can surmise the following: This country of now 1.4 billion

Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's monitoring framework, would provide an inadequate and flawed perception of the implementation and success of commitments" (Maney et al. 2024). After the dramatic failing of each of the targets, CBD members, in the Kunming Montreal CBD Conference in 2022, adopted the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), spelling out 23 new 2030 targets (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2022). So, instead of trying to find the root causes of failure, the idea was that we need new and better targets. Judging from the findings of Maney et al, the prospects of being more successful this time are unfortunately not very high.

inhabitants, where water scarcity and conflicts materialize in a dramatic way, uses the SDGs to paint a very positive picture. This does not mean that there are no serious efforts to achieve the goal, but their actual effectiveness appears to be rather limited.

How Can the Lack of Progress Be Explained?

Our next step will be to find explanations for the lack of sufficient progress which we just documented. Our main focus will be on deficiencies in international governance, which we will illustrate by looking through the lens of the policy cycle. We proceed by showing first how the SDGs are meant to function before analysing why this mechanism is intrinsically flawed.

Inside the Engine Room: The SDG Process and Its (Theoretical) Mechanism toward Progress

Since the beginning of 2016, the political goals of the United Nations regarding sustainable ecological, economic and social development have been set out under the title "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". In total, the SDGs define 17 overall goals and 169 sub-goals (targets), which relate to all areas of life (United Nations 2014). Compared to the previous period from 2000 to 2015 and the MDGs targeted at the time, the ambition has grown once more: Firstly, the SDGs do not only relate to the so-called Global South, but to the entire world. Secondly, they combine social, ecological, economic, political and institutional objectives. Thirdly, the United Nations is relying even more strongly than with the MDGs on indicator-based target setting: The transformation is to be driven forward with a total of currently 231 or 248 indicators (thirteen indicators repeat under two or three different targets), which in turn require global data collection (United Nations 2024a). At the beginning of the SDG process, the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD) therefore called for a "data revolution to improve the availability, quality, timeliness and disaggregation of data to support the implementation of the new development agenda at all levels" (UNSD/NBS 2015).

Combined with comprehensive data and the corresponding indicators is the hope that this could also drive actual development, because better data should enable better policies. As the OECD puts it: "National, regional and local governments need precise and timely data to implement better policies for well being and sustainable development. Data and indicators are key for strategic planning and decision making, and are tools for promoting informed dialogues across levels of government and sectors of society, integrating both a national and an international perspective" (OECD N/A).

A comprehensive approach is certainly appropriate, and global agreement constitutes an advancement when looking at the common problems that the SDGs are addressing. Yet, the question is whether the way this approach has been devised is or can be successful. Before examining the assumed mechanisms of action that

translate better data into better policies in the SDG process, we briefly reflect on the basic state of research on policy goals and how they can be achieved in general, in order to understand the specificity of data-driven goal attainment.

Governing, or How Political Goals Can Be Achieved

In the early nineteen-seventies, political science discovered the field of "policy analysis", and thus a field that it had largely neglected in its studies of institutional and process conditions of politics before. By "policy" the authors meant "a course of action intended to accomplish some end […] and what occurs as a result of the intention" (Heclo 1972: 84 f.). Partly, this new interest stemmed from a former concentration on systems theory (Bertalanffy 1950), which David Easton in particular had tried to make fruitful for political science (Easton 1957, 1965a, 1965b), and which led to research on how policy outputs depend on social, economic, political or technological conditions. Partly, it was fuelled by the experiences with social and human resource programmes of the 1960s and concentrated more on gaining knowledge about the influence of governmental actions on social, economic and political conditions (Williams 1978: 635). In either case, political scientists shifted their focus to the question of how political goals can be formulated, how they are fed into the political process, successfully implemented and, if necessary, reformed; what conflicts can be expected and how they can be resolved; what resources are needed and which actors play a role.

The field of policy analysis developed extremely dynamically and quite yieldingly in the following years; interest was focused on various aspects of the policy process, and we will pick up only a few central results from the discussion in order to illustrate the complexity of a successful implementation of set goals.

1.) The so-called policy cycle was established as a kind of life cycle of a policy, in which different phases like problem definition, agenda-setting, policy formulation, implementation, evaluation and termination or reformulation follow each other (May and Wildavsky 1978). Political science thus pursued the system-theoretical perspective of interdependence, that "the operation of no one part can be fully understood without reference to the way in which the whole itself operate" (Easton 1957: 383). The policy cycle enabled a research heuristic that could understand policy making as a process, determine the interdependence of different phases of the cycle and, above all, gain more insight into the rules of the game in individual phases – such as implementation or agenda setting.

2.) The focus also turned to "identify and derive logically the types of coercion available to governments" (Lowi 1972: 299). Beyond regulatory politics Lowi branded three other types: distributive, redistributive and constituent policies which, he assumed, produce different kinds of coercion and are applied to different problems and groups. The main purpose of this "policy taxonomy" was to learn to distinguish between different types of governance and to understand that different conflicts are generated depending on the type.

3.) This taxonomy thus also laid the ground for a differentiation of policy arenas. The concept of policy arena "is closely related to general political conflict and consensus processes. […] Central determinants of a policy arena are the costs and benefits expected by those affected, as well as the control strategy (incentive, bid/offer, etc.) by means of which costs and benefits are conveyed" (Windhoff-Héritier 1985: 9). It was assumed, for example, that distributive policies know virtually no losers, because "something" is distributed to "everyone", and are therefore structured more consensually, while redistributive policies produce winners and losers, and are accordingly structured conflictive.

4.) The focus also was broadened to different instruments of governance, which essentially defined power as a hard instrument of governance, and information, offers and financial incentives as soft instruments of governance.[6]

5.) The turn towards actor-centred institutionalism underlined the different organisational and action capacities of individual, corporate and collective actors: Different types of actors pursue different goals in different ways and use individual or collective resources, which in sum leads to different forms of decision-making (Scharpf 2000).

6.) Another focal point of the debate was policy learning: Policy learning as a practice has a long tradition (Dobner 2002: 175 ff.), but now scientists identified different types of policy learning by asking: Who learns what from whom and why?

The list is neither exhaustive, nor do we do full justice to each of the aspects we touched here. But the main purpose here is not a full appreciation of the efforts of policy analysis, but to point out that political governance and the achievement of political goals is a highly differentiated subject of political science research and in practice must be:

- a well-planned combination of tailor-made instruments and procedures in all phases of the policy cycle,
- must suit the set goal,
- must take different actors and their potentially contradicting interests into account,
- needs to encompass several political levels and heterogenous political actors with multiple interests,
- and cannot simply be applied universally in order to be successful.

Policy analysis was rightly criticized in later years as being too mechanistic, too euphoric about its practicality, too rigid for the real world and oblivious to power. Nevertheless, it has great merits in terms of a better understanding of political processes and especially in terms of an understanding of the high complexity and the numerous possibilities of failure of political governance. Against this briefly

6 Nudging as another governance tool was added by Thaler and Sunstein (2008, 2009, 2021) and refers to a decision architecture that can change people's behaviour without bids and bans.

sketched background of the research on how to make political plans work and how to reach set political goals, the universal turn to and belief in data-based goal achievement at the global level as the central, if not the only mechanism to reach the set goals, seems surprisingly simple. The question of why the central results of policy analysis were not considered in the global policy of the SDGs can be answered in two ways: The belief in the power of digitization and the collective forgetting of scientific findings as a result of alternating scientific fashions.

Data already played an important role in the formulation of the MDGs in 2001: They were to capture the 8 goals with initial and final dates (1990–2015), for which 18 sub-goals and 48 indicators were agreed (United Nations 2003). At the same time, the indicators and data collection in the MDG process were massively criticized as insufficient (Behrend 2016; Pogge 2016; Pogge and Sengupta 2015) which, however, did not lead to a critical reflection on data-based development strategies, but to the demand for more and better data in the SDG process. This was not only in line with the zeitgeist, but also with new technical possibilities: "The SDGs were negotiated during a period of global socio-technical change, including expanded access to the internet, mobile phones, satellite imagery, and crowd-sourcing platforms. Their adoption coincided with the rapid increase in the velocity, variety, veracity, and volume of data supply and use, differentiating the pathways to impact from previous eras of sustainable development initiatives." (Fischer et al. 2025: e49-2) Data were considered the central key to real-time monitoring of progress (Espey 2019), greater accountability, better policy making and service delivery as well as increased business opportunities (World Bank 2021: 4).

This trend correlates with a change in the orientation of political science, which from the 1990s onwards increasingly abandoned its originally normative self-image in favor of quantified methods (Maier 1996: 16). In terms of scientific theory, one can speak of a new "fashion" that inevitably leads to a departure from earlier approaches: "As in clothing fashion, the yesterday's theory is done, anyone who continues to adhere to it is hopelessly old-fashioned, and it deserves attention at best from the perspective of the Historian" (Laitko 1996). As long as science remains in search of scientific revolutions, paradigm shifts are inevitably inherent (Kuhn 1973). However, turning away from earlier findings, in this case the knowledge of the complexity of political control, is not always synonymous with real scientific progress (Allert 2014).

Data-Driven Policies in the SDG Process

On that basis, we will now look at how policies are effectuated or intended in the SDG process and what deficiencies there are. As we have already pointed out at the beginning of this article, the production and usage of data is the central tool of the SDG process. The UN Secretary-General's Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development (IEAG), convened in 2014, assumes in its recommendation for the use of data in the SDG process that "[d]ata are the

lifeblood of decision-making" (IEAG 2014: 4). Based on the fact that the amount of available data, data producers, dissemination of data and objects for which data is collected already represents a data revolution, the group calls for this to be made usable for the SDG process. By this it means firstly an integration of new, so-called big data with traditional data in order "to produce high-quality information that is more detailed, timely and relevant for many purposes and users, especially to foster and monitor sustainable development". Secondly, it calls for increased usability of data through more openness and transparency, "avoiding invasion of privacy and abuse of human rights from misuse of data on individuals and groups, and minimising inequality in production, access to and use of data". In sum, this should lead to "more empowered people, better policies, better decisions and greater participation and accountability, leading to better outcomes for people and the planet" (IEAG 2014: 6).

Given the key function of data in the SDG process, it is unsurprising that the hope for data-driven development is expressed in basically all SDG process documents (Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2015; United Nations 2016: 2, 2017: 16 ff., 2018: 16 f., 2019: 58, 2022: 3, 2024b: 4). What is really surprising, however, is that there is practically no reference to the scientific literature, which has long criticized a goal- and data-based policy of generating negative effects (Fukuda-Parr, Greenstein, and Stewart 2013; Fukuda-Parr 2014, 2019; Cobham 2014; Crawford, Miltner, and Gray 2014; Behrend 2016; Desai and Schomerus 2018; MacFeely 2019; Engle Merry, Davis, and Kingsbury 2015). No less surprising is that there are hardly any explanations on how exactly data could actually bring about real change. The translation of data into real policy remains largely a blind spot, with only some information found in application examples and in rather recently established research on impact of data. Instead, the idea seems to be that somehow knowing more will lead to more political action.

The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data for example provides a list in order to show the successful use of data, including statements like: "The government of Sierra Leone can better protect its vital mangrove forests. In Senegal, farmers can get prices for their crops more quickly at harvest time. The government of Paraguay can more effectively track flood risk and manage water systems. In Nigeria, the government is better able to track COVID-19 cases and health center availability" (Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data 2020: 4). It is striking that, firstly, the vast majority of these examples exhaust themselves in stating that better data is now available without explaining how this will be effective in practice and that, secondly, in the examples that do point to an application, it remains unclear exactly what difference this application makes.

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), on the other hand, published a report in 2020 that explicitly addresses the question of the impact of data with regard to forests. Three positive examples of Vietnam, Brazil and Cameroon are used to examine the conditions under which data can successfully contribute to a

reforestation or stop deforestation. Even though this positive selection is problematic in that it cannot structurally capture the reasons for failure, the study provides some results which we briefly summarize here. The report concludes that data can be helpful with regard to four phases in the policy-cycle, i.e. problem recognition, proposal and choice of solution, putting solutions into effect, and monitoring the results (FAO 2020: x).

At the same time, the examples point to a variety of conditions and additional measures that are necessary to actually achieve positive effects both in terms of data quality and policy conditions:

- Data may not help since "knowledge is power. The authorities in many countries may not want the truth to be known. They may have vested interests or things to hide or they may want to make claims that are not supported by the statistics" (FAO 2020: 14).
- Data need to be accessible, affordable, reliable, transparent, relevant and consistent across time and space (FAO 2020: xi, 39).
- "Data can be 'wrong' in several ways. First, where uncertainty is great, data do not yield clear conclusions. Second, data can be biased, usually to an unknown degree. Potentially most problematic is the case where uncertainties are unknown" (FAO 2020: 30).
- "Policy change requires a window of opportunity combined with the political will that data and analysis can catalyse but not create" (FAO 2020: ix).

What can be concluded from this? Data is useful when it is accurate, consistently collected, wanted, when the problem it presents is actually on the government's agenda, and when a window of opportunity opens to implement a solution, when regulatory and fiscal measures are taken and enforced, when corruption is discouraged and civil society demands a solution, and when the economic benefits of a solution are higher than a continuation of current practice. In other words, correct data can be helpful when there is the political will to identify a problem and find a solution – but it is not in itself the solution.

These findings are also consistent with research on the general impact of data. "Impact" can be defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (Jensen et al. 2022: 1 f.). Two main conclusions can be drawn from this research: Firstly, there is an extreme mismatch between the assumption that data drives change and the amount of research into whether this assumption is actually true, as Jensen et al. in 2022 claim: "This study is the first attempt to analyse the development of impact from data, focusing for the first time on examples of research where data played a major role in the generation of both research findings and impact." (Jensen et al. 2022: 9) Secondly, the analysis "found that research data on their own rarely develop impact, but instead they require analysis, curation, product

development or other strong interventions to leverage broader non-academic value from the research data" (Jensen and Reed 2019).[7]

With the SDGs, the UN and the signatory states have articulated the political will to make the world a better place. This is obviously a very laudable endeavour, but with the one-sided focus on "better data, better lives", they may have failed to reflect on the necessary steps that could make this political will really guide sufficient action on the ground. Whilst crises such as the pandemic have certainly made things worse, such findings cannot explain the shortcomings and sometimes even appear as excuses.

Recent findings by Biermann et al. seem to indicate that when they claim that "the 2022 SDG Impact Assessment, conducted by a global consortium of researchers, have pointed to some structural dysfunctionalities of the SDGs and have shown that the first phase of SDG implementation did not lead to a transformative reorientation of political systems and societies" (Biermann et al. 2023). As a result of a workshop in 2024 with over 100 scientists, Biermann and others have suggested to reinvigorate the SDGs. They refer to "extensive research and numerous policy reports suggest[ing] that these goals struggle to gain momentum, leading the UN Secretary-General to call for their urgent 'rescue'" (Biermann et al. 2024).

In addition to factors such as "weakened multilateral cooperation, global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, and rising geopolitical tensions", they emphasize that "the design of the SDGs and their institutional framework have been criticized for contributing to the slow pace of progress". They claim that the 2024 Pact for the Future falls short of what is needed. Other attempts to rescue the SDGs are made e.g. by Ruppel and Murray (2024) who suggest "[e]levating the SDGs to constitutional principles" in order to grant them "binding legal force, making governments accountable for their implementation" (Ruppel and Murray 2024).

This Pact for the Future makes a number of promises on how to accelerate progress. Water scarcity is addressed by Action 6: "We will invest in people to end poverty and strengthen trust and social cohesion." (UN 2024) This action builds on the following finding:

> We express our deep concern at persistent inequalities within and between countries and at the slow pace of progress towards improving the lives and livelihoods of people everywhere, including people in vulnerable situations. We must meet the Sustainable Development Goals for all segments of society and leave no one behind, including through the localization of sustainable development. We emphasize that guaranteeing access to energy and ensuring energy security is critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, promoting economic development, social stability, national security and the welfare of all nations worldwide. (UN 2024)

7 Cf. also (Jensen and Reed 2022).

It is hard to disagree with this statement in Action 6, but it is equally hard to see how it by itself will accomplish the change of paradigm that is actually needed. Articulating the will by itself does not mean that the domestic political situation or capacity has changed. If the problem of injustice is to be taken seriously it would have to be addressed by the international financial architecture more seriously. Similarly, at the domestic level, it requires solutions regarding distribution of resources, effective poverty reduction, strengthening sustainability, addressing power conflicts, etc. that are inconvenient but necessary. To what extent these endeavours have or may become more effective in light of the SDG paradigm remains a largely unanswered question.

Similar action is suggested by Action 10, again very lofty and sounding almost imploring: "We will accelerate our efforts to restore, protect, conserve and sustainably use the environment. [....] We will address the adverse impacts of climate change, sea level rise, biodiversity loss, pollution, water scarcity, floods, desertification, land degradation, drought, deforestation and sand and dust storms." Action 29, which again mentions water, promises to "scale up the means of implementation to developing countries to strengthen their science, technology and innovation capacities". Again, this is certainly a good idea, but it requires the actual transfer of resources even where there is no market for it. This is all what can be found in the Pact – water is not mentioned anywhere else in the whole 64 pages document, which is quite astonishing, looking at the gravity of water scarcity and other water related issues.

However, even the suggestions from academia (as important as they are) so far do not seem sufficient to remedy the weaknesses. Biermann et al. suggest, for instance, "to [e]stablish an independent expert-based assessment mechanism to monitor progress and strengthen the science-policy interface" (Biermann et al. 2024) (1.2), furthermore integrating them into existing or new legal frameworks (1.3), reforming the global financial architecture (1.4), strengthen participation from civil society (1.5), develop national and subnational plans (2.2). The demand is: "Governments must effectively operationalize and integrate the SDGs into national and subnational development strategies, customizing them to align with local contexts and priorities as well as actually deliver on their implementation."

Implementing the SDGs is obviously a very important point but merely demanding it does not answer the question why governments are not delivering on this promise so far. In turn, the suggestion to recalibrate the targets and indicators is one that we do not share because it simply means to shift the goal posts, which is exactly what the UN is doing already to some extent. Finally, the suggested "paradigm shift in economic policy" remains rather opaque, suggesting that there was a major dissent in the background.

Similarly, the suggestions by Ruppel et al. (2024) do not sufficiently address the root causes either. The study names some important factors, such as "addressing systematic inequalities and power imbalances". But it is limited to what would be

helpful in terms of legal reform. Suggesting to implement the SDGs in the constitution is a technical legal solution that would certainly strengthen their legal force, but the lack of consensus on the international level and haphazard implementation domestically does not make it seem very likely that this will actually happen. Admittedly, a decentralized approach, such as the one chosen in the Paris Agreement, might help to advance the agenda at least in some countries. However, this will depend on the political consensus, and whether this consensus will grow upon juridification is unclear.

Conclusions

To conclude, SDG 6 has neither been realized internationally nor in India, in spite of what the UN process promised. The desired connection of "better data, better lives" has not materialized. On the contrary, neither the data situation has improved sustainably in the ten years since the beginning of the SDG period, nor has the material supply of clean water. Whilst it is always easier to focus on what has not worked, it is much more difficult to say how things can be improved. But in order to do the latter, a thorough analysis of where we are and why things have not worked out the way they were supposed is imperative. We claim that this has not occurred sufficiently.

Our study cannot check reliably on effectiveness of SDG 6 as this would require a far more complex methodology on counterfactual analysis. Putting it simply, we do not know whether the situation on what SDG 6 demands might not be much worse without the SDG itself. In fact, there are some reasons to believe that this is actually the case, looking at the dramatically increasing impact of climate change which turns any attempt to implement the SDGs into an uphill battle. This is an important limitation of this study, and one that justifies even greater respect for a government that is aiming to address the issues. However, what we can say is that the intended goal with its targets and indicators has not yet been achieved, and we can offer at least one important reason why it probably could not have been achieved.

As our analysis shows, the lack of success is not surprising as the key assumption that better data makes better policy is quite under-complex and actually in many ways untrue. As we have argued using the policy cycle, the way that the United Nations has devised the SDGs is, at least to some extent, flawed and almost destined to fail. Of course, one should not underestimate the indirect effects of the SDGs. And in some ways the weaknesses that remain are simply a consequence of trying to achieve global consensus which is of course difficult enough – and has even become far more difficult in the last couple of years, looking at the various crises in the world and the crisis of the UN as such. In light of this, having managed to generate such a consensus is a big achievement in itself, and none of our criticism aims to deny that. Yet, nevertheless, whilst hopes and enthusiasm are helpful to generate a momentum and new norms may inject additional energy into the process we still need to be

aware of shortcomings and name them, in order to try and improve the system as it stands, as disappointed hopes without remedies merely lead to frustration.

More research is needed that zooms in even further and deconstructs the black box of SDG related law and policy in India. Looking at places where SDG implementation can be expected to happen should help to analyse whether there are in fact implementation efforts or not. If such implementation efforts in likely places exist, they are obviously not effective enough. If they do not exist, that could further underpin our findings of lack of effectiveness.

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Forschung und Lehre

Walking Meditation and Slow Marches: Buddhist Responses to Climate Change Protest

Rolf Scheuermann

Abstract
The climate crisis is arguably one of today's greatest challenges and the Buddhist doctrine offers a foundation for a comprehensive approach to environmental activism, grounded in core principles such as mindfulness, compassion, and dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Consequently, many Buddhists have turned to environmental activism, trying to find their own ways of expression. This study explores how Buddhist climate change activism manifests in protests in Germany and the UK, particularly through performative techniques. Building on the concept of climate activism as edgework in the Anthropocene (Hentschel 2023), it examines how XR Buddhists Germany have reimagined the traditional Buddhist mindfulness practice of walking meditation as a public, embodied intervention. During XR Germany's Autumn Rebellion in Berlin (September 2022) and subsequent protest events, walking meditation was repurposed as a form of protest to raise public awareness and a means of cultivating alternative ways of being in the world. Based on textual analysis, online resources, interviews, and fieldwork, this paper analyses how Buddhist activists can participate in shaping new life worlds amid an ecological crisis by transforming a contemplative practice into a mode of secular civil disobedience.

Keywords: climate change protest, walking meditation, slow marches, Buddhism, Buddhist eco-activism, Engaged Buddhism

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Introduction

"What do we want? Climate Justice! When do we want it? Now!" When people think of Buddhism and its practice, they envision patient monks seated peacefully on their cushions in deep meditation. Yet, on Sunday, September 18, 2022, a crowd of around 100 people embarked on a walking meditation organized by *Extinction Rebellion* (XR) *Buddhists Germany* in Berlin, stirred by these calls (Scheuermann 2024: 161).

The current climate crisis—arguably one of humanity's most significant challenges—has prompted many Buddhists to engage in environmental activism. This paper[1] observes how Buddhist walking meditation has been reimagined as a form of climate change protest and transformed into a secular act of civil disobedience, as exemplified by *XR Buddhists Germany*. Analyzing the intersection of Buddhist practice and environmental activism, it explores how Buddhist walking meditation has been re-imagined and repurposed as a (Buddhist) climate change protest method to create awareness about climate change and mobilize collective action.

Buddhism and Climate Crisis: Eschatology, Dependent Origination, and Activism

Climate change affects different parts of the world in unequal ways. While some regions have been able to adapt, others, such as the Himalayan region, are already experiencing drastic ecological shifts. Historically, this region has faced natural disasters, and its fragile ecosystem remains highly sensitive to environmental change. In response, various Buddhist traditions have developed ways to conceptualize and handle the uncertainties of nature.

Eschatological beliefs have long played a significant role in Buddhism, including the idea of living in a time of decline. Unlike Christian or Islamic traditions, which usually conceive of time in a linear fashion culminating in an apocalyptic end or eschaton, Buddhist cosmology follows a cyclical temporal model with repeating patterns of decline and increase. Hence, Buddhist cosmology does not narrate the development from a supposed cosmic origin of the world to its end but instead describes a continuous transformation process from a bird's-eye view. Nevertheless, when narrowed down, the current period is classified as the age of strife, which is characterized by a gradual decline, a long process of deterioration marked by an increase in suffering, natural disasters, and social turmoil. This aligns with contemporary concerns about the growing effects of climate-related events such as floods, droughts, heatwaves, armed conflicts, and pandemics.

However, the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamūtpāda*, Tib. *rten 'brel*) implies that the future is not predetermined but shaped by an interplay of

1 AI-based tools (Grammarly and ChatGPT) have been used to improve the language, but all ideas—unless marked otherwise—are original.

causes and conditions. Hence, individuals are not determined by fate but possess agency. They can act to avert, transform, or postpone adverse outcomes. This dynamic view has historically motivated Buddhist practitioners to work toward preserving and restoring the Buddhist doctrine in times of perceived decline.

Prophecies about the degeneration and eventual disappearance of the Buddha's teachings (*Dharma*), such as those found in the *Kauśāmbī* prophecy,[2] provide a framework for understanding the urgency of contemporary climate action. These prophecies predict not a singular end-time event but rather the progressive erosion of the teachings over time. From a Buddhist practitioner's perspective, this scenario is particularly grave, as salvation from *saṃsāra*—the endless cycle of rebirth and suffering—is considered impossible without access to the Dharma. This altruistic perspective has historically led Buddhist communities to actively maintain and revitalize the tradition. This effort can be likened to contemporary environmental activism aimed at averting the climate catastrophe.

Christine Hentschel's concept of *Edgework in the Anthropocene* offers a compelling lens for viewing Buddhist climate activism, particularly within the framework of Engaged Buddhism.[3] Hentschel defines edgework not as mere thrill-seeking or recklessness, but as the necessity and decision to face the catastrophic realities of planetary crisis and to draw the necessary personal, social, and political consequences (Hentschel 2025: 2).[4]

This mirrors the Buddhist commitment to mindfulness and compassionate action in the face of suffering. This was explained in the famous *Four Truths of the Noble Ones* (Skt. *catvāri āryasatyāni*, Tib. *bden pa bzhi*)—sometimes rendered as the Four Noble Truths—that were taught in the Buddha's initial sermon.

> "Suffering, this noble truth, must be recognized; the origin of suffering, this noble truth, must be avoided; the cessation of suffering, this noble truth, must be practiced": thus, monks, in regard to things unheard before, there arose in me the sight, there arose in me the understanding, the insight, the knowledge, the seeing. (Frauwallner 2010: 15)

The first two truths direct mindful attention to suffering and the cause of suffering, and in the last two truths, the Buddha taught the cessation of suffering in all its forms and the path that leads to this end. Taking up the middle-way approach outlined by the Buddha that balances mindfully between the extremes of ascetism and the

2 For an extensive treatment of the Kauśāmbī prophecy, refer to Nattier 1991: 52–54.

3 For a discussion of Engaged Buddhism in the context of Eco-Activism in the UK, see Zielke 2023.

4 "Edgework im Anthropozän setzt an einer veränderten Lebensrealität und gesellschaftlichen Selbstbeschreibung an, in der Selbstentfaltungsfragen zunehmend von Selbsterhaltungsfragen verdrängt werden. Vor dem Horizont planetarer Unsicherheit stellen sich Fragen des Überlebens, des Risikos und des Kontrollverlusts auf andere Weise. Der Edge ist jetzt die Schwelle zum Katastrophischen. Wenn das, was auf dem Spiel steht, das Überleben der Menschheit selbst ist, dann ist Edgework nicht mehr Abenteuerlust und Waghalsigkeit, sondern die Notwendigkeit und Entscheidung, dieser Realität ins Gesicht zu sehen und daraus die nötigen Konsequenzen zu ziehen: persönlich, gesellschaftlich und politisch." (Hentschel 2025: 2)

indulgence of sensory pleasures, his followers can leave *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of rebirths characterized by suffering, behind. In this way, Buddhist practice can also be considered edgework at the precipice of *saṃsāra*. Engaged Buddhist climate activists—such as those involved in movements like Extinction Rebellion Buddhists—embody this edgework by refusing to turn away from ecological collapse and the associated suffering. Instead, they treat it as an urgent call to ethical and spiritual responsibility. Just as traditional Buddhist communities may have historically responded to the prophesied degeneration of Dharma with renewed commitment, today's Buddhist eco-activists may react to the climate crisis with collective actions rooted in an understanding of dependent origination, non-violence, and the aspiration to reduce or eradicate suffering—for all beings, humans and more-than-humans.

Avertive Apocalypticism and Buddhist Climate Activism

Daniel Wojcik has described "avertive apocalyptic beliefs" as those that frame the world as "not irredeemably evil or absolutely doomed" but rather as something that can still be saved through human agency. In this model, individuals and collectives are not merely passive recipients of divine fate but active participants in attempting to prevent destruction. They may even cause a transformation, bringing about a renewed world, a perfect age (Wojcik 2011: 84).

It seems justified to establish connections between Buddhist eschatology and avertive apocalypticism. As I have argued elsewhere, Buddhist dystopian narratives of decline often serve a pedagogical function, instilling a sense of urgency and responsibility that has contributed to Buddhism's extraordinary resilience and longue durée throughout history. This "restorative enthusiasm" may also be relevant in the context of the ecological crisis (Scheuermann 2021). Climate activism, particularly within Buddhist communities, seeks to avert catastrophe, prevent collapse, and envision a better future.

However, caution is necessary when using the term apocalypse in the context of Buddhist decline narratives or the climate crisis. The *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements* (Crossley and Lockhart 2021) acknowledges that while the term is rooted in Christian eschatology, it is also used in secular contexts to describe large-scale destruction and radical transformation:

> Belief in the impending or possible destruction of the world itself or physical global catastrophe, and/or the destruction or radical transformation of the existing social, political, or religious order of human society—often referred to as the apocalypse. While the primary focus of articles will be on accounts of apocalypses which are understood in religious terms, or initiated by divine or supernatural forces, secular uses of the term (especially when these implicitly draw on or encode religious/supernatural themes) will also be included. As a secondary aspect, the definition includes implicit reference to revelation and prophecy, thus the definition includes belief systems in which the idea of destruction of the

> world/societal order is understood to be attained by communication from divine or supernatural sources. (CenSAMM 2021)

Timothy Morton conceptualizes such crises as "hyperobjects"—entities so vast in temporal and spatial dimensions that they defy traditional frameworks of understanding (Morton 2013). Hyperobjects are a way to describe processes that are beyond imagination and, from a Buddhist perspective, may be similar to unfathomable phenomena just like *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of rebirths characterized by suffering, which is driven by ignorance, karma, and dependent origination, or its counterpart *nirvāṇa*, which is beyond the sphere of experience of ordinary individuals. A similar incomprehensibility also applies to climate change, which poses an unimaginable threat to humanity. Its implications cannot be fathomed in their full extent by glancing at a hockey stick graph. Yet, the space that emerges from this incomprehensibility opens the possibility of transformative imagination that may envision a radically different (and potentially even better) future—a post-apocalypse.

Walking Meditation as Climate Protest: The Case of *XR Buddhists Germany*

On July 25, 2022, the *German Buddhist Union* (*Deutsche Buddhistische Union*, DBU), a national umbrella organization representing over 60 Buddhist groups, shared an announcement from *XR Buddhists Germany* on social media. The post invited followers to participate in the group's climate actions planned for Berlin on September 17–20, 2022. Although DBU posts generally receive little engagement, this one sparked a polarized reaction, with over 80 mixed responses ranging from strong approval to outright disapproval. Some critics questioned whether *XR Buddhists Germany* qualified as a Buddhist organization and a few even declared their intent to leave the DBU in protest.

Intrigued by this debate, I contacted members of *XR Buddhists Germany*, conducted interviews with organizers, participated in their 2022 Autumn Rebellion in Berlin, and have followed the group's activities since then. My previously published research on this subject examined *XR Buddhists Germany*'s diverse Buddhist practices and their relation to the *Ecodharma* movement. Therefore, this paper partially overlaps with the previous article, but takes a closer look at walking meditation as a form of climate activism and its transformation into slow marches (Scheuermann 2024).

Walking Meditation and Climate Protests in Berlin 2022

During the *XR Autumn Rebellion* in Berlin, *XR Buddhists Germany* established a meditation tent at the protest camp near the *Federal Ministry of Economy and Climate Protection*. Here, the group, composed primarily of German Buddhists, organized traditional practices such as lectures by monastics, sitting and walking

meditations, and *metta* and *tonglen* (Tib. *gtong len*) sessions focused on developing loving kindness and compassion. They also engaged in public outreach through organized demonstrations, including walking meditations.

On September 18, 2022, *XR Buddhists Germany* collaborated with *XR Faith Bridge*, an interfaith XR group, to organize a walking meditation with over 100 participants. Walking meditation is a mindfulness practice that originated during the Buddha's time, is practiced in many Buddhist traditions worldwide, and has been popularized in the West by Thich Nhat Hanh (1996). Marching from Henriette-Herz-Platz to Lustgarten, participants wore colored clothing arranged in a gradient to mimic climate warming stripes, a widely recognized data visualization of climate change.

The next day, September 19, *XR Buddhists Germany* held another walking meditation, targeting *Deutsche Bank*'s role in financing fossil fuels. The 25 participants, dressed in black, walked slowly from Friedrichstraße to the *Deutsche Bank* branch office, each carrying a sign reading "*Deutsche Bank*: Stop financing coal, oil, and gas." Upon arrival, they delivered a letter to the branch manager and concluded with a silent sitting meditation on the street in front of the bank.

The walking meditations on Sunday and Monday followed a Sōtō Zen-inspired technique, advancing one step per full breath cycle. David E. Riggs described the practice as follows:

> The super-slow style is unique to Sōtō and can now be seen in places around the world that have been influenced by Sōtō Zen. The precise ritual is thought of as having been passed down in an unbroken transmission from Dōgen (1200–1253), the founding figure who is taken as the source of all Sōtō orthodoxy. If, however, one reads the texts that the lineage has so meticulously preserved, it is clear that the details of this practice were in fact put together about 250 years ago, based on textual scholarship. (Riggs 2007, 223)

The extremely slow pace of the practice extended the relatively short-distance walks through Berlin to over an hour, transforming a traditional contemplative practice into a public performance of protest. The fusion of Buddhist meditation with political activism was underscored by the contrast between silent mindfulness and XR slogans shouted through megaphones, such as those mentioned above: "What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!"

From Buddhist Walking Meditation to Slow Marches

Since at least 2019, *XR Buddhists* have organized climate change protest marches in the form of meditative practices in both the United Kingdom and Germany. In the UK, *XR Buddhists* participated in the October Rebellion in London, facilitating daily sitting meditations and walking meditation sessions (Extinction Rebellion: XR Buddhists 2024). Around the same time in Germany, on October 9, 2019, a *Meditate-*

In was held in front of the *Hessischer Landtag*, the state parliament of Hesse (Extinction Rebellion Wiesbaden 2019).[5]

Walking meditation appears to have first been used as a form of protest by *XR Buddhists*, but was later incorporated in Germany into interfaith meditation marches under the banner of *Extinction Rebellion Faith Bridge*. *XR Faith Bridge* is an interfaith subgroup of XR and there are overlaps in membership between this group and *XR Buddhists*. Notably, mindful walking as a contemplative protest form proved inclusive and acceptable to people of various faiths. For instance, some interfaith participants in the *Faith Bridge* meditation during the Autumn Rebellion of 2022 joined *XR Buddhists Germany*'s walking meditation event the following day. While participation in a walking meditation seemed unproblematic for participants across faiths, one interfaith participant declined to carry the *XR Buddhists Germany* banner during the march, expressing that, as a non-Buddhist, he did not wish to identify publicly as such through that symbolic gesture.

Interestingly, one participant I interviewed noted that street-blocking is an "unintended yet effective side-effect" of the walking meditation technique, particularly when routes include crossing public roads. David E. Riggs provides the following strikingly vivid account of the slow, deliberate nature of the *kinhin* form of walking meditation:

> Although it may be translated "walking meditation," in order to distinguish it from seated meditation, *kinhin* as practiced today is closer to standing still than it is to normal walking. The prescribed procedure is that one should coordinate one's walking with one's breathing so that each tiny half step takes the time for a complete in and out breath. At a casual glance, the walker seems to be standing still, or frozen in mid-step. (Riggs 2007: 224)

The inherently slow pace of this type of walking meditation, which makes it well-suited for street-blocking, has attracted interest beyond the religious subgroups of XR and among other climate activist circles. *Last Generation* is particularly known for its radical tactics, including street blockades involving activists glueing themselves to the pavement. However, public acceptance of such methods has recently sharply declined. Incidents of verbal abuse, physical violence, and even drivers running over protesters have been reported. By contrast, despite effectively disrupting traffic when the route intersects with roads, slow marches are perceived as less confrontational and have not provoked the same level of public backlash, at least in Germany. During the walking meditations in Berlin in 2022, I noticed that the silent and peaceful nature of the protest march appeared to leave bystanders somewhat perplexed, uncertain of how to interpret the event. Although I had anticipated some hostility, none emerged—aside from a few amused reactions.

Slow marches have emerged as a less divisive yet equally impactful form of protest and were adopted by *Last Generation* in Germany in April 2023. The Newspaper

5 A video of the event was posted on the Facebook page of *Extinction Rebellion Wiesbaden*.

Die Zeit reported on this change of tactics with the article "Da schleichen sie." (There they slowly creep along.) (Neumann 2023). These marches, while inspired by *XR Buddhists*' slow-paced protest forms, have also been employed by other climate activist groups, including *Just Stop Oil*, *Fridays for Future,* and *Renovate Switzerland*. Unlike *XR Buddhists* or *Faith Bridge* events, however, the slow marches associated with *Last Generation* are entirely secular in nature, with no visible religious or spiritual dimension.

It is worth noting, however, that public and political responses to slow marches have differed between Germany and the UK. Despite entering the public debate, slow marches have not yet become a subject of parliamentary discussion in Germany. In contrast, the UK government directly addressed such protest tactics in the Public Order Act 2023 (UK Legislation 2023)—widely referred to in the media as the "anti-protest bill"—which specifically aimed to restrict climate activism methods, including slow marches (BBC 2023). This amendment to the Public Order Act 1986 directly addresses protest forms like slow marches by redefining "serious disruptions" as "more than minor." It became the subject of legal disputes, which resulted in an appealable High Court ruling in May 2024 that considered the new regulations unlawful (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary 2024).

Conclusion

The walking meditation case illustrates how Buddhist eco-activists have employed and reinterpreted traditional Buddhist techniques in response to the current climate crisis. Walking meditation, a practice deeply rooted in Buddhist mindfulness to cultivate a calm and attentive mind, was initially adapted by *XR Buddhists* into a form of public climate protest. It was then further secularized into slow walking during street-blocking slow marches, demonstrating how a previously religious technique used for self-development can evolve into a tool for civil disobedience and public engagement in the face of ecological crisis.

The secularization of Buddhist walking meditation reflects a trend that we can also see in the case of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which adapts a Buddhist technique for secular well-being. However, while MBSR remains primarily oriented toward self-development, eco-Buddhist climate protests are directed outward, aiming to effect social and environmental change. Since contemporary Buddhist thinkers have voiced critical comments on MBSR (Purser 2019),[6] it is unsurprising that eco-Buddhist activism that stresses political urgency has also become a point of contention within Buddhist communities.

Through a traditional Buddhist lens, such a transformation might be interpreted as a degeneration of the Dharma—an element of Buddhist end-time narratives (Scheuermann 2021: 92–95). Drawing on the conceptual framework of multiple

6 Particularly its economic exploitation has sometimes been critically perceived and coined the "McMindfulness" industry.

secularities explored by Christoph Kleine and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (2021), this shift cannot only be understood as a loss of authenticity, but in a non-evaluating sense as a process in which religious practices cross into new spheres of meaning. It reflects a fluid negotiation between a religious and a non-religious sphere, wherein a ritual like walking meditation is opened to the political sphere and creatively reappropriated. In this light, the adaptation of walking meditation into climate change protest does not represent a rupture but an expansion of usage. It was facilitated by the hyperobject climate crisis that opened up the necessary space for reimagining and change.

In any case, the eco-Buddhist activists' edgework not only has to counter the catastrophic realities of the current planetary crisis, but also the critical scrutiny and suspicion of contemporary Buddhist communities. Such edgework can indeed be regarded as a deeply affective, deliberate, collective and laborious effort, as described by Christine Hentschel (2023: 9–10),[7] which implies here a struggle not only on a personal, social, and political level but also in the realm of religion.

Hence, rather than retreating into passive despair or doomsday agony, Buddhist eco-activists engage in a form of edgework that confronts the truth of suffering explained in the Buddha's first sermon and, in this way, keep open the possibility of a transformation toward a different (and hopefully better) future.

7 "Edgework – ernstgenommen als die gefühlsintensive, geplante, kollektive und mühsame Anstrengung im Angesicht planetarer Zerstörung – lässt eine Landschaft von Praktiken des doing loss entstehen, auf die sich ein genauer Blick lohnt, um unsere Gegenwart in ihrem post/apokalyptischen Ringen zu verstehen." (Hentschel 2023: 9–10)

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ASIEN 172/173 (Juli/Oktober 2024), S. 151–154

Asien erleben

Den Kailash umrunden: Abenteuer in Tibet

Thomas Bauer

Der heilige Berg Kailash gilt als Seele Tibets. Reisebuchautor Thomas Bauer hat ihn zu Fuß umrundet. Er erzählt von Polizeikontrollen, Panikattacken und dem Reiz des Pilgerns.

Schon erstaunlich, dass kaum jemand hierzulande den Kailash kennt. Immerhin ist dieser tibetische Berg für ein Fünftel der Weltbevölkerung heilig. Bis heute stand noch kein Mensch auf seinem Gipfel. In seinem Umkreis entspringen vier Flüsse, von deren Wasser ganz Südasien abhängig ist: der Brahmaputra, der Indus, der Satluj und der Karnali, der in den Ganges mündet. Diesen Berg zu umrunden – 54 Kilometer zu Fuß auf der sogenannten *Kora* – verschafft nicht nur einen unverfälschten Blick in die tibetische Denkweise, sondern reinigt dem Volksglauben zufolge auch von allen Sünden.

18 Jahre lang hat der Kailash mich gerufen. Seit jeher faszinieren mich Orte, an denen Menschen die Hoffnung haben, etwas Außergewöhnliches zu erleben. Doch die Abgeschiedenheit dieses Gebiets, der Einfallsreichtum der chinesischen Bürokratie und zuletzt die coronabedingte Abschottung Tibets waren mir bislang im Weg gestanden. Erst seit Januar 2024 ist eine visumfreie Kurzreise durch Tibet für Deutsche möglich. Allerdings muss ich erst einmal bis zum Kailash gelangen. Und das setzt in meinem Fall eine strapaziöse Reise von Tibets Hauptstadt Lhasa bis nahe an die Grenze zu Indien und Nepal voraus – 1.300 Kilometer über eine baumlose, staubtrockene Hochebene. Irgendwann auf dieser Anreise höre ich auf, die Polizeikontrollen zu zählen. Die dauern mitunter mehrere Stunden, wobei meine „Tibet-Erlaubnis“ eine große Rolle spielt: ein Dokument, das ich Wochen im Voraus beantragen musste. Auf seiner Rückseite werde ich aufgefordert, gute Miene zum bösen Spiel zu machen: „Please keep a relaxed and happy mood!“.

Aber dann stehe ich direkt vor dem Berg – und das ist schier unglaublich. Befinde ich mich doch in Darchen, dem Ausgangspunkt der Bergumrundung, und damit schon fast auf Höhe des Montblanc. Ein nahezu mystischer Ort, weshalb mich mein Rechtschreibprogramm folgerichtig fragt: „Meinen Sie: Drachen?“. Ja, wahrscheinlich meine ich genau das. Zumindest würde es mich nicht wundern, wenn ein solches Tier hier vorbeiflöge – gestartet von jener zweitausend Meter aufragenden, schneebedeckten Pyramide, die sich direkt neben dem Dorf erhebt.

Am ersten Tag meiner Bergumrundung japse ich wie ein Hundewelpe, während akklimatisierte siebzigjährige Tibeterinnen mit ihren Enkeln an mir vorbeiziehen. Scheint die Sonne, klettert das Thermometer auf zwanzig Grad Celsius. Wolken bringen dagegen oft Schnee. Mehrmals pro Stunde ziehe ich meine Jacke an und wieder aus.

Das Ausmaß der Hingabe stellt alles in den Schatten, was ich bisher erlebt habe. Zwar sehe ich mitunter „westliche" Abenteurer mit modernster Ausstattung: Thermohosen, wasserdichten Ultraleichtjacken und höhenverstellbaren Wanderstöcken. Die wahren Pilger aber sind die Tibeter in ihren abgewetzten Klamotten, dafür mit traditioneller Ausstattung: Glaube, Leidensfähigkeit und unerschütterliches Vertrauen. Nicht wenige von ihnen absolvieren die Kora durch Niederwerfungen: Sie legen sich flach auf den Boden, gehen dann drei Schritte vor zu der Stelle, an der ihre Hände lagen, verbeugen sich dort vor dem Berg und legen sich erneut hin. Dabei murmeln sie unablässig Gebete. Drei Wochen werden sie benötigen, um den Kailash auf diese Weise zu umrunden. Verglichen mit diesen Pilgern bin ich ein Stümper, der beim ersten Windstoß zu zittern beginnt.

Trotzdem spüre auch ich die Kraft, die von diesem Berg ausgeht. Mal schwebt seine Kuppe in den Wolken, mal leuchtet sie dermaßen gleißend, dass ich versucht bin, die Hand auszustrecken, um sie zu berühren. Auf der gesamten Pilgerrunde ist der Kailash an meiner Seite. Unsereins hätte ihn wohl schnurstracks „bestiegen" und als Beweis der eigenen Größe eine Fahne in ihn gesteckt. Indem wir ihn umrunden, erweisen wir ihm hingegen Respekt. Lange vor uns war der Kailash da, und er wird es noch sein, wenn unsere Körper längst zu Staub zerfallen sein werden – oder, wie hier, zermahlen und den Geiern zum Fraß gegeben.

Das Kopfweh beginnt nach gut vier Stunden. Allzu hell ist die Sonne, ich kann kaum noch aufblicken. Von innen klopft ein sadistisches Männchen mit einem Hammer gegen meine Stirn. Mein Herz hüpft im Körper umher, als wolle es heraus. Der Boden unter meinen Beinen verschwimmt, bewegt sich wie ein Meer. Die Farben der Gebetsfahnen, der Singsang der Gläubigen – all das fließt ineinander, verklebt zu einem Rauschen, das sich in meinen Ohren festsetzt. Rechterhand erkenne ich einen Felsen, und ehe mein Bewusstsein nachkommen kann, habe ich mich auf ihn gesetzt. Kurze Zeit später hält mir irgendjemand einen Becher hin. Buttertee, auch das noch: jene fettige Brühe, die entsteht, indem man stundenlang gekochten Tee in ein Fass mit gesalzener Yakbutter gießt und anschließend darin herumstampft. In Tibet trinken ihn schon die Kinder zum Frühstück.

Kurze Zeit später bin ich bereit, weiterzugehen, trotzdem muss ich von hier an alle zehn Minuten eine Pause einlegen. Auf einmal steigt Panik in mir auf, ich fühle mich gefangen auf dieser schier endlosen Hochebene. Mit Ach und Krach erreiche ich mein heutiges Ziel: eine Baracke, auf die jemand wie einen gelungenen Witz das Wort „Hotel" geschrieben hat. Bevor ich mich schlafen lege, ziehe ich alles an, was ich mitgebracht habe. Obwohl es selbst im Inneren minus zwanzig Grad kalt ist,

gelingt es mir, bis drei Uhr zu schlafen, dann wecken mich düstere Ahnungen: Morgen gilt es, den Dolma-La-Pass zu überschreiten, die höchste Stelle der Bergumrundung. Würde ich das schaffen? Würde ich überhaupt merken, wenn es gefährlich wird? Bis wohin lohnt es sich zu kämpfen, wann wäre es hingegen ratsamer, umzukehren?

Unruhig stehe ich auf und trete hinaus. Vor mir erhebt sich, massiv und unbestechlich, der Kailash. Ich bilde mir ein, dass er mir eine Aufgabe stellt. Hier oben gibt es keinen Handyempfang und keinen Alpenverein, der einen im Zweifel vom Berg holt. Hier erfahre ich die eigene Zerbrechlichkeit, die erst dafür sorgt, dass ich das Leben neu wertschätze. Ich darf und muss mich fallenlassen, mich ganz der Kora hingeben und eine über mich hinausreichende Kraft spüren, die mich, wenn es gut läuft, auffängt. Dafür bin ich hier, darauf habe ich 18 Jahre gewartet. Und dennoch: keine leichte Aufgabe für einen „Westler“!

Am folgenden Morgen sieht der Berg freundlicher aus. Rotgelb strahlt sein Gipfel in der aufgehenden Sonne. Ich nehme das als gutes Omen und zwinge mich dazu, behutsam einen Schritt vor den anderen zu setzen – immer ein bisschen langsamer, als ich eigentlich könnte. Die Strecke weist nachdrücklich nach oben. Mehrmals rutsche ich auf dem gefrorenen, mit Felsbrocken besprenkelten Weg aus, gleite den Hang hinab und muss die eben erst gemeisterte Strecke neu hinaufklettern. Dennoch gelingt es mir loszulassen: Ich vergesse die Zeit, vergesse selbst den Weg und ergebe mich dem Spiel der Wolken mit der Sonne, dem lockeren Strom der Pilger und dem Gemurmel tibetischer Satzfetzen. So merke ich erst, als sich die Stimmung ringsumher aufhellt und mir fremde Pilger auf die Schulter klopfen, dass ich die heiligste Stelle der Kora erreicht habe. Auf den obligatorischen Gipfelfotos grinse ich wie ein Honigkuchenpferd.

Es folgt ein sechsstündiger Abstieg und eine weitere rustikale Übernachtung, ehe mich ein weitläufiges Tal zurück nach Darchen bringt. Am Wegrand sehe ich immer wieder Steine mit der Beschwörungsformel „Om Mani Padme Hum“, die jemand über den Pass getragen und dann hier abgelegt hat. Freundlich grüßt der Kailash von rechts. Er hat mir viel geschenkt, dafür gesorgt, dass ich mich neu verankert habe und wieder in der Lage bin, mich auf das Wesentliche zu konzentrieren. Vermutlich ist es das, was wir in unserem Alltag mit seinen allzu greifbaren Ablenkungen am meisten benötigen. Doch dieser Berg hat mir zugleich eine Grenze aufgezeigt: In diesem Leben werde ich wohl nicht mehr höher als 5.698 Meter aufsteigen.

Muss ich auch nicht. Der Berg ist jetzt in mir.

Thomas Bauer
Reiseschriftsteller
thomas-bauer@mail.de

Geschafft! Thomas Bauer am höchsten Punkt der Bergumrundung.

Für Bergziegen ist Klettern kein Problem.

Andrang beim Vollmondfest „Saga Dawa“

3,2,1 … meins!
Mönch im Einkaufsladen

Kulinarisch eher so mittel: Buttertee und Gerstenbrei

Hitzige Diskussion der Mönche im Kloster Sera

KONFERENZBERICHTE

Inhalt

ASIEN 172/173 (Juli/Oktober 2024), S. 156–157

Colloquium des AK SOA

Juni 2025, Online.

Bericht von Friederike Trotier

Zweimal im Jahr bietet das Sprecherteam des Arbeitskreises Südostasien ein virtuelles Colloquium für seine Mitglieder an. Seit 2021 wurden auf dieser Plattform Artikel oder Anträge *in progress* vorgestellt und Themen diskutiert, die von allgemeinem Interesse sind, wie zum Beispiel Publikationsstrategien und Reviews zu schreiben. Wenn es sich anbietet, werden auch Experten zum Colloquium eingeladen. Dies geschah zum Beispiel bei dem Thema Reviews schreiben, als ein Mitglied im Editorial Team des Journals *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies* am Colloquium teilnahm und seine Expertise einbrachte. Die Einladung zu der jeweiligen Veranstaltung erfolgt über den E-Mail-Verteiler des Arbeitskreises. Bisher variierte die Teilnehmerzahl je nach Thema und Termin zwischen 5 und 15 Mitgliedern des Arbeitskreises.

Die Colloquien stellen für alle Interessierten eine Plattform dar, um sich auszutauschen und zu vernetzen oder um Feedback zu bekommen. Die Treffen bieten nicht nur Raum für die Vorstellung eigener Arbeiten, sondern ermöglichen es auch, wertvolle Rückmeldungen und neue Impulse von Kollegen mit unterschiedlichen fachlichen Hintergründen zu erhalten. Dadurch entstehen oft neue Perspektiven und Anregungen, die unmittelbar in eigene Forschungsvorhaben oder in strategische Überlegungen einfließen können. Gerade für Promovierende und Nachwuchswissenschaftler ist das Colloquium eine niederschwellige Möglichkeit, Einblicke in Themenbereiche zu bekommen, Fragen stellen zu können oder erste Erfahrungen mit Präsentationen in einem fachlich nahen, aber zugleich unterstützenden Umfeld zu sammeln. Neben der inhaltlichen Arbeit trägt das Colloquium wesentlich zur Vernetzung innerhalb des Arbeitskreises bei, da es auch immer Raum für informellen Austausch bietet. Das virtuelle Format macht die Teilnahme unkompliziert und unabhängig vom Aufenthaltsort. Nicht zuletzt trägt das Colloquium dazu bei, die Sichtbarkeit und Relevanz der Südostasienwissenschaften in Deutschland zu stärken, indem aktuelle Fragen diskutiert und gemeinsame Strategien für Outreach und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit diskutiert und entwickelt werden.

Das letzte Colloquium fand im Juni 2025 zum Thema „Aktuell bleiben, ohne vor Ort zu sein“ statt, bei dem ein Erfahrungsaustausch darüber erfolgte, mithilfe welcher Plattformen (insbesondere Websites und Podcasts) man sich gut über Themen zu

Südostasien informieren kann, wenn man hauptsächlich in Deutschland (oder Europa) ansässig und tätig ist. Als Resultat des gemeinsamen Brainstormings entstand eine Liste von Weblinks, die an alle verschickt wurde. So konnten die gesammelten Materialien langfristig nutzbar gemacht werden. Außerdem fand in der Runde ein lockerer Austausch über das Thema statt, und es wurden weiterführende Themen, wie die Herausforderungen der Regionalwissenschaften an deutschen Universitäten angesprochen. Zum Schluss des Colloquiums wurden noch Ideen für zukünftige Treffen gesammelt, wie zum Beispiel Förderprogramme und Stipendienmöglichkeiten sowie Sichtbarkeit und Outreach der Südostasienwissenschaften in Deutschland.

Insgesamt verbindet das Colloquium des Arbeitskreises Südostasien wissenschaftlichen Austausch mit praktischer Unterstützung und persönlicher Vernetzung. Die Teilnehmer gewinnen neue Impulse für ihre Forschung, profitieren von gegenseitigem Feedback und leisten zugleich einen Beitrag zur Weiterentwicklung und Sichtbarkeit der Südostasienwissenschaften in Deutschland.

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Annual Meeting of the Southeast Asia Library Group

Chair of Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia, University of Passau, 26–28 June 2025

Report by Jana Igunma and Holger Warnk

The Annual Meeting and Conference of the Southeast Asia Library Group (SEALG) took place this year at the University of Passau in Lower Bavaria, Germany, being hosted by the Chair of Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia[1] in this beautiful city for the first time. Professor Martina Padmanabhan, Dr Friederike Trotier and their team delivered a fantastic three-day event, with their invaluable organisational support ensuring those taking part had a lovely time during their stay in Lower Bavaria. At this year's meeting, participants from Austria, Cambodia, France, Germany, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, Switzerland, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States were present both physically and virtually. On the afternoon of Thursday, 26 June, the meeting started with David Gibis leading a guided tour through the Historical Jesuit Library[2] of Passau, which holds fascinating collections of pre-nineteenth century books, sculptures, globes, ethnographica and also a small *Wunderkammer* ('curiosity cabinet') museum.

Friday morning began with a guided tour of Passau University's Central Library[3] by Hafsa Idrees, who showed attendees its Southeast Asian collections and closed stacks. Thereafter, the presentation of papers started: Martina Padmanabhan gave a welcome address and introduced to the audience the Chair of Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia and its history. This was followed by the first presentation by Juliet Olivar, Candy May N. Schijf and John Louie Zabala from De La Salle University in Biñan, Laguna, The Philippines. Their paper *Mapping voices: A scoping review and bibliometric analysis of Filipiniana oral histories* highlighted the importance of oral history in the Philippines, in particular for research on migration and labour, identity and social movements, or war and historical traumata. The next paper was presented by Cindy Nguyen from the University of California, Los Angeles, US (but joining the group fresh from fieldwork in Cambodia). Her talk on *Bibliotactics: Libraries and the colonial public in Vietnam* showed the

1 https://www.sobi.uni-passau.de/en/southeast-asian-studies
2 https://www.staatliche-bibliothek-passau.de/historische-jesuitenbibliothek/
3 https://www.ub.uni-passau.de/

importance of libraries in colonial times in French Indochina and their relationship to power as vehicles of colonial propaganda, being one of the most frequently used state institutions to that end.

The second presentation by Candy May N. Schijf on *Bridging the digital divide: A self-assessment of digital equity in Philippine school libraries* drew attention to an oft-overlooked and under-researched collection: the school library. In her preliminary interviews with 47 school librarians, mainly but not exclusively from Luzon, she investigated their efforts at bridging the digital divide in terms of policy and practice; also elaborated on were problems of infrastructure as well as the lack of suitable digital materials in Philippine vernacular languages – in particular, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilokano, Waray and many others. The next speaker was Wimonsiri Hemtanon from Mahidol University International College, Bangkok, Thailand. Her talk on *Contested heritage and community access in Banglumpoo, Bangkok, Thailand* highlighted tourism-driven development, engagement by residents and civil society activists, as well as the problems of documenting these changes for future researchers as regards the capital's oldest district. Friederike Trotier of the University of Passau, in her talk titled *Researching and teaching Southeast Asia at a German university: Role and expectation of library collections*, reflected on her changing role as a library user first as a student at her alma mater and now as a lecturer who has to introduce undergraduate students to academic literature with the aim of increasing their interest in the Southeast Asia region.

This was followed by two papers on Shan collections from Burma now held in the UK. The first was delivered by Jotika Khur-Yearn from the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and explored *What SOAS collections tell us about Shan Studies*. A handful of other places in the world aside, Shan Studies would be carried out mainly at SOAS by European researchers of a colonial and/or missionary background from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, which explains the existence of a number of Shan manuscripts in SOAS Library. Maria Kekki gave a talk about *The Shan Chevening Fellowship at the British Library* (where she works), an award which allowed, among others, professional Shan poetry composer and reciter Myo Thant Linn (Sai Hlaing) to carry out research on Shan collections located both at the eponymous institution and elsewhere in the UK. The next presentation was by Stephanie Willi on *Decolonization of the collections and archives of ETH Zurich*, addressing her and fellow staff members' efforts to that end. Their endeavours include identifying problematic areas, raising awareness and dealing with challenging terminology. She demonstrated processes from acquisition and cataloguing to presentation and archiving by giving examples from several collections in Zürich. Annabel Teh Gallop, also from the British Library, analysed several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *Lists of 'lost' Malay manuscripts* – that is, a number of said texts whose whereabouts are unknown. These lists came from Dutch East India Company predicant George Werndly, Madras army officer Thomas John Newbold, Malay author, printer and translator Abdullah Munsyi, missionary Thomas Beighton and a certain 'Inchi Mohamed'.

Ane Husstad-Nedberg spoke on *A new collection? Status of the Southeast Asian manuscripts at the Oslo University Library*. The existence there of such manuscripts came as a surprise to many participants, since the University of Oslo has not once over the years offered a Southeast Asian Studies programme while Norway never had colonial ties with Southeast Asia. They were in the library's catalogue for about 70 or more years and consist of one paper and 16 palm leaf manuscript(s), identified as Burmese (8), Cambodian (6) and the remainder in Thai and certain unidentified languages. The next paper by Cam Sharp Jones, from the Visual Arts section of the British Library, introduced the audience to *The Southeast Asian visual art collection of the British Library*. Several collections were acquired or donated from well-known personalities like Stamford Raffles, Thomas Horsfield, William Marsden and Frederick Harrop; they consist of paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, furniture, sculptures, weapons, textiles and other items. A special mention was made of the Doris Duke collection made up of items from Myanmar and Thailand.

The next two presentations focused on Southeast Asian library collections in various Chinese and Indian languages. Virginia Shih spoke on *Breathing new life into the Sinophone Southeast Asia Studies Collection at the University of California, Berkeley: Challenges and prospects*, in highlighting what is the only Southeast Asian Studies collection in the US with Chinese-language expertise. The collections held at Berkeley cover a wide range of topics on the Chinese of Southeast Asia; among the major challenges here are the identification and acquisition of relevant materials, particularly difficult in mainland Southeast Asian countries. Holger Warnk of Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany, then presented his paper on *Some notes on publishing and printing in South Asian languages in Malaysia and Singapore*. He faced similar challenges in his search for publications in Indian languages; those discovered were mostly in Tamil, but materials in Bengali, Malayalam, Punjabi and Telugu also feature. More and more Indian publishers in Malaysia and Singapore have closed down in recent decades, meaning there is a risk of overlooking publications by these minority groups.

The next presentation was by Pwint Phyu Maung, an MA student at SOAS who had also previously completed an internship at the British Library. In her talk on *Burmese illustrated manuscripts: The collections of the British Library*, she focused on Burmese folded manuscripts (*parabaik*) as representations of monarchical power, religious devotion, courtly tradition and as documents of significant historical narratives – ones originally acquired by British administrators, envoys and missionaries. The final paper was presented by Sopheaktra Suon, also an MA student at SOAS and also someone who has previously interned at the British Library. He spoke about *Recent development in cataloguing Khmer manuscripts at the British Library*. Of the 26 Khmer manuscripts on palm leaves, mulberry paper or Western paper found at the institution in question, he took a closer look at 11 manuscripts and was able to identify at least one female scribe. Further examples highlighted text from the *Reamker* epic and colophons in other manuscripts.

After the many paper presentations, SEALG came together again on Saturday for its Business Meeting. The minutes from the previous Annual Meeting were approved, then reports on activities and initiatives carried out in the past 12 months were presented by our members and representatives of participating libraries. Jana Igunma spoke about the SEALG blog[4] statistics from the past 12 months. Finally, the issue of the SEALG Archive, currently stored in the offices of the British Library, was discussed. It was agreed that it should remain in the UK since SEALG was founded there. Jotika Khur-Yearn agreed to enquire whether the SEALG Archive could be transferred to SOAS London's own academic holdings.

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4 https://southeastasianlibrarygroup.wordpress.com/

REZENSIONEN

Inhalt

Hsu An-Nie 徐安妮 (Hrsg.): Von Wahrsagern und Technofrauen. Erzählungen zeitgenössischer Autorinnen aus Taiwan.

Bochum/Freiburg: projekt (2021). 286 Seiten. 17,80 €.

Hsu An-Nie (Hrsg.): Von Berglern und Geheimagenten. Zeitgenössische Erzählungen aus Taiwan.

Bochum/Freiburg: projekt (2024). 307 Seiten. 22,80 €.

Rezension von Thilo Diefenbach

Seit 1982 sind sieben deutschsprachige Anthologien taiwanischer Literatur erschienen; bei den hier zu besprechenden Büchern handelt es sich um den fünften und den siebten Band in dieser Reihe. Leider weisen beide Bücher nicht nur übermäßig viele, oft schwerwiegende Sachfehler in den Vorworten und Anmerkungen auf, sondern präsentieren auch mehrheitlich mangelhafte Übersetzungen. Daher muss man bedauerlicherweise konstatieren, dass es sich bei den hier vorgelegten Anthologien um die mit Abstand schwächsten Vertreter ihrer Art handelt.

Ein solches Urteil erfordert eine ausführliche Begründung.

Beginnen wir mit dem früheren der beiden Bände: *Von Wahrsagern und Technofrauen* enthält ausschließlich Erzählungen von Autorinnen. Die Herausgeberin wollte damit erreichen, dass sich ihre Anthologie von den Vorgängern unterscheidet (Vorwort, S. 10). Besonders originell ist ein solcher Ansatz in unserer heutigen Zeit allerdings nicht – 1980, als Chang Mo 張默 den Gedichtband *Jade schneiden* 剪成碧玉葉層層 veröffentlichte, die erste Anthologie der taiwanischen Literaturgeschichte mit ausschließlich weiblichen Dichtern, lagen die Dinge noch ganz anders, und erst recht 1954, als Chang Shu-hans 張漱菡 Erzählungsanthologie *Schwalben* 海燕集 erschien, die ebenfalls nur Beiträge von Autorinnen enthielt.

Im Klappentext von Hsus erster Anthologie heißt es: „Die verschiedenen Sprachen und Traditionen sowie die zum Teil konkurrierenden Religionen und Weltanschauungen verleihen Taiwan auf engstem Raum einen ganz eigenen Charakter kultureller Vielfalt und Mehrsprachigkeit. Die daraus entstehende Multikulturalität mitsamt dem damit einhergehenden Multilingualismus ist wiederum eine unerschöpfliche Quelle für die taiwanische Literatur.“ Aus kultureller Vielfalt und Mehrsprachigkeit sollen also Multikulturalität und Multilingualismus entstehen. Diese Aussage ist für sich genommen merkwürdig genug, aber dann stellt man auch noch fest, dass sämtliche Erzählungen dieses Bandes ausschließlich aus dem Mandarin übersetzt wurden, also nicht zur Illustration des zitierten Satzes taugen. Im Übrigen wurde hier keine einzige indigene Autorin aufgenommen.

Im Vorwort behauptet die Herausgeberin Hsu An-Nie 徐安妮, Professorin der Germanistik an der Nationalen Hochschule für Politik 國立政治大學, Taiwan sei im 17. Jahrhundert zuerst von den Spaniern und dann von den Niederländern erobert worden (7); tatsächlich hatten die europäischen Kolonisatoren jeweils nur ein sehr kleines Gebiet besetzt (wobei die Niederländer übrigens früher auf Taiwan anlandeten als die Spanier). Auf S. 10 ist zu lesen, dass taiwanische Autoren unter der japanischen Herrschaft nur in japanischer Sprache publizieren durften – aber das ist völlig falsch: Bis 1937 konnte man problemlos auch Texte auf Mandarin veröffentlichen, und den Gebrauch des latinisierten Holo 白話字 untersagten die Kolonialbehörden bis zum Ende der japanischen Herrschaft nicht. Hsus Behauptung ist emblematisch für ihre mangelnde Vertrautheit mit der taiwanischen Literatur. Insofern ist es auch nicht verwunderlich, dass sie nur einen sehr knappen und wenig informativen literaturhistorischen Abriss liefert. Hsu erklärt dort, dass es in den 1950er Jahren einen „ersten Boom der Frauenliteratur“ gab (10/11), womit sie allerdings nur auf die Anzahl der damals von Frauen publizierten Werke abzielt. Sie erwähnt jedoch nicht den beträchtlichen Einfluss, den Frauen wie Lin Hai-yin 林海音 oder Nancy Ing 殷張蘭熙 bereits zu jener Zeit auf den taiwanischen Literaturbetrieb ausübten. Außerdem sagt sie auch nichts zu Nieh Hua-ling 聶華苓, die schon in den 1960ern nicht nur als Herausgeberin in Erscheinung trat, sondern außerdem mithilfe des von ihr und ihrem Mann Paul Engle in Iowa gegründeten „International Writing Program“ mehreren Generationen von taiwanischen Autoren beiderlei Geschlechts große Chancen eröffnete. Auch vom außergewöhnlichen schriftstellerischen Erfolg und den – nach damaligen Maßstäben – in skandalöser Weise von der Norm abweichenden Lebenswegen Ch’iung Yaos 瓊瑤 und San Maos 三毛 erfährt der Leser hier nichts. Unverständlicherweise lässt Hsu überdies Ch’en Jo-hsi 陳若曦 unerwähnt, deren Berichte über ihre Erfahrungen im China der Kulturrevolution auch in Deutschland um 1980 ihr Publikum fanden. Die Aussage Hsus, ab der Jahrtausendwende hätten sich die Autorinnen nicht mehr auf einen „weichen Ton“ beschränkt, sondern ihre „Kritik in aller Schärfe“ (11) geäußert, zeigt, dass sie offenbar nicht zwischen Literatur und Aktivismus unterscheidet. Insofern ist es umso seltsamer, dass sie nichts von dem enormen Aufsehen zu berichten weiß, das die vollkommen unangepasste Autorin Kuo Liang-hui 郭良蕙 mit ihren provokanten Werken schon in den frühen 1960er Jahren auslöste. Auch die beiden eingangs erwähnten Anthologien von Chang Mo und Chang Shu-han nennt Hsu nicht.

Am Schluss des Vorworts erklärt Hsu pauschal, die an dem vorliegenden Band beteiligten Übersetzer hätten „die Kultur Taiwans in deutscher Sprache präzise und lebendig neu aufscheinen lassen.“ (13) Dieses Diktum trifft aber nur auf jene vier Texte zu, die von Marc Hermann übertragen wurden (Lai Hsiang-yin 賴香吟: „Mein erfundenes Jahr 1987 虛構一九七八“; Ch’iu Ch’ang-t’ing 邱常婷: „Berggeister 山鬼“, Chung Wen-yin 鍾文音: „Der letzte Gast 最後的房客“, Lin Hsin-hui 林新惠:

„Die Techno-Ehefrau 一具“). Brigitte Höhenrieder und Hans Peter Hoffmann dagegen sind bei den anderen vier Geschichten leider weit unter ihrem Niveau geblieben, sprich: Viele Passagen sind in einem sehr unbeholfenen Deutsch verfasst und teilweise sogar komplett sinnentstellend übersetzt, so dass ihre deutschen Fassungen eine ernsthafte Auseinandersetzung mit den Texten sehr erschweren, wenn nicht sogar unmöglich machen.

Von der ersten Erzählung angefangen („Bukolika 田園詩“ von K’o Yü-fen 柯裕棻) gerät der Leser immer wieder ins Stocken. Prinzipiell irritiert der ständige Wechsel der Register, von dem im Original (auch bei den anderen Erzählungen) nichts zu bemerken ist: Neben „Giftbrodem“ (26), „Vestibül“ (27) und „Pein“ (47) stehen schnodderige Formulierungen wie „er fummelte und rummelte“ (39) oder – in einer anderen Geschichte – „der Onkel schlug in Taipeh auf und wollte eine klare Ansage“ (112). Man liest von „Schreibtischstühlen“ (15) statt Bürostühlen oder von „unverbrüchlichen Glastüren“ (17). Auch Sinismen trifft man immer wieder an, von „Hygienepapier“ (statt Toilettenpapier) auf den Seiten 216 und 219, „stattliche fast tausend Schriftzeichen“ (198) und „Straßensituation“ statt Verkehrslage (206). „Tante A Shen“ (34) sowie „Onkel A Shu“ (35) sind außerdem Doppelungen, denn „shen 嬸“ und „shu 叔“ bedeuten bereits „Tante“ respektive „Onkel“.

Viele taiwanspezifische Begriffe hätten erläutert werden müssen, nicht nur in der ersten Geschichte (z.B. „Pflaumenregen“ auf S. 15), sondern auch in den folgenden, etwa das „Militärtraining“ für Studenten (65). Manches ist zu schwach übersetzt, so das „Lange Parlament“ auf Seite 70 („Greisenparlament“ oder „Ewiges Parlament“ wäre für „wan-nien kuo-hui 萬年國會“ wohl besser gewesen). Unnötig sind die vielen Anglizismen, etwa „Senior High“ statt Oberschule auf Seite 109 oder „High School“ statt Mittelschule auf S. 159. „Martial Arts“ auf S. 189 heißt zu Deutsch „Kampfkunst“. Auf S. 211 findet man die „Memorial Hall“ statt der „Gedenkhalle“; später folgt das „Armed Forces Hero House“ (220), das man z.B. mit „Gasthof der Veteranen“ wiedergeben könnte. Manche dieser Fremdkörper sind dann auch noch falsch geschrieben, etwa „Everybodys Darling“ (221) oder die „Work-Live-Balance“ (214). Auf S. 251 steht „Veterans Affairs Council“ statt „Veteranenkommission“, wobei diese Institution auch noch hätte erläutert werden müssen. Besonders unschön sind, gerade in einem literarischen Text, Wörter wie „upzudaten“ (254). Und warum auf Seite 148 ein Brief Chu-ko Liangs 諸葛亮 (181-234 n.Chr.) an seinen Herrscher unbedingt auf Englisch zitiert werden muss oder die Herausgeberin im Vorwort den Namen des Nationalmuseums für taiwanische Literatur nur auf Englisch angibt (9), bleibt rätselhaft.

Viele Sätze sind komplett verunglückt: „Riesiges Rohholz mit Nummern aus rotem Lack wurde mit schwarzen Gummibändern gebündelt wie Essstäbchen, tot und mit offenliegenden Jahresringen, der Duft und die Trauer waren wie eine lautlose Elegie, verstreut, wie sie waren, auf ihrem Weg in den Norden.“ (19) „Die Entschlossenheit, die sie sich den ganzen Morgen bewahrt hatte, fiel im Angesicht dieses Sofas augen-

blicklich in sich zusammen.“ (28) „Jäh tauchte in der Ferne zwischen den Gemüseblättern ein gelber Hund auf, stürzte laut bellend auf sie zu und Echo rollte durch das Bergtal. […] Sie ging in die Hocke, umarmte den wild an ihr hochspringenden Hund und ging seiner Zunge aus dem Weg.“ (44)

Völlig unerklärlich ist mir das folgende Phänomen: Im Nachwort der Übersetzer liest man, dass eine „direkte Nachahmung der chinesischen Reihung im Deutschen schnell etwas sehr Schulaufsatzhaftes bekommen kann“ (283), womit gemeint ist, dass die in den Originalen oft anzutreffenden langen Sätze im Deutschen besser nicht nachgebildet, sondern in kürzere Sätze aufgeteilt werden sollten. Das ist korrekt – und dennoch stößt der Leser immer wieder auf Gebilde wie dieses hier:

> Nach dem Verkauf hatte er Ärger mit den Behörden, für den ganzen Grund gab es ein Projekt, ein Feriendorf, er hatte keinen halben Mao bekommen, im Gegenteil, sie hatten ihn reingelegt und er hatte aus eigener Tasche investiert, am Berg und in den Feldern, wurde das Feriendorf, unter Vortäuschung falscher Tatsachen ein Fahrradweg durch die dörfliche Landschaft gebaut, überall nichts als Bananen- und Ananasfelder, die Radfahrer hatten nichts als Mücken im Gesicht und dann der widrige Düngergeruch, von wegen da kommen Leute, nach einem halben Jahr war Schluss. (40)

Ähnliche Konstruktionen findet man beispielsweise auch auf Seite 127, 206, 255 und 256 sowie gleich zweimal auf S. 227.

Der Auftakt der dritten Geschichte – „Der Wahrsager 卜算子“ (2010) von Huang Li-ch’ün 黃麗群 – birgt derart viele Missverständnisse, dass die Geschichte ihren inneren Zusammenhang verliert. Das fängt schon damit an, dass das Wort *suan* 算 konsequent mit „rechnen“ übersetzt wird, was hier einfach falsch ist, denn es geht *immer* um Wahrsagerei (also um das Berechnen von Horoskopen u.ä.). Der Onkel kommt nicht „auf die Zukunft zu sprechen“ (108), sondern er will das Schicksal weissagen 論命; er lässt auch nicht „alles im Vagen“ (108), sondern „verbirgt 瞞“ den Inhalt eines von ihm erstellten Horoskops vor dem Kunden. Auch auf den folgenden Seiten ist vieles irreführend: „Problemlos bekam er einen Arbeitsbericht als Sprungbrett für eine kleine Anstellung an der Akademie“ (111) – gemeint ist: „Problemlos bekam er einen kleinen akademischen Posten, den er als Sprungbrett für eine Karriere nutzen konnte 順利獲一跳板小學術職“; die Hühnerbrühe riecht wohl eher nicht „fischig“ (114), sondern höchstwahrscheinlich eklig 腥. Auf Seite 115 fehlt eine Erklärung des Begriffs „Zipeng-Berechnung“, der nach meiner Vorlage übrigens „Ziping 子平“ transkribiert werden müsste.

Es gibt auch hier wieder so einige schiefe Sätze: „Wenn ich mich dieser Behandlung geduldig unterwerfe, dann nicht, weil ‚Wo Leben ist, auch Hoffnung ist‘, sondern weil je niedriger die Virusdichte umso später die Krankheit ausbricht, umso geringer die Gefahr für meinen Onkel.“ (114) „Die Ruhe, die er lange mühsam aufrechterhalten hatte, überschlug sich, er meinte, er sei sehr ruhig.“ (116) „Der Onkel fing an zu lachen und ein Fisch schlug tief auf dem Grund seiner Augen mit der Flosse“ (132) – das ist kein vom Original intendierter Surrealismus, sondern einfach nur Unsinn;

stattdessen muss es heißen: „Sein Onkel lachte, wobei seine Fältchen noch tiefer und seine Augen ganz feucht wurden. 伯笑起來，魚尾紋一拖深深到兩眼水底." Und die Schlusszeile eines Gedichts von Hsin Ch'i-chi 辛棄疾, also aus dem 12. Jahrhundert, lautet gemäß der hier vorgelegten Übersetzung: „Wenn ein Betrunkener bei einem Autounfall [!] nicht zu Schaden kommt, verdankt er das dem Himmel 醉者乘車墮不傷全得於天也" (133). Das Original scheint mir diese ‚Modernisierung' nicht zu rechtfertigen, aber geübte Translationswissenschaftler können sicher mit vielen theoriegesättigten Gründen für den Anachronismus aufwarten. Besonders bedauerlich ist, dass bei dieser Erzählung auch noch die abschließenden, eigentlich sehr anrührenden Szenen durch eine grobe, ungenaue Sprache ruiniert werden.

Ähnliche Einwände ließen sich auch vorbringen gegen so manche Sätze in Ch'en Yu-chins 陳又津 „Transkommunikation 跨界通訊" und Chang Yi-hsüans 張亦絢 „So wird man nicht an einem Tag 淫婦不是一天造成的" (wo schon der Titel eindeutig zu schwach übersetzt ist, denn wörtlich bedeutet er „Schlampe wird man nicht an einem Tag"). Stattdessen sei noch auf einige sachliche Probleme hingewiesen: Nicht der Roman *Transkommunikation* wurde 2014 mit einem Preis ausgezeichnet (185), sondern die gleichnamige Erzählung, die die Autorin dann zu einem Roman erweiterte, der 2018 erschien. In der Kurzbiographie von Lai Hsiang-yin auf S. 51 wurde nicht erwähnt, dass sie seit Jahren in Berlin lebt. In der Bibliographie zu den einzelnen Werken (285) ist meist nicht das Erstveröffentlichungsdatum der Erzählungen genannt. Und das Schriftzeichen *wan* 卍 auf S. 252 hätte gerade für deutsche Leser, die mit dem Mandarin nicht vertraut sind, unbedingt erläutert werden müssen.

Um trotz allem die inhaltlichen und literarischen Aspekte nicht aus dem Blick zu verlieren, sei noch angefügt, dass (legt man die Originalfassungen zugrunde) vor allem die Erzählungen K'o Yü-fens, Huang Li-ch'üns, Ch'en Yu-chins und Chung Wen-yins überzeugen können, weil sie eindrückliche, teilweise beklemmende Bilder des Familien- und Alltagslebens in Taiwan zeichnen; insofern hätten die Geschichten der drei erstgenannten Autorinnen eine erneute Übersetzung verdient. Lin Hsinhuis Geschichte dagegen ist schon von der Prämisse her unlogisch: Um die „Bevölkerungsexplosion" zu stoppen, werden in Taiwan Ehen mit Robotern eingeführt. Aber warum sollte eine solche Maßnahme ausgerechnet in einem Land mit extrem niedriger Geburtenrate durchgesetzt werden?

Für die Erstellung des zweiten Bandes hatten die Herausgeberin und ihre Übersetzer (verstärkt durch Andreas Guder) zwei Jahre Zeit und nicht mehr, wie zuvor, lediglich ein Jahr. Darüber hinaus haben sich noch zwei weitere Dinge geändert: Erstens hat nicht mehr die Herausgeberin selbst das Vorwort verfasst, sondern Fan Ming-ju 范銘如, Professorin für taiwanische Literatur an derselben Universität wie die Herausgeberin, und zweitens wurden diesmal keine Autoren aufgrund ihres Geschlechts ausgegrenzt. Das Schwerpunktthema dieses Bandes ist „Identität". Der Klappentext des Buches verheißt erneut elf „sorgfältig übersetzte" Erzählungen, was aber genauso aussagekräftig ist wie beim ersten Band – denn auch bei diesem zweiten Buch

ist die Herausgeberin ihrer Aufgabe in puncto Qualitätskontrolle nicht nachgekommen. Bei den insgesamt sehr gelungenen Übersetzungen von Guder und Hermann stellt das letztlich kein Problem dar, bei den anderen jedoch umso mehr.

Dazu eine Bemerkung in eigener Sache: Nachdem der erste Band erschienen war, erhielt ich ein Rezensionsexemplar vom Verlag. Bald darauf teilte ich der Herausgeberin mit, wie sehr mich die mangelnde Qualität des Buches befremdet habe, woraufhin sie mich später bat, als Lektor für den zweiten Band zu fungieren. Ich sagte zunächst zu, legte das Mandat aber nach der Überarbeitung nur eines Textes nieder, weil ich feststellen musste, dass die restlichen mir vorliegenden drei Erzählungen (die Herausgeberin hatte mir erst gar nicht alle elf Texte zukommen lassen) nicht die Voraussetzungen für eine Überarbeitung boten und dass die besser gelungenen Übersetzungen keine Chance haben würden, das schlechte Gesamterscheinungsbild des Bandes aufzuwerten. Verbunden mit meinem Rückzug von diesem Buchprojekt war der Rat an die Herausgeberin, ganz neue Übersetzungen anfertigen zu lassen. Das ist jedoch nicht erfolgt.

Bereits das Vorwort zu *Von Berglern und Geheimagenten* enthält eine Reihe von Fehlern, wobei mir das Original nicht vorliegt und somit nicht immer eindeutig festzustellen ist, ob diese zu Lasten der Verfasserin oder aufs Konto des Übersetzers Conrad C. Carl gehen. Einige Beispiele für Fehler im Vorwort: Die Ch'ing-Dynastie hat sich am Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts nicht ganz Taiwan einverleibt (8), sondern lediglich Teile davon, und sie hat zu keinem Zeitpunkt die gesamte Insel kontrolliert. Die Niederlage der Ch'ing gegen Japan fand nicht hundert Jahre später statt (8), sondern mehr als zweihundert Jahre später, nämlich 1895. Dass während der Kriegsrechtsphase „Dissidenten" von der Kuomintang 國民黨 (KMT) verfolgt und hingerichtet wurden (8), ist unscharf formuliert, denn der Weiße Terror richtete sich offiziell vor allem gegen sogenannte „kommunistische Spione 匪諜" und später gegen „Separatisten", wobei faktisch jeder, der sich auch nur ansatzweise kritisch gegenüber der Kuomintang äußerte, diesen Kategorien zugeordnet werden konnte. Das Japanische wurde nicht bereits mit dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges vom Mandarin abgelöst (11), sondern erst ein Jahr nach der Übernahme Taiwans durch die KMT verboten. Das ist insofern bedeutsam, als dieses Jahr der Mehrsprachigkeit zu den interessantesten Phasen der taiwanischen Literaturgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts gehört. „Beijinghua 北京話" meint nicht den „in und um Beijing gesprochenen Dialekt" (18), sondern die auf dem Nordchinesischen basierende, von offiziellen Stellen festgelegte Standardsprache.

Einiges klingt merkwürdig gewunden: „Neben der Jagd und der Fischerei gehört für die indigenen Völker das gesprochene Wort seit jeher zum Selbstverständnis der eigenen Kultur" (15) – das soll wohl eine vornehme Umschreibung des Umstands sein, dass diese Völker schriftlos waren. Und dass die Ureinwohner angesichts des Zustroms von Chinesen nicht nur ihre Eigentumsansprüche, sondern auch ihre „Rede- und Meinungsfreiheit einbüßten" (15), halte ich nicht für plausibel, denn solche Freiheitsrechte existierten während der Ch'ing-Dynastie nicht.

Manche Ausführungen Fans sind aus meiner Sicht kaum nachvollziehbar, etwa wenn sie die Erzählung T'ung Wei-kos 童偉格 folgendermaßen erläutert: „Wenn die Felder zur Unkenntlichkeit verwüstet, die Meere und Flüsse vergiftet und aller Lebensraum zerstört ist, was kann ein verspätetes lokales Bewusstsein zum Erhalt der Heimat überhaupt noch beitragen?" (21) Solche apokalyptischen Beschwörungen sind heutzutage nicht unüblich, nur passen sie überhaupt nicht zu T'ungs Geschichte. An anderer Stelle heißt es, dass Ch'i-teng-sheng 七等生 „die Heuchelei sozialer Repräsentationen" thematisiere (12) – was auch immer das bedeuten soll; für mich steht eindeutig der Rückzug eines vom Leben enttäuschten Individuums in die Selbstisolation im Vordergrund. Ebenso wenig erschließt sich mir, was die Erzählung Hu Shu-wens 胡淑雯 mit „han-chinesischem Chauvinismus" (19) zu tun haben soll, wo sie sich doch vor allem den sozialen Unterschieden zwischen Schülern widmet.

Soviel zum Vorwort, nun zur ersten Geschichte. Ch'i-teng-shengs „Die Flügel der Silberwellen 銀波翅膀" (1980) beginnt mit den folgenden Worten: „Das Boot war verschwunden; es war, wie es war, die Nacht hatte es verschluckt, es musste aber noch auf dem Meer sein; wenn es auch sehr weit weg sein mochte und sehr klein, es war noch da." (25) Jedoch: Nur die deutsche Fassung beginnt mit diesen Worten, nicht das Original; der Satz taucht in der gesamten Geschichte nicht auf. Er befindet sich lediglich auf dem Vorblatt des Bandes, dem die Erzählung entnommen wurde, entstammt also wohl einer anderen Geschichte.

„Die Flügel der Silberwellen" ist ein sehr schwieriger Text, denn der Autor hatte prinzipiell eine Neigung zu grammatikalischen Abweichungen und zu Neologismen sowie zur Verwendung graphischer Varianten von Schriftzeichen. Die Übersetzung erschwert das Verständnis der auch inhaltlich nicht ganz einfachen Geschichte schon insofern, als die Rückblenden ohne den im Deutschen angebrachten Tempuswechsel wiedergegeben werden (25, 29). Dass der Übersetzer darüber hinaus sehr häufig Textabschnitte, die im Original zusammengefügt sind, durch willkürliche Absätze trennt oder durch Absätze getrennte Abschnitte verbindet, macht das Verständnis nicht einfacher, ebenso wenig wie lexikalische Missverständnisse: „Später kam sein Freund öfter zu ihm heraus, meistens Mittwoch gegen Abend war sein Kommen stets eine Freude für das rätselhafte Leben des schweigsamen Lu Sheng." (30) Tatsächlich ist wohl eher gemeint: „Sein Besuch bereitete dem schweigsamen Lu Sheng jedes Mal eine unaussprechliche Lebensfreude (他的到來總是帶給沉默寡言的盧生一點莫名的生活喜悅.)".

Der hohe Schwierigkeitsgrad der zweiten Geschichte – „Rapssaat 油蔴菜籽" (1982) von Liao Hui-ying 廖輝英 – ist vor allem auf den großen Anteil von umgangssprachlichen und taiwanesischen (Holo 台語) Wendungen zurückzuführen; in die mir vorliegende Originalfassung sind nicht umsonst über 1100 erklärende Fußnoten eingefügt (Übersetzer oder Herausgeberin hätten vielleicht darauf hinweisen sollen, dass diese Erzählung faktisch in zwei Sprachen verfasst ist). Es existiert außerdem eine

englische Fassung, die man hätte konsultieren können, was aber offenbar nicht erfolgt ist, denn die deutsche Übersetzung ist derart von Unebenheiten und Fehlern durchzogen, dass man der Geschichte kaum noch folgen kann. Erzählt wird vom Leben einer Frau, vor allem ihrer Kindheit und Jugend, die über lange Jahre hinweg unter ihrem nichtsnutzigen Vater und ihrer verwöhnten Mutter leidet – und auch darunter, dass der Bruder ihr gegenüber ständig vorgezogen wird (der abschätzige Vergleich von Mädchen allgemein mit Rapssamen taucht mehrfach auf). In der Schule ist sie allerdings sehr fleißig und erfolgreich, obwohl sie nebenher fast alle Arbeiten im Haushalt erledigen und sich um ihre Geschwister kümmern muss. Später geht sie im Beruf ihren Weg, und selbst wenn das Verhältnis zu ihrer Mutter schwierig bleibt, so schließt die Erzählung doch mit einer versöhnlichen Szene. Zu Beginn sagt der Großvater der Ich-Erzählerin zu ihrer Mutter, deren Ehemann sich als Versager erwiesen hat:

> 貓仔，查某囡仔是油麻菜籽命，做老爸的當時那樣給你挑選，卻沒想到，撿呀撿的，撿到賣龍眼的。老爸愛子變做害子，也是你的命啊，老爸也是七十外的人了，還有幾年也當看顧的，你自己只有忍耐，恁不似父，是沒辦法挺寵你的。 (132-133)

> Kätzelchen, ein Mädchen, das ist wie Rapssaat, als dein Papa damals die Wahl für dich getroffen hat, wie hätte man gedacht, bei all der Sorgfalt am Ende auf eine Niete zu setzen. Papas liebster Sohn ist ein Reinfall, das ist nun dein Leben, ich bin über siebzig und wenn ich auch vielleicht noch ein paar Jahre über dich wachen kann, musst du lernen, dein Schicksal zu tragen, ich werde alt und bald keine Möglichkeit mehr haben, dich wie ein Vater zu verwöhnen. (44-45)

> Kitty, the fate of a woman is like seed of the rape plant. A father can only try to make a selection that, hopefully, would be right for you, but, unexpectedly, after all that picking, we got one like him. Your papa's love for you turned out to be your undoing. It is your destiny. Your old father is over seventy, and will look after you in his remaining years. Your husband is not like your father. There's no way that he would spoil you lovingly as your father did. (140-141)

Selbst wenn man die holprige Konstruktion außer Acht lässt – der deutsche Leser fragt sich hier vor allem, wieso der Vater plötzlich von seinem „liebsten Sohn" redet. Und wenn er das Original kennt, fragt er sich auch, warum am Schluss des Absatzes keine Rede mehr vom Ehemann ist.

An einer anderen Stelle fragt sich die mittlerweile erwachsene Tochter mit Bedauern, warum ihre Eltern nach so vielen Jahren immer noch nicht gelernt haben, friedlich zusammenzuleben; die deutsche Fassung bringt diesen Gedanken aber leider nicht zum Ausdruck:

> 那一切的一切，竟似那般毫無代價的發生？所有的傷害，竟也是聲討無門的肆虐嗎？ (161)

> Musste das alles nicht letzten Endes seinen Preis haben? Kamen alle Verletzungen nicht letzten Endes aus einer Grausamkeit, die sich mit Anklagen nirgendwohin wenden konnten? (69)

> Hadn't they paid a price for all this? And all those hurts, were they injuries that could not be compensated for? (160)

Und noch ein Beispiel dafür, dass die deutsche Fassung oft so sehr am Original klebt, dass sie unverständlich wird. Als der Vater eine finanzielle Entschädigung für seinen Ehebruch anbietet, entgegnet ihm ein Angehöriger seiner Gespielin:

> 這款天大地大的歹事，兩千塊只是擦個嘴而已。 (144)
>
> Bei so einer Riesengeschichte, da sind Zweitausend gerade mal über den Mund gewischt. (54)
>
> Two thousand dollars normally would be a mere opener considering the magnitude of this shameful affair. (148)

An einer Stelle erwähnt die Mutter mehrfach direkt hintereinander, dass sie sich um ihre vier Kinder sorgt – zumindest im Original (139) und in der englischen Fassung (144-145); im Deutschen hingegen redet sie zweimal von drei Kindern und erst am Schluss von vieren (49-50). Auf S. 53 heißt es: „Nun begann mein kleiner Bruder, der wie ein Wilder aussah, zu greinen (那像番仔的大弟, 143)". An vielen Stellen des Buches ist von „Wilden" die Rede, wenn in den Originalen *fan-tsai* 番仔 steht, also „Barbar", womit die taiwanischen Ureinwohner gemeint sind. Der griechische Begriff „Barbar" klingt aus heutiger Sicht zwar unangemessen, deckt sich aber inhaltlich exakt mit dem, was Chinesen und Taiwaner einstmals mit „fan(-tsai)" verbanden. Die englische Fassung löst das Problem recht elegant, indem sie „my unruly younger brother" (148) schreibt. Der Begriff „Wilder" hat außerdem auch den Nachteil, dass sich mit ihm nur merkwürdig klingende Komposita bilden lassen, wie in diesem Buch mehrfach demonstriert wird: „Wildengebiet" (133), „Wildenpenis" (134), „Wilden-Messer" (153).

In der Geschichte „Die kleine Prinzessin 小公主" von Rimuy Aki ist eine ähnliche Unsicherheit im Umgang mit den Indigenen zu beobachten, etwa wenn deren Tänze als „Bergtänze 山地舞" (158) bezeichnet werden. Das mag lexikalisch zwar korrekt sein, hätte aber eine Erläuterung verdient – die englische Übersetzung ist mit „aboriginal dance" jedenfalls deutlich verständlicher. Auch „einheimische Kinder" (162) statt „indigene Kinder 原住民小孩 " ist verfehlt, denn die Siniten (also Han / Holo und Hakka) sind schon seit geraumer Zeit auf Taiwan ebenso heimisch wie Austronesier. Von erheblichen Verständnisproblemen zeugt diese Stelle:

> 我們高家在葛啦拜部落是世居的家族，靠西北方的太寧山就是我們「莎萬」家族的大本營。莎萬家族在葛啦拜是具有相當地位的，畢竟從傳統的眼光來看，我們家族擁有最優秀的獵人，工於耕職的婦女，遵行泰雅族 Gaga 的族人，從現代的眼光來看，莎萬家族的青壯輩多半受過中高等教育，從事公職的人也不少。 (131)
>
> Die Gaos, also unsere Familie, waren alteingesessene Klapay, das Hauptquartier unserer ‚Shawan'-Sippe lag im Nordwesten, am Berg Thengin in Fujian. Die Shawans hatten im Stamm eine gewisse Stellung, schließlich hatte unsere Familie

> traditionell gesehen die herausragendsten Jäger, ihre Frauen arbeiteten auf dem Feld und webten und gehörten zum Gefolge des Gaga-Clans der Tayal; aus moderner Sicht hatte über die Hälfte der jüngeren Shawans eine Mittel- und Hochschulausbildung, nicht wenige arbeiteten sogar im öffentlichen Dienst. (161)
>
> My family, Gao, had lived in Gelabai for generations. That Tainin Mountain in the northwest was the headquarters of our Sawan family. The Sawans held a high status in Village Gelabai. Traditionally, our family provided the most skillful hunters and the most productive women – skilled at farming and sewing, and the most disciplined villagers under the rules of Gaga of the Atayal; in modern times, most young and middle-aged people of the Sawans were well-educated. Many of us were public servants. (6)

Ganz abgesehen davon, dass es reichlich abwegig ist, die Heimat eines taiwanischen Ureinwohnervolks in Fujian zu verorten – dass im selben Buch der Begriff „gaga" in einer Übersetzung korrekt erläutert wird, nämlich als Moralkodex der Atayal (151), hier aber fälschlicherweise als Eigenname aufgefasst wird, muss man vor allem der Herausgeberin anlasten. Und dass die Übersetzerin dann wenige Seiten später auch noch das Wort „verrückt 瘋狂" ausgerechnet mit „gaga" wiedergibt (173), ist höchst ungeschickt.

Dazu kommt, dass der Begriff „Stamm 部落" nicht nur eine Personengruppe, sondern auch deren Siedlungsgebiet bezeichnen kann und dann eben mit „Dorf" oder „Siedlung" übersetzt werden muss. Dies sorgt mehrfach im Text für Verwirrung, z. B. auf S. 162 („oberer und unterer Stamm") oder auf S. 166, wo die Formulierung „in dem friedlichen Stamm" so klingt, als wolle die Autorin darauf hinweisen, dass die Atayal sich mittlerweile die Kopfjagd abgewöhnt hätten. In Wirklichkeit muss der Satz lauten: „[Die Nachricht von der Verlobung] sorgte in unserem sonst so ruhigen Dörfchen für helle Aufregung 帶給安靜的部落許多的熱鬧." – Unklar ist übrigens auch, warum die Autorin Rimuy Aki in diesem Band (im Gegensatz zu ihrem ebenfalls indigenen Kollegen Walis Nokan) mit ihrem sinitischen Namen Tseng Hsiu-mei 曾修媚 in Erscheinung treten muss.

Mangelnde Vertrautheit mit der Ureinwohner-Thematik spricht auch aus der Fußnote auf Seite 141: „Unter der japanischen Besatzung Taiwans waren die Ureinwohner ‚Barbaren' oder ‚Bergler', ‚Bergler' blieben sie bis 1984 die Diskriminierung beseitigt wurde und der Begriff ‚Ureinwohner' eingeführt wurde." Hier stimmt gar nichts: Der Begriff ‚Barbaren (*fan* 番/蕃)' war schon während der Ch'ing-Herrschaft und sogar davor gebräuchlich; bereits 1604 tauchte er im Titel einer Abhandlung Ch'en Tis 陳弟 auf. Die Japaner verwendeten *fan* zwar noch, ersetzten es aber allmählich durch die Bezeichnung *takasago* 高砂, eine traditionelle japanische Bezeichnung für Taiwan, die auf die hohen Berge der Insel verweist. Wenn man will, kann man *takasago* mit „Bergler" übersetzen, wenngleich „Bergbewohner" oder „Bergvölker" vielleicht etwas weniger holprig klänge. Jedenfalls verschwand der Begriff *takasago* mit den Japanern, und die Kuomintang ersetzte ihn durch „Landsleute in den Bergen 山地同胞 (山胞)". Dieser Terminus wiederum wurde beileibe

nicht 1984 abgeschafft, stattdessen wurde in diesem Jahr aber der „Verein zur Stärkung der Rechte indigener Taiwaner 台灣原住民權利促進會“ gegründet. Erst 1994, nach vielen Protesten und Petitionen, fand der Begriff „Ureinwohner“ Eingang in die Verfassung.

In einer weiteren Fußnote auf S. 145 wird übrigens behauptet, dass die KMT die schmähliche Niederlage ihrer Nationalarmee gegen die Kommunisten jahrzehntelang nicht eingestehen wollte: „Erst Long Yingtai […], Schriftstellerin und ehemalige Kultusministerin, […] hat in ihrem 2009 erschienenen Buch *Strom und Meer 1949* 大江大海一九四九 zum ersten Mal öffentlich ausgesprochen – und damit das Taboo [sic] gebrochen –, dass die Kuomintang den Bürgerkrieg gegen die Kommunisten verloren hat.“ Wie mir der bekannte Demokratie-Aktivist und ehemalige politische Häftling Yao Chia-wen 姚嘉文 (geb. 1938) – einer der Verurteilten des *Formosa*-Vorfalls 美麗島事件 des Jahres 1979 – bestätigte, ist diese Darstellung wiederum vollkommen falsch. Nicht die Niederlage war vor 1987 mit einem Tabu belegt, sondern die Behauptung, die Rückeroberung des Festlands sei unmöglich. Die Niederlage und den Rückzug der Nationalarmee dagegen gestanden schon während der Kriegsrechtsphase zahllose, auch hochrangige Persönlichkeiten der KMT und der Armee ein. In der Literatur finden wir einen Beleg dafür beispielsweise in dem 1971 erschienenen und damals sehr populären Band *Menschen in Taipeh* 台北人 von Pai Hsien-yung 白先勇: In der dort enthaltenen Erzählung „Staatsbegräbnis 國葬“ benutzt der Autor in dem hier zur Debatte stehenden Zusammenhang ganz unumwunden die Formulierungen „besiegte Armee 敗軍“ (326) und „endgültiger Rückzug vom Festland 大陸最後撤退“ (327).

Wie schon im ersten Band begegnet der Leser auch im zweiten mehreren unschönen, schwer verständlichen Bandwurmsätzen (s. etwa S. 28, 33, 67, 239, 263) und verunglückten Formulierungen: „Er bestand von Kopf bis Fuß aus nichts als dem sogenannten Lebensunterhalt“ (39; gemeint ist, dass er nur für die Arbeit lebte 滿身只是所謂謀生; 270). „Ein Mädchen, das nichts kann und nichts weiß, das wird in der Zukunft von einem Mannsbild abhängen, dass es was zum Essen hat.“ (58) „In den Straßen shoppen, wäre Mama alleine niemals gegangen“ (70). „Im Raum herrschte plötzlich ein herzliches Hallo“ (41). „In sein hübsches Gesicht war ein sauberes Augenpaar eingelegt“ (159). „Ihr ganzes Gesicht knallte röter als die Mittagssonne“ (255). „Die Baseballkappe auf seinem Kopf überdeckte das saubere und ordentliche Haar, die den angenehmen Seifenduft aber nicht überdecken konnte“ (265). „Wen er dies hören ließ, schüttelte den Kopf“ (271). „Manchmal konnte er denken, der Großvater habe in Wirklichkeit in einer gewöhnlichen Zugnummer gesessen.“ (279) Jemand erinnert sich daran, wie man sich früher damit zufriedengab, „aus Essschälchen zu essen und aus Wasserkellen Wasser zu trinken“ (174). Wieder jemand anders gießt seinen Gästen „orangefarbenen Orangensaft ein“ (173/174), was im Original deutlich weniger albern klingt (倒出一杯杯橘色柳橙汁, 142) – gemeint ist nach meinem Verständnis eine besonders kräftige Färbung des Getränks. In einer

Geschichte redet ein Student seinen Kommilitonen immer mit „Sie“ und „Herr Yang“ an (212); im Original ist jedoch von „Yang-chün 楊君“ die Rede (151), wobei die zweite Silbe eine Übernahme aus dem Japanischen darstellt (*-kun*) und eher vertraulich-freundschaftlich als distanziert klingt. Weitere Beispiele für Übersetzungsfehler und schlechte Formulierungen ließen sich noch seitenweise anführen.

Auch die Nachbemerkungen dieses Bandes weisen einige Probleme auf: „Arbeitslosigkeit, Poker und frittierter Tintenfisch 失業，撲克，炸魷魚“ von Ch’i-teng-sheng ist kein Roman (302), sondern eine Erzählung. Der Titel der Essaysammlung „Chi-jang-ko 擊壤歌“ von Chu T’ien-hsin 朱天心 ist mit „Bodenschlaglied“ eher schlecht übersetzt (302); es handelt sich hier um ein den Titel eines anonymen Gedichts aus dem chinesischen Altertum, der bereits als „Bauernlied“, „Beim Zerschlagen der Erdkrume gesungen“ und „Lied der Alten beim Schlagholzspiel“ ins Deutsche übertragen worden ist. Dass mit „Kapitelroman“ (304) der traditionelle Romantypus der Ming- und Ch’ing-Zeit gemeint sein soll, hätte man vielleicht anmerken können.

Natürlich haben auch in diesem Band wieder einige Erzählungen ihre Qualitäten, vor allem Lo Yi-chüns 駱以軍 „Abgang 離開“, eine sehr gute Parabel auf den Autoritätsverlust der auswärtigen 外省 Eliten nach der Aufhebung des Kriegsrechts; T’ung Wei-kos „Verstecken 躲 “, die Geschichte eines Mannes, der seine Familie verlässt, weil er kein Bauer sein will, und erst Jahrzehnte später, nachdem er unter Tage und auf hoher See gearbeitet hat, wieder in seine Heimat zurückkehrt; Kan Yao-mings 甘耀明 „Geisterzug 神秘列車“, eine politische Allegorie, die geschickt mit Elementen des Magischen Realismus spielt und (im Original) eine stark lyrisch gefärbte Sprache aufweist. Umso mehr wäre im Falle der beiden zuletzt genannten Erzählungen dringend eine Neuübersetzung vonnöten.

Sachliche Fehler, falsche Übersetzungen oder verunglückte Formulierungen mögen sich in allen der bisher erschienenen deutschen Anthologien zur taiwanischen Literatur finden, aber die hier besprochenen Bände belegen in allen drei Kategorien mit Abstand die beiden vordersten Plätze. Die Hoffnung der Herausgeberin, dass ihre Bücher „das Verständnis der deutschsprachigen Leser für Taiwan vertiefen helfen und neue Freunde für die taiwanische Literatur gewinnen“ werden (300), kann sich wohl kaum erfüllen. Diese beiden Bände sind kein Ruhmesblatt für die meisten der Beteiligten. Und sie sind vor allem keine Werbung für die taiwanische Literatur.

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Thilo Diefenbach

Jimmy Brainless: Im Spiegel der Pfütze.

Salzburg: Müry Salzmann Verlags GmbH, 2024. 332 S., EUR 28,00.
ISBN 978-3-99014-257-8.

Jimmy Brainless: Im Spiegel der Ahnen.

Salzburg: Müry Salzmann Verlags GmbH, 2025. 288 S., EUR 28,00.
ISBN 978-3-99014-270-7

Rezension von Julia Marinaccio

In zwei Werken, *Im Spiegel der Pfütze* und *Im Spiegel der Ahnen*, arbeitet der junge österreichisch-taiwanesische Autor Elias Hirschl, alias Jimmy Brainless, seine Familiengeschichte über mehrere Generationen auf. Diese entfaltet sich über zwei Kontinente und ereignet sich in den zwei Ländern, die auf den ersten Blick nicht unterschiedlicher sein könnten. Während der Autor im ersten Band, *Im Spiegel der Pfütze*, großteils auf seine Kindheit, Eltern, deren Geschwister und die Großeltern fokussiert, reist der zweite Band, *Im Spiegel der Ahnen*, in die weiter entfernte Vergangenheit und nimmt die Lebensgeschichten der Urgroßeltern und Großeltern mit auf. Beide Erzählungen verlaufen achronologisch und Personen des ersten Bandes kehren auch im zweiten Band wieder, was zu einer engen Verflechtung der beiden Erzählungen führt und sie zu einer großen Familiengeschichte verschmilzt.

Auf über 600 Seiten gibt der Autor intime Einblicke in persönliche Momente und Ereignisse, die er teilweise selbst erlebt oder aus Erzählungen von anderen gesammelt hat. Darüber hinaus kontextualisiert er gekonnt die individuellen Lebensrealitäten mit Erklärungen zu allgemeinen gesellschaftlichen Entwicklungen, die seine und viele andere Familien in beiden Ländern über den Lauf eines Jahrhunderts geprägt haben. Vielmehr aber erarbeitet der Autor ein detailreiches und lebendiges Portrait der Mitglieder seines engsten und erweiterten Familienkreises. Sein eloquenter und direkter Schreibstil schickt den/die Leser:in auf eine Reise und lässt ihn/sie Teil dieser Momente werden.

So unterschiedlich die Kontexte und Kulturen von Österreich und Taiwan auch sind, so zeigen die beiden Bände auch die vielen gemeinsamen Erfahrungswerte wie Entbehrungen, Tod, Generationenkonflikte und familiäres Beisammensein. Auch universelle Archetypen finden sich wieder, wie zum Beispiel der knausrige und ständig auf Sparsamkeit bedachte Großvater aus Taiwan, der auch im Zeitalter des allgemeinen Überflusses tief Geprägtes aus Zeiten der Entbehrung nicht zu überwinden vermag.

Weitgehend erzählt im Präsens und historischen Präsens, springt der Autor ständig zwischen Gegenwart, jüngerer und älterer Vergangenheit hin und her. Für die Rückblenden bedient er sich der Allegorie einer Wasserpfütze, die er regelmäßig aufsucht, um nach Antworten in der Vergangenheit zu fischen. Der Umfang und der Detailreichtum zeugen von einer akribischen Recherche und einem ausgeprägten Interesse

des Autors an seinen Wurzeln, die er gekonnt zum Leben erweckt. Wir können nur vermuten, dass diese Suche von seiner In-Betweenness motiviert ist.

Man kann dem Autor daher in vielerlei Hinsicht gratulieren. Aus der literarischen Perspektive fehlt es den Erzählungen allerdings noch an Tiefe; so kommen *Im Spiegel der Pfütze* und *Im Spiegel der Ahnen* nicht an epochale Werke der Weltliteratur, wie Gabriel García Márquez *Hundert Jahre Einsamkeit,* heran. Auch die historische Einbettung des Familiendramas gelingt dem Autor weniger gekonnt als in den herausragenden autobiographischen Werken von Wu Zhuoliu, *Orphan of Asia*, und Eileen Chang, *Love of a Fallen City*. Die Analogie der Pfütze wäre für die Rückblenden eigentlich nicht nötig gewesen, wirkt oftmals etwas banal – aber über Geschmack lässt sich bekanntlich immer streiten, auch in der Literatur. Obwohl die beiden Bände je 300 Seiten fassen und unglaublichen Detailreichtum beinhalten, sind sie in wenigen Stunden gelesen. Das liegt daran, dass der Rhythmus der Sprache immens schnell ist, was die Lesegeschwindigkeit automatisch erhöht und nicht zum Verweilen einlädt.

Trotz dieser Schwächen schillert an vielen Stellen das schriftstellerische Talent des Autors durch. Er verfügt über eine ausgesprochene Eloquenz und sein humoristischer Schreibstil gestaltet die Lektüre kurzweilig und unterhaltsam. Vielleicht also bloß ein ungeschliffener Diamant in der Diaspora-Literatur? Wir erwarten gespannt die nächste Publikation!

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Rainer Werning und Jörg Schwieger (Hg.) (2025): Von Marcos zu Marcos.

Promedia, 2025, 264 S., € 24,00; E-Book: € 19,99.
ISBN: 978-3-85371-550-5.

Rezension von György Széll

Dank der Frankfurter Buchmesse von 2025 ist dieses Land, das im Allgemeinen in den Nachrichten nur anlässlich von Naturkatastrophen – hauptsächlich Taifunen – auftaucht, etwas stärker und angemessener wahrgenommen worden. Aus diesem Anlass hat auch die Beilage *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* am 27. September 2025 eine sehr lesenswerte Zusammenstellung von Beiträgen veröffentlicht. Dabei sind die Philippinen mit 117 Millionen Einwohnern das 14. bevölkerungsreichste Land und somit an sich ein internationales Schwergewicht.

Die beiden Herausgeber kommen aus sehr unterschiedlichen Richtungen und haben sich aber bereits früher in ihrem Engagement insbesondere für die Philippinen zusammengefunden. Rainer Werning ist Politikwissenschaftler und Publizist mit den Schwerpunkten Südost- und Ostasien. Seit 1970 absolvierte er mehrfach längere Studienaufenthalte in den Philippinen. Jörg Schwieger ist evangelischer Theologe und Germanist. Er war von 1982 bis 1986 Geschäftsführer der „Aktionsgruppe Philippinen“ und von 1987 bis 1991 Geschäftsführer des Philippinenbüro e.V. sowie langjähriger Mitarbeiter im kirchlichen Entwicklungsdienst in unterschiedlichen (Leitungs-)Funktionen. Gemeinsam haben sie bereits das *Handbuch Philippinen: Gesellschaft, Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur* (Berlin, regiospectra, 2019, 6. Aufl.) herausgegeben (s. dazu auch meine Besprechung im *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, 50/1-2, 2013: 187-189). Zum 60. Jahrestag des Beginns der Marcos Sr.-Herrschaft erscheint nun gewissermaßen der hier zu besprechende Sammelband als aktualisierte Veröffentlichung.

Der Band umfasst 67 verschiedene Beiträge von 33 Autoren; zahlreiche davon sind Übersetzungen. Hinzu kommen verschiedene Zusatzinformationen der beiden Herausgeber; darunter acht Interviews sowie Dokumentationen, weiterführende links und Literaturangaben. Fünfzehn Beiträge stammen von Rainer Werning, drei von Schwieger. Die zahlreichen Übersetzungen wurden von beiden sowie von weiteren Autorinnen und Autoren verfasst. Das Land mit seinen über 7.000 Inseln ist kulturell, religiös, sozial, ethnisch und politisch so vielfältig, dass es eher einem *Mosaik* oder einem *Puzzle* als einer einheitlichen Nation gleicht. Der Band wird dieser Vielfalt durchaus gerecht und gliedert sich in folgende Hauptabschnitte: Nach der Ouvertüre folgen Beiträge zur Geschichte, zu Leben und Überleben, Gesellschaft und Politik, Wirtschaft, Filipinos im Ausland, Klima und Umwelt, Die Linke, sowie ein Schlussakkord. Zweifelsohne ist es absolut unmöglich, dieser Vielfalt in einer Besprechung gerecht zu werden. Die wesentlichen Fragen, die sich den Herausgebern und dem deutschsprachigen Publikum stellen, lauten:

1. Wie konnte es zu der Herrschaft von Marcos Sr. kommen?
2. Wieso führte der Machtwechsel – trotz Volksmacht – 1986 nicht zu einem fundamentalen Regimewechsel?
3. Und schließlich: Wie war es möglich, dass Marcos Jr. – der Sohn von Diktator Marcos Sr. – 2022 demokratisch zum Präsidenten gewählt werden konnte?

Die Antworten sind komplex und müssen tief in die Kolonialgeschichte zurückverfolgt werden. Nach jahrhundertelanger spanischer Okkupation eroberten die USA 1902 endgültig das Archipel, um es 1946 in die Halb-Unabhängigkeit zu entlassen. Von einer Halb-Unabhängigkeit kann deshalb gesprochen werden, da nicht nur Militärbasen verblieben, sondern auch das amerikanische politische, Bildungs-, Wirtschafts- und Rechtssystem übergestülpt wurde und amerikanische Konzerne bis heute einen dominanten Einfluss ausüben (S. 36). Intern verblieben auch über Jahrhunderte gewachsene Clanstrukturen, die bis heute das politische Leben dominieren (s. 22 f.). Daneben können sich Minderheiten – wie die Moros trotz jahrzehntelangem Bürgerkrieg – und auch andere indigene Gruppen kaum durchsetzen. Zweifelsohne tragen die internen Konflikte unter den progressiven Kräften eine Mitschuld an der Misere, wie die sehr beachtenswerte Selbstkritik von Robert Francis Garcia belegt (S. 231-235). Insgesamt wird ein hervorragender Überblick über den Zustand der heutigen Philippinen in all ihren Facetten geboten. Damit hat der Band ein Alleinstellungsmerkmal in der deutschen Bibliographie, da keine vergleichbare Veröffentlichung auf Deutsch ansonsten verfügbar ist. Der Büchermarkt wird in Bezug auf die Philippinen von Reiseführern und immerhin einiger Belletristik dominiert.

Die philippinische Gesellschaft ist nach der Lektüre m.E. durch folgende Phänomene geprägt:

1. Die über 7.000 Inseln, die es zu einer *Seefahrernation* schlechthin machen. Ein Viertel aller Seeleute weltweit sind Filipinos. Eine Frage, die sich mir in diesem Zusammenhang stellt, lautet: Wie steht es mit der *Piraterie*? Sie stellt ein zunehmendes Problem in Südostasien dar, wird aber im Buch mit keinem Wort erwähnt.
2. Sie sind ein *Auswanderungsland*. Gastarbeiter finden sich fast überall besonders in den Golfstaaten, aber auch in den USA und in Deutschland. Sie bilden jeweils eine sehr aktive Diaspora.
3. Der *informelle* Sektor, der 40 % der Gesamtwirtschaft umfasst, wird zwar erwähnt, aber trotz seiner enormen Bedeutung nicht weiter ausgeführt. Das liegt sicher an der Datenlage, wie der Begriff ja schon nahelegt.
4. Immerhin haben die Philippinen trotzdem alle acht ILO-Grundstandards sowie 38 weitere Abkommen ratifiziert. Die Frage bleibt jedoch offen, ob auch alle implementiert werden.

Ein kleines formales Manko betrifft meines Erachtens die fehlenden Indizes. Bei einer solch komplexen Darstellung wären diese hilfreich, um ggf. schnell zu einem bestimmten Thema Zugang zu finden.

Am Ende bleibt die Frage aller Fragen: Sind die Philippinen letztlich gar unregierbar? Offensichtlich nicht ganz, denn es handelt sich im Gegensatz zu vielen anderen Regionen zum Glück – noch? – nicht um einen *failed state*. Aber die Herausforderungen sind groß. Immerhin rangieren die Philippinen im *Democracy Index 2024 der* Economist Intelligence Unit auf Platz 51und gelten damit als unvollständige Demokratie – ähnlich wie die USA. Im *World Happiness Report 2025* belegen sie Platz 57, im *Human Development Report 2025* hingegen nur Platz 117. Beim *Transparency Perception Index 2024* haben die Philippinen 33 von möglichen 100 Punkten und befinden sich damit im letzten Drittel von 180 Nationen. Also insgesamt eine gemischte Bilanz, die schlechter sein könnte, aber sicherlich kein Trost.

All diese Indizes sind seit Jahren mit dem Erstarken rechtsextremer Bewegungen und Parteien rückläufig. Die Philippinen sind ein Teil davon. Ob dieser Trend demnächst umgekehrt werden kann, ist offen. Immerhin besteht weiterhin eine starke Zivilgesellschaft – wie in diesem Buch an vielen Stellen aufgezeigt wird –, die möglicherweise doch noch eine Wende zum Besseren bewerkstelligen kann. Die Filipinos – außer in der deutschsprachigen Diaspora – werden durch das Studieren dieses Buchs wohl kaum zur progressiven Veränderung beitragen können. Aber dominieren nicht mittlerweile insbesondere bei der jüngeren Generation die sogenannten *sozialen Medien* mit all ihren negativen Konnotationen bei der Informationsbeschaffung? Denjenigen, die sich aber weiterhin auf das gedruckte Wort – sei es auch digital – verlassen, sei dieses Buch wärmstens empfohlen.

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Ilker Gündoğan: The Politics of Football in China: Institutional Change and Political Steering Under Xi Jinping.

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2025.
ISBN: 978-3-031-74600-0

Rezension von Stefan Messingschlager

Since Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012, football has unexpectedly emerged as a prominent component of China's political landscape. The elevated political attention given to a sport in which China has historically underperformed appears paradoxical at first glance. Yet, as Ilker Gündoğan compellingly demonstrates in his incisive study, this apparent paradox is precisely why football constitutes an ideal analytical lens through which to understand deeper institutional transformations and modes of political steering under Xi Jinping. Football thus becomes a revealing prism reflecting the systematic recentralisation of governance structures – a hallmark of Xi's leadership style.

To conceptualise this profound institutional transformation, Gündoğan draws on the notion of "Top-Level Design" (顶层设计), which underscores a clear hierarchical governance logic markedly distinct from the fragmented authority patterns preceding Xi's tenure. Methodologically rigorous, the study employs detailed process tracing, reconstructing institutional shifts through careful examination of official policy documents, media reports, and structured expert interviews. Theoretically, Gündoğan grounds his analysis firmly within Actor-Centred Institutionalism (ACI), following Mayntz and Scharpf, which allows him to examine institutional dynamics and their effects on actor behaviour. He complements this framework with Political Steering Theory (PST), analytically distinguishing between "hard" instruments such as direct control and disciplinary sanctions, and "soft" mechanisms including symbolic politics and incentives. By combining these approaches, Gündoğan convincingly bridges sinological research with broader governance analyses, demonstrating the analytical richness inherent even in seemingly peripheral policy fields.

Gündoğan systematically unfolds his central argument of recentralisation and intensified political steering through a clearly structured and persuasive chapter progression. In the opening chapter, "Why Football Helps Understand Xi Jinping's China", he succinctly captures football's symbolic and strategic significance as a key component within the broader political narrative of China's "national rejuvenation". He convincingly argues that football is far from a trivial or purely symbolic domain; rather, it reveals central political ambitions and core governance dynamics of the contemporary Chinese regime.

Chapter 2, "Anti-Corruption and Disciplinary Campaigns in Chinese Football", vividly illustrates the practical implementation of this hierarchical steering logic through sweeping anti-corruption initiatives. Gündoğan examines campaigns that

have intensified significantly since 2022, persuasively interpreting these measures not merely as short-term disciplinary interventions but as strategic instruments for consolidating long-term political control. This chapter effectively demonstrates how institutional norms and expectations have been systematically redefined to align football governance tightly with central political objectives.

Chapter 3, "Emergence of New High-Level Governing Bodies", further develops this analysis by exploring the creation and empowerment of new central institutions, such as the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission and the Inter-Ministerial Joint Conference on Football Reform. Here, Gündoğan carefully delineates the shift from fragmented, decentralised authority towards clearly defined hierarchical governance structures. Particularly insightful is his nuanced examination of the ambivalence surrounding the officially proclaimed autonomy of the Chinese Football Association (CFA), contrasting sharply with the reality of increasing political oversight and central control.

Gündoğan deepens this institutional analysis by considering local policy experiments and societal impacts in Chapters 4 ("Policy Experimentation Under the 'Extended Shadow of Hierarchy'") and 8 ("Chinese Parents and Campus Football"). His examination of the Campus Football initiative compellingly demonstrates how local actors – particularly schools and parents – find themselves under increasing political pressure to comply with centrally imposed policy directives. His analysis astutely captures how recentralisation, while enhancing immediate compliance, simultaneously undermines local flexibility, innovation potential, and broader social acceptance.

Internationally, this logic of intensified political steering generates notable tensions, vividly analysed in Chapter 5 ("'Irrational' Overseas Football Investments"). Gündoğan expertly dissects China's politically motivated investments in prominent European football clubs between 2015 and 2017, revealing how these initiatives, driven primarily by political rather than economic rationales, ultimately proved both financially and politically counterproductive. The subsequent corrective actions undertaken by Chinese authorities underscore the inherent limitations of exporting centralised governance models to international markets.

The global implications of China's authoritarian steering are examined further through detailed case studies in Chapters 6 ("The DFB and Tibet") and 7 ("Mesut Özil, Arsenal FC and Xinjiang"). In both cases, Gündoğan convincingly elucidates how China employs diplomatic and economic leverage to compel international actors into aligning with its political preferences. Collectively, these chapters underscore how China's domestic institutional logic increasingly shapes global interactions, influencing international norms and behaviours well beyond its borders.

In his concluding chapters ("Lessons from Chinese Football in the Xi Jinping Era" and "Conclusion and Prospects of Chinese Football"), Gündoğan synthesises his empirical findings within a coherent theoretical framework. He carefully dissects the complex ambivalences of authoritarian steering, arguing convincingly that

systematic recentralisation, while facilitating effective short-term policy alignment, poses substantial risks to the regime's long-term adaptability and innovative capacity. From this perspective, he outlines three plausible development scenarios, ultimately identifying an "institutional recalibration" – a strategic balance of centralised steering with limited local flexibility – as the most realistic trajectory.

Overall, Gündoğan masterfully demonstrates how an ostensibly peripheral domain such as football provides profound insights into the political and institutional transformations currently reshaping Xi Jinping's China. The innovative integration of China Studies, governance theory, and sports politics, underpinned by rigorous methodological grounding, produces a nuanced and compelling analysis of contemporary authoritarian governance mechanisms. The study's greatest strength lies in this analytical synthesis, bridging theoretical precision with detailed empirical investigation.

With this impressive analytical achievement, *The Politics of Football in China* constitutes a substantial contribution to contemporary scholarship on China, authoritarian governance, and globalised sports politics. The book is thus highly recommended to scholars specialising in China and governance studies, as well as practitioners and policymakers interested in understanding the complex political dynamics shaping global sporting arenas.

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Cord Eberspächer, Jürgen Kloosterhuis, Zou Ailian, Hu Zhongliang, Andreas Steen, Xu Kai, Xu Jian (Herausgeber), bearbeitet von Cord Eberspächer: Preußen-Deutschland und China 1842–1911. Eine kommentierte Quellenedition.

Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2023. 592 Seiten, ISBN 978-3-428-18198-8, 109,90 Euro.

Rezension von Thomas Weyrauch

Keiner sprach damals über Decoupling, wohl aber über Waffenlieferungen an China. Wir befinden uns im 19. Jahrhundert und es geht um das Preußen im postnapoleonischen Europa.

Dem Titel nach setzt Eberspächers Edition 1842 zum Zeitpunkt der Beendigung des Ersten Opiumkrieges durch den sino-britischen Vertrag von Nanjing an, welcher als Beginn der Fremdbestimmung Chinas durch ausländische Mächte anzusehen ist. Tatsächlich geht aber die Quellensammlung weiter zurück bis ins Jahr 1809. Der Quellenbezug auf das Jahr 1842 ist jedoch insoweit maßgeblich, als zu dieser Zeit eine neue Qualität der preußisch-chinesischen Beziehungen erreicht wurde.

Eberspächer gliedert sein Werk in fünf Kapitel:

1) Protokoloniale Beziehungen: Preußens Interesse und Chinas Desinteresse bis 1859
2) Das Eindringen in China und die Integration in das koloniale System
3) Politische Repräsentation Chinas zum Ziele der Selbststärkung: Die Gesandtschaft in Berlin (1866–1908)
4) Asymmetrische Handelsbeziehungen im kolonialen System (1863 – 1906)
5) Kulturtransfers und Bildungsexport: Die Stärkung Chinas zur Steigerung deutschen Einflusses (1876–1911).

In der Einleitung verdeutlicht Eberspächer, dass sowohl Preußen als auch China nicht viel voneinander wussten, wobei in der Folgezeit gegenseitige Hochachtung das Unwissen ersetzte. So konstatierte etwa der Schriftsteller Karl Tanera, der bereits China bereist hatte, in einem Artikel der *Preußischen Jahrbücher* 1888: „Wir müssen gestehen, dass manche unserer europäischen Diplomaten von einem oder anderen bezopften Sohne des himmlischen Reiches etwas lernen können.“ Sehr bald schon hatte allerdings Deutschland für China einen Vorbildcharakter – selbst nach dem Übergang zur deutschen Kolonialpolitik gegenüber dem riesigen asiatischen Staat. Und umgekehrt war China für Preußen strategisch so wichtig, dass zwischen 1869 und 1914 ununterbrochen deutsche Kriegsschiffe in chinesischen Gewässern zugegen waren.

Der Zeitraum zwischen der Wahrnehmung Preußens durch die chinesische Politik bis zum Aufbruch der preußischen Ostasienexpedition unter Graf Friedrich zu Eulenburg wird im Kapitel 1 „Protokoloniale Beziehungen: Preußens Interesse und Chinas Desinteresse bis 1859“ umrissen. Seit dem Bekanntwerden des britisch-chinesischen Vertrags von Nanjing im Jahr 1842 bis zur Entsendung des Grafen gaben sich Preußen und damit auch die übrigen Staaten des Deutschen Zollvereins zurückhaltend, sodass sie lediglich als Trittbrettfahrer und ohne ein erkennbares koloniales Konzept in Erscheinung traten. Dieser Zeitraum ist folglich als „protokolonial“ zu bezeichnen. Die Politologin Susanne Zantop kommentierte jene Zurückhaltung dahingehend, die preußische Regierung sei zu dieser Zeit noch von kolonialen Phantasien unbeeindruckt geblieben. Verzichtete Preußen zu dieser Zeit auf den Erwerb einer Kolonie in China, so wuchs das Interesse am Chinahandel schlagartig. Der in Hamburg ansässige chinaerfahrene Händler Wilhelm Oswald schlug dem preußischen Finanzminister von Bodelschwingh sogar vor, eine Expedition mit einem Sachkundigen zur Erkundung des chinesischen Marktes auf den Weg zu schicken, nachdem er sich als einen solchen vorgestellt hatte, und antichambrierte, die „Lösung dieser Aufgabe [*sei*] wohl einer so einflußreichen mit so hoher Intelligenz und großen pecuniären Mitteln ausgerüsteten Regierung wie der Königl. Preußischen würdig und angemessen“. Immerhin schaffte es Preußens Diplomatie, 1947 ein Exequatur für ein Generalkonsulat in Guangzhou (Kanton) in englischer Sprache zu erhalten.

In Kapitel 2 „*Das Eindringen in China und die Integration in das koloniale System*“ offenbart Preußen seine Neigungen, auch weltpolitisch aufzusteigen, indem die preußische Regierung ein Eulenburg unterstelltes Geschwader unter Beteiligung von Prinzregent Wilhelm nach Japan, China und Siam entsandte. Als mögliche Kolonie hatte Eulenburg die Insel Taiwan im Auge und gab hierfür am 9. Dezember 1860 dem Schiff *Elbe* den Auftrag, „Formosa“ zu erkunden, wobei einige Matrosen jedoch beim Übersetzen eines Beibootes „aus einem das Ufer begrenzenden Gebüsche von den Eingeborenen mit Gewehrfeuer empfangen“ wurden. Lieutenant Reinhold Werner ließ daraufhin „mit Geschützen auf die am Strande liegenden Wohnungen feuern“.

Dieses Scharmützel stellte offensichtlich weder für den Expeditionsleiter Eulenburg noch für die chinesische Seite einen Hinderungsgrund dar, am 2. September 1861 in Tianjin einen Freundschafts-, Handels- und Schifffahrtsvertrag zu schließen, der auf der einen Seite das Kaiserreich China, auf der anderen, deutschen Seite Preußen, die Zollvereinsstaaten, die Mecklenburgischen Herzogtümer und die Hansestädte als Partei benannte.

Mit der Zusammenarbeit auf militärischer Ebene entsandte Preußen Instrukteure und konnte fünf Jahre nach dem Vertragsabschluss eine politische Vertretung in Beijing etablieren, wovon Kapitel 3 „Politische Repräsentation Chinas zum Ziele der Selbststärkung „berichtet*:* Erhebliche Schwächen im chinesischen Verwaltungssystem

wurden insbesondere durch das Fehlen gut vorbereiteter und professionell handelnder Diplomaten deutlich. Das lag unter anderem an einer fehlenden Wertschätzung für Emissäre, die im Ausland China vertreten sollten. Je weiter von der Heimat entfernt, desto mehr haftete ihnen der Ruf einer Verbannung an. Umso schlimmer war es, wenn ein Diplomat, wie etwa Guo Songtao, Assimilationsbemühungen an den Tag legte, in westlicher Kleidung auftrat und an westlicher Kultur interessiert war. Im britischen Satireblatt *Punch* als „John Chinaman" verspottet, galt er in heimischen Gefilden als Landesverräter und Abweichler vom Konfuzianismus, wurde beschimpft und musste um sein Leben fürchten.

Eine Deutschland zuzurechnende Schande waren respektlose Berliner, durch welche „die Bediensteten der kürzlich hier eingetroffenen chinesischen Gesandtschaft bei ihrem Erscheinen auf den Straßen belästigt, ja sogar insultirt" wurden.

Kampfer, Chinawurzel, Elfenbein, Fächer, Ingwer, Leinenhanf, Feuerwerksartikel, Papier, Porzellan, Tee, Opium und Seide waren chinesische Handelsgüter die zunehmend von militärischer Hardware aus Preußen aufgewogen wurden, wie das Kapitel 4 „Asymmetrische Handelsbeziehungen im kolonialen System (1863 – 1906)" offenbart. Deutsche Waffen wurden gern von China aus zwei Gründen gekauft. Erstens waren weder Preußen noch andere deutsche Staaten an den Opiumkriegen beteiligt; zweitens hatte der Sieg über Frankreich 1971 die deutsche Überlegenheit aufgezeigt.

Das Kapitel 5 „Kulturtransfers und Bildungsexport: Die Stärkung Chinas zur Steigerung deutschen Einflusses (1876 – 1911)" bezeugt, dass eine stattliche Zahl von Studenten und Lehrern nach der Reichsgründung 1871 nach Deutschland kamen, die nicht nur die Vermittlung von „Realwissenschaften" kennenlernten, sondern auch Industrieunternehmen besuchen durften. Deutsche Lehrkräfte unterrichteten zudem in China. So wurde unter anderem die Tuberkulosebehandlung in China bekannt: „Mittels Spritzen von geheim hergestellter flüssiger Arznei (…) gelangte die Wirkung der Arznei in die Lungen. Die Patienten spucken alle Würmer (Bakterien) aus und die Krankheit wird geheilt".

150 inhaltsstarke Urkunden des Geheimen Staatsarchivs Preußischer Kulturbesitz, des Bundesarchivs mit den Abteilungen Militärarchiv in Freiburg/Breisgau und Deutsches Reich in Berlin, des Politischen Archivs des Auswärtigen Amtes und des Ersten Historischen Archivs in Beijing, 17 Quelleneditionen, 28 Memoiren und Briefe sowie entsprechend reiche Literatur waren die Basis für Eberspächers Quellensammlung, die durch ein Personenverzeichnis abgerundet wurde.

Cord Eberspächers umfangreiches wissenschaftliches Werk bringt nicht nur eine Vielzahl neuer historischer Aspekte hervor, sondern bietet eine breite Forschungsgrundlage, etwa für Dissertationen.

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Klaus Bardenhagen: Die wichtigste Insel der Welt. Was Sie wissen müssen, um Taiwan zu verstehen.

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Rezension von Thilo Diefenbach

Es kommt selten vor, aber in manchen Fällen kann man Autoren und Verlegern einfach nur zu ihrer Titelwahl gratulieren. Dieses Buch hier ist so ein Fall, denn der Titel erregt Aufmerksamkeit und fordert in seiner provokanten Absolutheit sogar zum Widerspruch heraus, ist aber gleichzeitig wohlbegründet, schließlich könnte Taiwan der Anlass zu einem Konflikt zwischen zwei Großmächten werden, der auch Europa und die Weltwirtschaft in erhebliche Mitleidenschaft ziehen würde. Die Hintergründe dazu legt der Autor in 16 Kapiteln ausführlich dar.

Bardenhagen, der seit 15 Jahren in Taiwan lebt und als freier Journalist für diverse deutsche Medien Berichte über die politische Lage der Insel verfasst, beginnt seinen Erstling mit den beiden Themen, die Taiwan endgültig die internationale Aufmerksamkeit sicherten: den von wüsten Drohungen der chinesischen Regierung begleiteten Besuch Nancy Pelosis in Taipeh im August 2022 und die überaus erfolgreiche wirtschaftliche, gesellschaftliche und medizinische Bewältigung der Coronakrise. Darauf folgen knapp dreißig Seiten zur Geschichte Taiwans vor 1895 und fünfzehn weitere Seiten zur japanischen Kolonialzeit. Auch wenn der Schwerpunkt des Buches also eindeutig auf der Nachkriegszeit liegt, so erklärt Bardenhagen auch die weiter in die Geschichte zurückreichenden Hintergründe der heutigen prekären Lage Taiwans doch in der gebotenen Ausführlichkeit – und vor allem anschaulich, mit vielen, gelegentlich sogar humorvollen Details, etwa wenn er beschreibt, dass die Einwohner Keelungs bis heute den Seelen der französischen Soldaten, die 1884/85 beim Kampf um ihre Stadt fielen, angemessene Opfergaben darbringen: nämlich Wein und Baguette (S. 56).

In erster Linie aber bietet der Autor in diesem Buch eine verlässliche Einführung in die taiwanische Geschichte und Gegenwart, die sehr gut für jeden geeignet ist, der sich einen Überblick verschaffen will – und selbst Experten dürften hier und da noch Details entdecken, die ihnen zuvor unbekannt waren. Vor allem seine Kritik an der üblichen Berichterstattung deutscher Medien zu Taiwan (13. Kapitel) und an der übervorsichtigen Haltung der deutschen Regierung (14. Kapitel) sind überaus lesenswert, ebenso wie das 8. Kapitel, das von den (leider bei vielen ausländischen Journalisten sehr gut funktionierenden) Propagandatricks der chinesischen Regierung berichtet. Auch seine über mehrere Kapitel verteilten Ausführungen zu den signifikanten Unterschieden zwischen dem „Ein-China-Prinzip“ der Kommunistischen Partei und der „Ein-China-Politik“ verschiedener Länder sind positiv zu vermerken. Hervorzuheben ist außerdem seine insgesamt sehr sorgfältige Recherche, die sein Buch wohltuend über das Niveau vieler anderer deutscher Beiträge zu Taiwan emporhebt.

Einige kleinere Mängel weist das Buch allerdings schon auf, so zum Beispiel die ebenso stereotype wie überflüssige Zwischenüberschrift „Warum es wichtig ist“ am Ende jedes Kapitels. Störend sind auch die zahlreichen Anglizismen wie „Taiwan Garrison Command“ (132), „First Girls’ High School“ (223) oder „Sunflowers“ (164). Vom englischen Sprachgebrauch verursacht sind offensichtlich auch stilistische Missgriffe – etwa wenn Lee Teng-hui als „verkapptes Unabhängigkeits-U-Boot“ tituliert wird (133) oder wenn von „besonderen Staat-zu-Staat-Beziehungen“ (164) die Rede ist. Störend sind auch verunglückte Sätze wie „Beginnend 2027 soll Dresden produzieren“ (158) oder „Peking sucht nach Schwächen, in die es stoßen kann“ (217). Gelegentlich stößt man auch auf falsche Angaben – so hat zum Beispiel die Zeitschrift *Formosa* 美麗島 (1979), abgesehen von einigen wenigen Gedichten, so gut wie gar keine literarischen Texte veröffentlicht (128); und dass die Japaner kurz nach Beginn ihres Kolonialregimes ein „hukou“ genanntes System der „Haushaltsregistrierung“ eingeführt haben sollen (64), ist in doppelter Hinsicht falsch, denn erstens lautet der Name dieses Systems der wechselseitigen Überwachung innerhalb von Nachbarschaften und Gemeinden *pao-chia* 保甲 (jap. *hokō*), und zweitens wurde es bereits 1733 von den Mandschuren auf Taiwan eingeführt – zumindest nominell, denn erst die Japaner setzten es stringent in die Tat um.

In den letzten Kapiteln leidet Bardenhagens Argumentation etwas unter seiner stark vereinfachenden Gegenüberstellung von China und „dem Westen“. Natürlich besteht kein Zweifel daran, dass der Versuch Chinas, Taiwan entweder durch wirtschaftlichen Zwang oder durch einen Krieg in die Unterwerfung zu zwingen, indiskutabel ist, und dass Taiwan im Kampf gegen die kommunistische Bedrohung jede Art von Unterstützung verdient hat, steht außer Frage. Aber dass die USA eine „regelbasierte globale Ordnung“ verkörperten (226), ist spätestens seit dem völkerrechtswidrigen, mit frei erfundenen Vorwürfen gerechtfertigten Angriffskrieg gegen den Irak 2003 und der staatlich sanktionierten Folter in Guantanamo nicht mehr so richtig glaubhaft. Bardenhagens Einschätzung, der Fall des russischen Angriffs auf die Ukraine zeige, dass eine unprovozierte Invasion „in den Augen der Welt“ schwer zu rechtfertigen sei (224), klingt etwas zu optimistisch – den meisten Ländern der Welt scheint dieser Krieg ziemlich egal zu sein; es herrscht ja nicht einmal in der EU Einigkeit zu dem Thema. Dass China mit Rücksicht auf die Meinung der „Weltgemeinschaft“ auf einen Krieg gegen Taiwan verzichten würde, dürfte wohl ausgeschlossen sein. Zu guter Letzt: Dem Buch fehlt ein Index zu Personennamen.

Trotz solcher Detailprobleme ist zu hoffen, dass Bardenhagens Buch eine breite Leserschaft findet und dass gerade deutsche Journalisten sich von ihm dazu anregen lassen, bei Berichten zu Taiwan etwas genauer hinzuschauen und auch präziser zu formulieren, anstatt es bei oberflächlicher Betrachtung zu belassen und von China geprägte Parolen nachzubeten.

Thilo Diefenbach

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Zusammengestellt von Uwe Kotzel

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