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BALÁZS SZIGETHY

(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

Thoughts on Cord Knotting as an Early Record-Keeping System in Ancient China

Abstract

Is it possible to demonstrate the existence of cord knotting in ancient China, and if so, how might it have influenced the evolution of the Chinese writing system?

In this paper I am aiming to examine the existence of cord knotting in ancient China and its potential influence on the evolution of Chinese writing. By reviewing extant Chinese scholarship and comparing cord knotting practices with similar mnemonic and accounting devices worldwide, I propose that although cord knotting predates Chinese writing, it did not directly lead to its development; rather, it evolved contemporaneously as an independent system of record keeping, that later contributed stylistic elements to the formation of Chinese characters. Cord knotting served as a mnemonic tool for recording labour days, wages, loans, and other vital economic transactions, and its visual conventions may have contributed to the formation of the silk classifier found in many Chinese characters. This study situates cord knotting within broader global practices while reevaluating traditional Chinese texts, suggesting that the aesthetic and functional elements of knotted cords played a significant role in the emergence and evolution of Chinese logographs.

Building on this claim, the paper develops three lines of argument. First, it establishes a global comparative baseline for ‘rope media’ by synthesizing Cyrus L. Day’s tripartite typology—magical/apotropaic, mnemonic (numerical and cultural), and practical knots—and by reviewing rich cross-cultural cases such as the Andean khipu, Polynesian and North American mnemonic cords, Hawaiian ‘tax-gatherer’s memorandum cords’, and the Ryukyuan warazan straw-cord counting system. These analogues demonstrate that knot-based records can sustain durable administrative functions—time-reckoning, tribute accounting, genealogical recall—without becoming phonographic writing. They therefore provide a plausible technological ecology within which a Chinese cord-record system could have coexisted with, but remained distinct from, early script.

The study re-examines Chinese classical references to cord knotting (*Yi-xici*, *Shuowen* postface, Zheng Xuan’s commentaries, *Wenxin diaolong*, *Zhuangzi*, and ethnographic notices) not as direct proof but as cultural memory of an administrative practice. To avoid what I call ‘textual primacy bias’, these sources are balanced against palaeographic and archaeological evidence. Applying Demattè’s criteria for identifying precursors to Shang script, the paper concludes that cord knotting does not qualify as writing in the strict sense, functioning instead as a mnemonic aid for counting and verification. Claims that rope impressions, such as those at Dadiwan, represent archives of records are re-evaluated and more plausibly interpreted as constructional remains, though they still confirm rope’s availability in the Neolithic.

At the same time, a narrower stylistic influence is proposed in line with Keightley's 'visual pun' model, whereby script signs schematize familiar tools and practices. Early forms of 糸 and related graphs (夷, 專, 傳) may encode the cord, the knot, the knot-keeper, and the act of transmission. Other graphs tied to numbers, contracts, and genealogy (e.g., 廿, 卅, 卌, 賁, 貸, 世, 孫) plausibly echo domains where knot records were used—tallying, valuing, and marking descent. This does not imply a linear derivation of writing from cords, but rather that knotting culture provided visual and conceptual resources for scribes.

Cord knotting is therefore best understood as a parallel technology that was eventually supplanted by graphemic writing, yet left stylistic fingerprints in early Chinese script, particularly within silk-classifier graphs and administrative vocabulary. While perishable materials make direct proof unlikely, archaeological preconditions—rope production, counting needs, and social complexity—support the plausibility of such systems. In this light, writing in China developed independently but might have absorbed aspects of cord knotting's visual and semantic logic.

Keywords: cord, rope, knot, cord knotting, rope knotting, Chinese writing, Chinese characters, oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, seal script, 結繩, 結繩記事

Introduction

The main focus of this paper is on cord knotting as a counting device in ancient China and its potential influence on Chinese writing. Intriguingly, the term *jiesheng*¹ 結繩 tying knots, functions in modern Chinese as a synonym for accounting, particularly in economic contexts. This invites critical questions: Is this linguistic link merely a reflection of modern archaizing tendencies that romanticize the past? Or could it signal a deeper, historically rooted association? To evaluate this, we must first establish three foundational questions: Did functional cord knotting systems exist in ancient China? If so, did they meaningfully influence the development of Chinese writing? To what extent might later cultural perceptions (like the modern accounting term) reflect historical reality versus retrospective projection? Addressing these requires rigorous examination of archaeological, textual, and palaeographic evidence.

The well-known Chinese knot and its tying techniques gained popularity during the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279 CE), however, if such knots were ever functionally connected to accounting, that role was subsequently abandoned. What exactly constitutes cord or rope knotting?

¹ For the sake of consistency, tone marks have been omitted throughout the paper, except in Sections 3.7 and 3.8, where they are retained due to their relevance to phonological and etymological analysis.

1. Cord knotting around the world

To be able to put ancient Chinese cord knotting into context first we have to define what it is and how other cultures looked at it.

Cord knotting is a device that consists of knots tied on a single strand of rope or more strands of ropes made by grass, thatch, reed, vine, bark or other natural materials used by people. By a broader sense of definition, one could easily categorize rosaries as a type of cord knotting tools, but to understand what knots on ropes mean and how they work we first turn to Cyrus L. Day² who provides a detailed account on cord knotting around the world, and differentiates three types of knots on ropes on the basis of purpose or usage examining more than a dozen of knotting systems from different places around the world, including Khonds- and Stantali people of India, the Japanese *warazan* from Ryukyu Islands, the Makonde people of East Africa, the Wagogo People of Central East Africa, the Baganda people of Uganda; the Pueblo Indians, the Siouan tribes, the Maidu people the Arapaho tribes all from North America; the Peruvian Incas, the Guiana tribes and Orinoco Indians in Venezuela; the people of Marquesas Islands in Polynesia, the Hawaiian tax collectors, the Philippine Negritos and the Nauru Islanders all from the Pacific Islands.

The first type is related to magic and religion; the second type is the mnemonic type with two sub-categories and last the third type is the practical knots. The magic knots are presumed by primitive people to have power over:

1. the weather;
2. health and disease;
3. sex including love, marriage, conception, and childbirth;
4. spirits, demons and deities.

The influence of magic knots may be:

1. maleficent or beneficent;
2. intentional or spontaneous;
3. effective at close range or at a distance;
4. effective at once or after a lapse of time;
5. the work either of a layman or of a professional, like a witch, a wizard, or a medicine man.

In various cultures, knots have been used in rituals to influence natural elements like wind and rain. Rainmakers often avoid using knots, believing they inhibit rainfall; instead, they perform actions mimicking rain, such as dripping water

² Day 1957, 2021.

through leaves. Conversely, wind brokers, or witches, have historically claimed to control winds by tying knots in cords. Sailors would purchase these knotted cords, with the belief that untying the first knot would release a gentle breeze, the second a stronger wind, and the third a tempest. This practice was noted in regions like Finland, Lapland, Denmark, and various parts of the British Isles. The concept also appears in literature, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, where Aeolus, the king of winds, provides Odysseus with a bag containing bound winds. These traditions highlight the symbolic power attributed to knots in weather-related folklore.

Throughout various cultures, knots have been integral to traditional healing practices, symbolizing the binding or releasing of ailments. In the Punjab, a remedy for haemorrhoids involves tying a five coloured cotton thread around the big toe at night for a fortnight, concluding on a Tuesday. The Veddas of Ceylon address snake bites by reciting a charm and securing a string made of human hair above the wound. In Togoland, medicine men utilize black and white cords, wrapping them around the arms of the ill to expel evil spirits. Similarly, in the Scottish Highlands, black and white threads were wound around individuals or animals believed to be afflicted by the evil eye. The Musquakie Indians donned magic headbands to alleviate headaches, while the Apache's sacred *izze-kloth*, or medicine cord, was believed to perform various miracles, including healing the sick. In modern Egypt, the [دَقْعُ] (*ukād* [sic]³), a woollen cord with seven knots, each imbued with a charm and a magician's breath, is used to treat colds and fevers, typically worn around children's necks.

Throughout history, knots have been imbued with protective and apotropaic qualities, serving as amulets to ward off illnesses, malevolent spirits, the evil eye, and other negative influences. Unlike curative knots, which aim to heal existing ailments, apotropaic knots are pre-emptively tied to safeguard against potential dangers. Linguistic evidence underscores the deep-rooted association between knots and amulets. In Russian, for instance, the words for 'amulet' [на́у́з] (*náuzû*) and 'knot' [у́зел] (*úzelû*) share a common origin, and a term for 'wizard' is [узольник] (*uzol'nik*), meaning 'knot-tier'. Similarly, in Hebrew, the term for a charmer or enchanter is [הוֹבֵר הָבֵר] (*hober haber* [sic]⁴), translating to 'a man who ties (magic) knots'.

Day's second type of knots are the mnemonic knots and their purpose is to aid the fallible human memory. According to him primitive man utilized mnemonic knots in two major ways by function:

1. Numerical knots
2. Cultural knots

³ In standard scholarly transliteration, it would be 'uqad'

⁴ In standard scholarly transliteration, it would be 'hōvēr hāvēr' or more simply 'hover haver'.

Numerical knots were used to record dates and numbers. In this category he mentions knot-calendars, by contrast the cultural knots are more complex to understand than simple numerical knots. Day mentions examples for the use of cord knotting from ancient times. Herodotus provides us probably the earliest known account of a knot calendar. In his narrative, the Persian King Darius, during his campaign against the Scythians tied sixty knots in a thong, and calling the despots of the Ionians to an audience he told them: 'Ionians, I renounce the opinion which I before declared concerning the bridge; do you now take this thong and do as I command you. Begin to reckon from the day when you shall see me march away against the Scythians, and loose one knot each day: and if the days marked by the knots have all passed and I have not returned ere then, take ship for your own homes'.⁵ Day then continues with examples of accounts from different places like the Makonde Plateau in East Africa, Rajamahall in Bengal in India, a Dravidian tribe called Khonds of southern India, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and Arizona, American Indians in Virginia and North Carolina Piedmont, the Huichol Indians of Mexico, a Yakima Indian of the State of Washington, Solomon Islands in the South Pacific. All these accounts share the same method of tying knots on a line of rope symbolizing the unit of time being measured, which can either be days or full moons depending on the length of time that needed to be measured. After each unit of time has passed a knot has been untied on the line of rope. By this easy method people from early times to even the 20th century could measure the passing of time.

Regarding mnemonic knots Day mentions George Keate's 18th century account of the Palau Islands, where Captain Wilson and his crew following the loss of their ship leaving the island behind in their newly obtained ship from the native king Abba Thulle, his second son, a boy named Lee Boo accompanied them to England and measured time with an above-mentioned knot-calendar measuring thirty moons. Extraordinary he moreover attempted to use another string of line of knots for entirely something else. He wanted to know the name and country of origin of every passing ship he saw at sea, so every time he saw a new ship he tied a knot on his rope and memorized the name and country of the ship. After each passing day, he repeated all the ship's information by using his hand on the rope. The crew misinterpreted this as he was reading his journal from his rope. Lee Boo's rope was merely just an external mnemotechnical aid based on the counting method with the knots on the rope.

Similarly to Lee Boo's account Day furthermore provides a detailed account on the *Marquesas* Islands records, where ropes were used to help to remember genealogies, folk-songs and legends. Every knot was identified with the name

⁵ Day 2021: 2.

of an ancestor. Karl von den Steinen even saw a *Marquesan* knot-genealogy that went back 159 generations (note that by counting thirty years for a generation this would bring us back to about 2870 BCE). A typical Marquesan knotted cord consists of a hollow plaited core, called the *toó*, to which appendages, including knotted strings, were attached. The priest who could ‘read’ the cord was called *tuhuka*.

In a Samoan folk tale, the small fish called *mano* ‘o challenges a porpoise to combat. As the porpoise approaches, hurling insults, the *mano* ‘o leaps into its nostril and wriggles, causing the porpoise to concede defeat. King Tapakea then praises the *mano* ‘o’s bravery and instructs the onlookers to mark its victory by setting up a coconut leaf with a knot tied at the top. This act reflects a common practice among South Sea Islanders, who used knotted cords or objects to record and remember events in the absence of a written language.

In 1822, Tyerman and Bennet observed a unique ‘tax-gatherer’s memorandum cord’ in Hawaii. This cord, approximately 2,400 to 3,000 feet long, was used by tax collectors, who, despite being illiterate, maintained precise records of collected items. Different sections of the cord represented various districts, distinguished by knots, loops, and tufts of diverse shapes, sizes, and colours. Each taxpayer had a specific segment, with the type and quantity of their contributions, such as dollars, hogs, dogs, sandalwood, or taro, indicated through these markers. This method resembles the quipus of ancient Peru, where knots and cords recorded historical data. Unlike Marquesan cords, which could only be interpreted by their creators or those instructed by them, this Hawaiian system allowed anyone familiar with the code to ‘read’ the information, as the varied knots and objects provided specific details beyond mere reminders.

Ancient Egyptian culture provides further testament to the significance of knots as protective symbols, from about thirty hieroglyphics that symbolize ropes or cords, around five have meanings related to amulets. The hieroglyph , representing a rope or a hobble for cattle or a string of magic knots also conveys the meaning for amulet and protection. The *ankh* symbol (☥), resembling a looped cross, signifies ‘life’ or ‘living’ and is frequently depicted in the hands of deities and individuals, emphasizing its association with vitality. A variant known as the *tyet* amulet , often referred to as the Isis knot, symbolizes life and welfare and appears in art as early as the Third Dynasty (c. 2686 BCE – c. 2613 BCE). These symbols highlight the Egyptians’ belief in the protective and life-affirming powers of knots.

The Greek term *δεσμός* means knot or spell or charm and its derivative *κατάδεσις* translates to binding fast and enchantment. The word *ἄμμα* signifies knot, while the compound word *περίαμμα* denotes something worn around the body or amulet. In Latin, *fascia* and *fascinum* refers to both band or bandage,

while *fascino* meaning to bewitch and the word *fascinatori* means enchanter. This linguistic interplay suggests that the ancients perceived a profound connection between the act of tying knots and the invocation of protective or magical forces.

Regarding the third type, the practical knots Day writes that modern civilization's tools stem from ancient inventions passed down through generations. He highlights that before the Age of Stone, humanity relied heavily on wood, which was abundant and essential for survival. Many tools, such as clubs, bows, and canoes, were originally made from wood, though their perishable nature has left little archaeological evidence. Primitive societies also utilized materials like vines, bark, and animal sinews for binding and construction, making the so-called Stone Age merely a late phase of a much longer Age of Wood, or even an Age of String.

Day argues that knots are among humanity's oldest tools, though their perishable nature leaves little archaeological evidence. Early humans likely used lashings and simple knots for practical purposes, and as their skills evolved, they developed more complex knots like the granny knot, square knot, and lark's head. Ethnographic evidence suggests that many indigenous cultures continued using basic knots for daily survival. However, historical and anthropological accounts often overlook knots, making it difficult to trace their precise origins and cultural variations. Additionally, some societies, such as sailors and indigenous groups, guarded their knot-tying knowledge, treating it as specialized expertise passed down through generations.

In his conclusion, Day posits that the use of mnemonic knots was likely a universal practice among prehistoric peoples. He suggests that these practices are of such ancient origin that the debate over whether they spread through cultural diffusion or arose independently becomes irrelevant. Day further speculates that as early humans migrated from a common origin, they likely carried with them essential tools, including various types of knots, magical, mnemonic, and practical.⁶

1.1 The Inka *quipu*

Gary Urton⁷ building on the important contributions of Locke, Ascher and Ascher and Conklin provides a detailed explanation about the Peruvian Inka cord knotting system. Urton concludes a differentiation has to be made between rosary, message stick and a *khipu* or *quipu*. A rosary is a series of beads on a string, a message stick consists of incisions on a stick, while a *quipu* is an

⁶ Day 2021.

⁷ Urton 2003, Urton–Brezine 2005, Urton 2014.

arrangement of cotton or wool strings made of alpaca, llama or other camelid fibers. Some of these strings or all of them may be dyed in complex colours, and they have been either Z-spun/S-plied or S-spun/Z-plied and attached recto or verso to a common, primary string and bear knots tied in a decimal-place fashion using three different types of knots: single knots, long knots and figure 8 knots. A *quipu* consists of a main or primary cord to which pendant strings are attached. Pendant strings may have secondary or subsidiary strings, which may have other subsidiary or tertiary strings attached. Some *quipus* have top strings, which hangs in the opposite direction of the pendant strings. Some *quipus* have end ornaments, referred to as *pachacamanta* meaning about or concerning a hundred, which became the synonym for labour groupings (*ayllu*) in Inka administration.

Related to the Inka *quipu* Urton mentions two different types of jobs, the master dyer and weaver, who organized the process of dyeing yarn, and the *kipukamayuk*, the knot maker or knot keeper, who was an official in charge of the knot accounting system, organizing, transferring and overseeing the labour days, wages paid, censuses, tribute, ritual and calendrical organization, genealogies and other matters.

Urton furthermore argues that the Inka *quipu* was a binary encoded writing system, utilizing the combinations of spin, colour and knot types, and these coded series were read or interpreted on the basis of values assigned to these coded sequences.⁸

According to Charles C. Mann⁹ the *quipus* date back to the Spanish colonial period in the 16th century, but unfortunately many of these evidences were destroyed, and only 600 *quipus* survived the Spanish conquest. 20% of the surviving *quipus* appear to be non-numerical, suggesting a possible writing system. In 2000, an Australian lab using mass spectrometry dated a *quipu* from the Miccenelli collection and placed it between the 11th and 13th century. Archaeologist Ruth Shady Solis¹⁰ of the National University of San Marcos in Lima states, that the *quipu* found in Caral, an archaeological site in Peru that dates back to around 2600 BCE to the *Caral* civilization or *Norte Chico* civilization, is possibly the oldest known *quipu* or even a proto-*quipu* and may be about 4500 years old. This suggests that *quipus* were in use long before the Inka empire.

⁸ Urton 2003.

⁹ Mann 2005a, 2005b.

¹⁰ Solis 2001.

1.2 The Japanese *warazan*

Closer to China another cord knotting system existed, the so-called Ryukyuan knotted straw cords or *warazan*. According to a paper by Kinjō Matsuei 金城松栄 and Kotagiri Tadato 小田切忠人,¹¹ who gathered local researches and did field work and interviews, on the Ryukyu Islands (modern day Okinawa) in Japan, states that in the Okinawan dialect the word *sanmin*, which stands for counting comes from the Chinese *suanming* 算命, to tell fortune. The *warazan* (Miyako dialect: *barazan*) is a form of knotted cord counting and a tool used for arithmetical calculations or recording numbers by tying knots in ropes. The term *warazan* (literally meaning straw counting) comes from its primary material, straw. However, if ropes were made from other materials, such as aerial roots of the adan tree or orchid fibers, they were also referred to as *warazan*. The paper mentions an account from 1477 by a Korean visitor to the *Ryukyu* Islands, who do not mention a writing system, implying that *warazan* either did not exist or might not have been widely used yet. Some records suggest the use of *warazan* began between 1477 and 1637, likely linked to the head tax system introduced in 1637. The spread of formal education and the introduction of the *soroban* (Japanese abacus) led to the gradual disappearance of *warazan*. It is said that on Taketomi Island in the 12th year of Shōwa (1937), *warazan* were burned, and despite their grandchildren's *soroban* (abacus) results being correct, many elderly people were surprised by this. The author believes the elders realized that science cannot be overcome, so they accepted the burning of the straw bundles. In 1969–70s an elderly woman in Okinawa was reportedly still using *warazan* in her store as possible the last user of it in modern days Japan.

To understand the place of cord knotting in ancient China we have to understand the origins of the Chinese writing system.

2. Briefly about the evolution of Chinese writing

2.1 Evolution of characters

In her paper, Csikó¹² provides a detailed summary of research on Chinese writing's evolution. As established, writing emerged independently in four ancient centres: Mesopotamia (3400–3300 BCE), Egypt (3200 BCE), China (1200 BCE), and Mesoamerica (900–500 BCE).

¹¹ Kinjo – Kotagiri 2009.

¹² Csikó 2022.

The earliest Chinese evidence appears in late Shang oracle bone inscriptions (OBI, 1200–1045 BCE), ritual devices used by imperial shamans to communicate with the spirit world. Notably, many excavated bones contain drill holes and fire marks without inscriptions, suggesting the primary ritual language was non-scriptural, with Chinese characters serving a secondary recording function.

Demattè's analysis of writing origins examines the gradual versus sudden development theories. Like Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese script shows signs of progressive evolution. The sophistication of OBI implies earlier developmental stages supported by Neolithic archaeological finds, favouring gradualist explanations over isolated invention.¹³

This aligns with Xu Shen's 許慎 (c. 55–149 CE) traditional account attributing writing's creation to Cang Jie 倉頡, who allegedly progressed from pictographic patterns taken from nature to characters incorporating phonetic elements.¹⁴

Modern scholarship, however, challenges romanticized narratives of script standardization. As Galambos demonstrates through rigorous re-examination of Han sources (*Shuowen jiezi*'s postface and *Hanshu*'s *Yiwenzhi*) contrasted with epigraphic evidence.

Standardization was gradual, beginning pre-Qin and continuing centuries post-unification, evidenced by variance between Qin bronze inscriptions vs. *Shuowen* small seal script; inconsistencies in Qin-era script itself; non-uniform Han small seal script (e.g., Yuan'an stele 袁安碑 vs. *Shuowen*); persistent irregularities in Mawangdui manuscripts despite reforms.

Shuowen's prescriptive nature reflected Han cosmology. Xu Shen sought to 'restore' an imagined innocent script amid perceived moral decay. *Liushu* categorizations served as pedagogical mnemonics for character memorization, not evolutionary principles. The dictionary functioned as examination preparation tool, freezing character forms to curb innovation.¹⁵

Political symbolism over linguistic reality, where script standardization represented the Han 'projection of cosmic order onto writing'; an ideological stance where correct writing signified moral virtue; continuous state efforts spanning Qin edicts to Han punishments for nonstandard characters.¹⁶

Thus, the Qin-Han script reforms constituted not instantaneous imposition but centuries, long negotiation between administrative pragmatism, pedagogical needs, and cosmological ideology, a process continuing long after the Han era.

¹³ Demattè 2010: 211–213.

¹⁴ Bottéro 2002: 24.

¹⁵ Galambos 2006: 40.

¹⁶ Galambos 2006: 62.

2.2 Criteria of writing systems

A writing system should be able to communicate from simple to complex, concrete and abstract thoughts with a set of symbols carved, painted etc. on a medium. Bagley mentions that the Shang oracle bone inscriptions from around 1200 BCE count as a full writing system because it is able to record connected discourse. When discussing the divinations further on the excavated oracle bones he writes that specialists agreed that it is considered full writing for the reason that the Shang scribe could probably have written pretty much anything he could say.¹⁷

In his review, Packard summarizes Boltz's analysis of the four universal stages in the development of writing, as cited from Campbell.¹⁸ In stage one the use of logographs, where each graph uniquely stands for a single word. In stage two Boltz terms graphic multivalence where one graph may have multiple meanings with the help of visual rebus writing, where the words are different in meaning but homophonous in pronunciation, technically speaking paronomasia. In the next stage, stage three, which he calls the determinative stage, where determinatives are secondary graphs, which solve the problem of ambiguity. In stage four, which Chinese never reached, is the phonetic stage, where graphs become fully phonetic symbols.¹⁹

I argue that in this first stage several concrete objects (both natural and man-made) have been implemented in the visual formation of the first characters of Chinese language, just like footsteps, birds, sun, mountain, tree and the knotted silk, which in this case might be a just simple grass rope (see Chapter 4.6. and 4.7. for further details). So, if cord knotting ever existed in China it was not a prerequisite for the development of the Chinese writing system, rather an earlier, decentralized tool for counting, which was not reliable anymore due to its slow process and as the postface to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 mentions (see Chapter 4.1 for further details) with the growing numbers of fraud and forgery, so ancient book keepers had to leave this method behind and switch over to the newly and widely developing writing system. It was not a prerequisite for writing, but it existed before and inspired it, with the emphasis on Chinese writing would have developed independently of rope knotting.

But before trying to place and connect cord knotting with writing systems first, we have to look at the definition and prerequisites of what makes a writing system what it is. For this exact reason Demattè outlines four criteria for distin-

¹⁷ Bagley 2004: 190, 198.

¹⁸ Campbell 1984.

¹⁹ Packard 1996.

guishing Neolithic signs potentially ancestral to Chinese writing from those that are not. These criteria include:

1. intentionality and structural coherence, with distinctive shapes and systematic use,
2. a logical developmental connection with later Shang bronze or bone scripts,
3. forming a regional system expanding over time, and
4. emergence during socio-political complexity.

Demattè acknowledges that while some Neolithic signs could be related to the development of Chinese writing, others might not be. These criteria help in differentiating between significant early signs and other early forms of communication like basic signaries and counting systems.²⁰

From this we can understand that cord knotting does not fulfil the requirements of Demattè to be a writing system.

3. Review of Chinese sources

3.1 Citing the classics

Unfortunately, archaeological evidence regarding cord knotting in China is limited, only remnants of different kind of ropes, such as the later mentioned structural reinforcement ropes kind of ropes or such archaeological finds as arrow heads indicate the usage of bow, which required a string, which are available to us. Many scholars, like Xu Jiming 徐繼明, Jin Qingwan 靳青萬, Zhuang Jiandong 莊建東, Ji Shaoyu 嵇紹玉, Liu Zhengying 劉正英, Liu Zhiyuan 劉志遠 or the venerable Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒 all turn to the classics and mention the following sources in different variations. The most prominent of them all is the *Book of Changes* and its commentary the *Yi · xici zhuan* 《易·系辭》²¹ :

In high antiquity, governance was conducted by tying knots; in later generations, sages replaced this with writing (and carving). Officials used them to govern, and the populace used them for inspection.

上古結繩而治,後世聖人易之以書契;百官以治,萬民以察。

²⁰ Packard 1996: 802.

²¹ This commentary is one of the ‘Ten Wings’ traditionally appended to the *Book of Changes*, providing interpretative insights and philosophical context to the hexagrams and their judgments.

Or to quote Xu Shen's 許慎 postface to the *Shuowen Jiezi xu* 《說文序》:

Upon the time of the Divine Farmer (Shennong) tying knots was the means of governance, overseeing (uniting) his affairs. As tasks (jobs and businesses) became numerous so did deceit (and forgery) proliferate. Cang Jie 倉頡, the scribe of the Yellow Emperor, observed the tracks of birds and beasts, realizing that distinctions could be made, and thus initially created writing by carving wood. By this the hundred officials were regulated, and myriad entities (commodities) were (could be) inspected.

及神農氏結繩為治,而統其事,庶業其繁,飾偽萌生。黃帝之史蒼頡,見鳥獸蹄迹之跡,知分理之可相別異也,初造書契;百工以乂,萬品以察。

Or to mention the western Han scholar Zheng Xuan's commentary on the *Book of Changes* Zheng Xuan *Zhouyi zhu* 鄭玄《周易注》:

For important matters tie large knots in the cord and for minor matters tie small knots in the cord.

事大,大結其繩,事小,小結其繩

Or a longer version of the same passage:

In ancient times, when there was no writing, people used knotted cords for agreements and pledges. For major matters, they tied large knots; for minor matters, they tied small knots. The number of knots varied according to the quantity of things recorded. Each party would hold a copy for mutual verification, which was sufficient for governance.

古者無文字,其有約誓之事,事大大結其繩,事小小結其繩,結之多少,隨物眾寡,各執以相考,亦足以相治也。

Or in the *Literary Mind* and the *Carving of Dragons* by Liu Xie 劉勰 it is written that *Wenxin Diaolong* 《文心雕龍》:

Written symbols were arranged as (the time of) knotted cords moved on, and bird tracks became clear as written characters have been created.

文象列而結繩移,鳥跡明而書契作。

Or to mention *Zhuangzi Quqie Pian* 《莊子·胠篋篇》：

In ancient times, during the reigns of Rongcheng, Dating, Bohuang, Zhongyang, Lili, Liliu, Xuanyuan²², Hexu, Zunlu, Zhurong, Fuxi, and Shennong, the people used knotted cords (for record-keeping.)

昔者容成氏、大庭氏、伯皇氏、中央氏、栗陸氏、驪留氏、軒轅氏、赫胥氏、尊盧氏、祝融氏、伏橫氏、神農氏 當是時也民結繩而用之。

While the Chinese authors mentioned above refer to classical sources and accept them without question, they overlook international research and accounts of other minority groups in China who also used cord knotting. For example, *The Early History of Tibet: From Chinese Sources* mentions the ancient tribe called *Qiang* 羌 and states:

They have no written characters. Notched pieces of wood and knotted strings are used in covenants. Although there are officers, they are not constantly employed, being only appointed when there is stress of business. For collecting warriors, they use gold arrows.²³

and

The Yangt'ung first communicated with China in the year 641, when they sent envoys to the imperial court. They were divided into Lesser and Greater. The latter people were settled on the plateau to the south of Khotan, having the Lesser Yangt'ung on their west, the Tufan on the east. 'Their country was 1000 li from east to west, and they numbered between 80,000 and 90,000 fighting warriors. They were a nomadic people, who plaited their hair into a queue hanging down behind, and dressed in felt and fur. Wind and snow prevailed, and ice more than ten feet thick. 'They had no written characters, only cut notches in sticks and tied knots in cord.'²⁴

3.2 Xu Jiming 徐繼明

In his paper, Xu Jiming 徐繼明 refers²⁵ to the discovery of horizontally arranged straw ropes embedded in the walls of House No. 405 at the Dadiwan site in Qin'an, Gansu 甘肅秦安大地灣. Without citing specific sources, he claims

²² Alternative name for the Yellow Emperor.

²³ Bushell 1880: 440

²⁴ Bushell 1880: 527.

²⁵ Xu 2002.

these were used for ‘knotted cord recording’ and suggests the ropes were stored in six or seven layers along the walls, interpreting this as evidence of a storage system for cord-based records.

According to archaeological excavations, on the walls of House No. 405 at the Dadiwan site in Qin’an, Gansu, horizontally arranged straw ropes were observed spanning between every two wall-supporting columns... Based on this, some experts have speculated that *jiesheng jishi* (cord-knot recording) not only truly existed but also had centralized places for storage and safekeeping.

據考佔發掘研究發現，在甘肅秦安大地灣發掘的405號房屋內的牆上，看到在每兩根附壁柱上，佈滿了橫向排列的草繩...有專家推論：“結繩記事”不但真實存在，而且，還有集中存放和保管的地方。²⁶

He further asserts, again without citing his source, that the tradition of knotted cord recording was still in use among ethnic minorities in southwestern China as late as the 1950s:

According to modern sources, even as late as the 1950s, some ethnic minorities in southwestern China continued using the traditional method of *jiesheng jishi* (knotted cord recording) to track time calculations and record important family or clan events.

根據現代資料介紹，就是歷史發展到了現今的五十年代，在我國西南地區的少數民族中也還有繼續使用著“結繩記事”的傳統方法，用來記載時間的推算以及家庭或家族中的重大事情。²⁷

In addition, Xu draws an interpretive link between the archaeological record and a historical official title used in Confucian texts, namely *zhu xia li* 柱下吏 (‘scribe under the pillar’), suggesting a possible connection between ropes and bureaucratic recordkeeping. However, the archaeological report he cites, Qin’an Dadiwan 405 hao xinshiqi shidai fangwu yizhi 秦安大地灣405號新石器時代房屋遺址 by Zhao Jianlong 趙建龍, makes no such claim. It only describes structural features:

The pillar leans 35 degrees to the south, causing the northern residential surface to bulge upward and crack. The wooden pillar was burned, leaving behind a grass and mud casing on the ground, 0.15 meters high, 0.81 meters in diameter, and 6.5 centimetres thick. The casing has two layers, and between them are impressions

²⁶ Xu 2002: 109.

²⁷ Xu 2002: 110.

of grass ropes, spaced 4.5–5 centimetres apart. The exterior is coated with a layer of white lime.

柱身向南傾斜35度，致使北部居住面向上隆起破裂。木柱已燒毀，地面殘存草泥包皮，高0.15、直徑0.81米、厚6.5厘米，分兩層，兩層之間有草繩纏繞痕跡，繩痕間距4.5–5厘米。外表塗抹白灰面。

These impressions likely result from construction techniques rather than recordkeeping. Thus, while the presence of ropes indicates their technological existence in the Yangshao 仰韶 culture (3rd–5th millennium BCE) or earlier, the evidence does not support the claim that these ropes served as a writing or accounting system.

3.3 Liu Zhiyuan 劉志遠

Liu Zhiyuan 劉志遠 in his paper²⁸ argues that in order for knot recording to work three conditions were necessary:

1. Availability of Rope: people first had to produce rope.
2. Knotting Skills: They needed the expertise to tie knots in various ways.
3. Ability to Create Pictorial Symbols: The knots had to take on specific forms that could symbolize or represent particular objects, events, or ideas.

Based on archaeological evidence (for example, composite tools from sites in today's Shanxi 山西 and Hebei 河北 showing that ancient people already used rope to fasten stone arrowheads to wooden shafts), the author asserts that as early as the Neolithic period, humans had mastered rope-making and knotting. These skills were then applied to various aspects of life, gradually developing into a system that not only assisted memory before writing existed but also evolved alongside the development of pictographic writing. The evolution of cord usage proceeds with everyday needs and practical usage like tools for construction. Rope was used in making composite tools (e.g., bows, arrows) by tying together wood, stone, and rope. Another usage was related to navigation and hunting. Hunters carried a short rope with which they could tie knots. In unfamiliar hunting grounds, they would use red-dyed (with animal blood) ropes knotted on visible objects (such as tree branches) or laid on the ground to mark paths and directions, ensuring they would not get lost. A third usage was time

²⁸ Liu 1996.

keeping to measure the passage of days, months and seasons to optimize agricultural production.

Furthermore, the author sees this method as not merely a mnemonic device used before the advent of writing but as a parallel development that contributed to the emergence of pictographic writing. He links the progression from simple knotting to the affixing of symbols on cloth and eventually to carved inscriptions, thus positioning rope knotting as an integral step in the evolution of Chinese written language.

Although the author's reasoning is consistent and follows a clear progression and cites archaeological finds, but altogether due to the perishable nature of rope direct archaeological evidence is limited. The argument rests on inference and interpretation of later symbolic systems rather than direct proof and connects cord knotting with the evolution of writing linearly backwards in time rather than building up the connection through evidence.

3.4 Ji Shaoyu 嵇紹玉

Ji Shaoyu 嵇紹玉 presents²⁹ cord knotting as a transformative innovation that emerged around 5000 years ago, a breakthrough that 'pierced the chaos' much like a lightning bolt, marking humanity's transition from a state of raw survival into the realm of civilization. Although cord knotting for record keeping occurred after spoken language had developed and before formal writing appeared, its influence extended well into later eras. The author's argument is built on several key ideas starting from basic survival needs (clothing, food, shelter), where cord knotting was a new innovation, which evolved into record- and time keeping tool. The author highlights that Chinese cord knotting was distinguished by an emphasis on the shape, size, and arrangement of knots. Unlike other cultures (for example, ancient Persians, who associated different colours with specific meanings), early Chinese practices relied on the physical form of the knots to encode information. This focus on form influenced the later development of Chinese characters. The author notes that patterns found on Neolithic pottery, such as circular water ripple designs and grid like arrangements, reflect the early application of mathematical principles. These patterns, reminiscent of cord knots, suggest that rational, even numerical, thinking was present at the time when cord knotting was used. This rational approach helped ensure that the knots could reliably record quantities and structured information. Even after the invention of writing, cord knotting retained its cultural resonance. Over time, its

²⁹ Ji 2020.

function evolved from mere record-keeping to becoming a carrier of emotional and social meaning. Specific knot forms (like the *tongxinjie* 同心結 for ‘unity in love’) came to symbolize interpersonal bonds and social cohesion. The very language of connection, terms like *jieyi* 結義 (‘forming brotherhood’), *jiebai* 結拜 (‘sworn brotherhood’), and *tuanjie* 團結 (‘unity’), derives its imagery from these ancient practices.

The author effectively ties the practice of knotting to a range of later cultural achievements, from the formation of writing systems to the establishment of communal rules and even emotional symbolism. The tone of text is speculative and poetic. While this makes the narrative compelling, it also means that many of the claims are interpretative rather than strictly evidentiary. The imagery, though evocative, sometimes obscures concrete details and relies on a speculative reconstruction of events due to lack of direct archaeological evidence.

3.5 Liu Zhengying 劉正英

Scholar Liu Zhengying 劉正英 in his paper³⁰ based on the classics mentioned above, and archaeological finds, like the Shiyu people’s ruins in Shanxi province (*Shanxi shiyuren yizhi* 山西峙峪人遺址) dating back 28000 years, reveal that early peoples not only made knots but also produced pictures and incised symbols, indicating that methods like pictographs, incisions, and knot records had already undergone a long development. The author then turns to the mysterious and legendary diagrams of *hetu* 河圖³¹ and *luoshu* 洛書³² as the starting point of Chinese culture and civilization. The author proposes an interesting connection by combining the *hetu* and *luoshu*, along with the Eight Trigrams, *bagua* 八卦, ancient people could encode information of names, dates, locations onto knots. The author provides a speculated simulation example on how recording an event could have worked using knots on a rope with the help of the above-mentioned diagrams. He records the event ‘this year an earthquake occurred in the southwest’ by assigning numeric values and directional indicators (using different knot sizes, distances, and sequences) to represent the time (‘spring’), location (‘southwest’), and the event (‘earthquake’). The author reexamines

³⁰ Liu 2000.

³¹ *Hetu* 河圖, often called the River diagram, is said to have emerged from the Yellow River. It is associated with the ordering of the cosmos and the principles governing nature, often linked to the concept of the Five Elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, water) and yin-yang dynamics.

³² *Luoshu* 洛書, known as the ‘Luo writing’, is famously represented as a 3×3 magic square where every row, column, and diagonal sums to 15. According to legend, it appeared on the shell of a mystical turtle in the Luo River. This diagram has influenced various aspects of Chinese thought, including divination practices like the *Yi Jing* and even aspects of *Feng Shui*.

several ancient legends (for example, the myths of Nüwa 女媧, Fuxi 伏羲, Shennong 神農, and Huangdi 黃帝) by considering them in the context of knot record-keeping. This reinterpretation implies that these legendary figures were originally record keepers or administrators who used knot systems to manage and pass down important tribal or clan information. The eventual development of written language then naturally replaced the knot-record method.

The paper's reasoning follows a clear trajectory, as once the basic prerequisites (rope, knotting skills, and a need to record) were met, the system naturally evolved from simple mnemonic knots into a complex, rule-based method capable of recording numerical and event information. This progression is further linked to the eventual emergence of written language. Although the connection between writing and cord knotting is explained, however it is not supported with evidence. The paper hypothesizes that ancient Chinese knot record-keeping *élél* was far more sophisticated than the simplistic 'big knot for big events' model, and it integrated symbolic systems like *hetu* 河圖, *luoshu* 洛書 and numerical, directional schemes, forming a precise method for recording and transmitting information.

3.6 Zhuang Jiandong 莊建東

The author Zhuang Jiandong 莊建東 in his paper³³ proposes a new theory on the origin of Chinese characters by highlighting the role of cord knot record keeping as a transitional stage toward symbolic record keeping. He reviews various ancient legends and theories (see sources in Chapter 4.1) and argues that the practical needs of early Chinese agricultural society (such as record-keeping during large-scale warfare) drove the development of increasingly complex methods to record events.

According to the article, cord-knot record-keeping (as attested in texts like the *Book of Changes*) provided the foundational method for recording information before the advent of writing. Over time, record keepers evolved this method by adding inscribed bamboo or wooden tablets to the knots, a process personified by the figure of Cang Jie 倉頡. This method not only ensured accurate recording and transmission of important events but also eventually led to the development and unification of Chinese characters. The author supports his theory with references to ancient texts, archaeological discoveries (such as bone artifacts with rope traces and engraved symbols), and ethnographic parallels,

³³ Zhuang 2008.

arguing that the need for complex record was the primary driving force behind the creation of writing.

Although the author presents a plausible scenario for the evolution from cord knot record keeping to symbolic writing, much of this reconstruction is speculative. The absence of direct, unambiguous archaeological evidence for a transitional Cang Jie phase means that the theory, while coherent, cannot be conclusively proven at present.

3.7 Jin Qingwan 靳青萬³⁴

Jin Qingwan 靳青萬 in his paper³⁵ stresses the significance of cord knot record systems as an important developmental stage in human civilization, and hypothesizes oracle bone inscriptions have revealed traces related to rope-knot record methods. In particular, four oracle bone characters (𣎵、𣎵、𣎵、𣎵 糸、亼、專、傳 respectively) appear to be directly linked with the rope knot recording process and may even reflect its internal operation. The author, based on comparative research between different oracle bone inscriptions, argues that the shape of the OBI character *mi* (originally *si*, as in *si* 絲, ‘silk’) 糸, found on different oracle bones, like: 𣎵、𣎵、𣎵、𣎵、𣎵, all consist of two intertwined lines, resembling a rope rather than a fine thread. These entanglements can also be viewed as knots on the rope. The author argues that in early times there was no separate character for *sheng* 繩, meaning ‘rope’, because adding phonetic components (in this case the part *měng* 黽, originally depicting a toad, of the character *shéng* 繩) or the phono-semantic stage was a later invention, so the character for rope, *sheng* 繩, could not exist in early times. However, since its importance in daily life, there had to exist one character for rope, so the original meaning of *mi* (or *si*) 糸, instead of fine silk as defined³⁶ in the *Shuowen jiezi*, should be *sheng* 繩, rope.

The author as a supporting argument examines the interrelationships with other characters, and shows that the oracle bone form 𣎵, and its graphic variants 𣎵、𣎵、𣎵、𣎵 later identified as *zhuān* 亼, meaning to entangle, seems to be derived from the above mentioned 𣎵 rope character by adding a cross *shi*

³⁴ All special characters, glyphs, and oracle bone inscriptions reproduced in this paper are taken directly from the reviewed author’s original article. Any characters that could not be digitally rendered or typed have been represented as faithfully as possible based on the source material.

³⁵ Jin 1996. Characters in this section stem from the same article.

³⁶ Section *mi* 糸 (silk): *mi* 糸 means ‘fine silk thread’. It depicts the form of a bundle of silk threads. All characters belonging to this category follow the *mi* 糸 semantic key. It is pronounced like *mi* / *mò* 覩. 《糸部》糸：細絲也。象束絲之形。凡糸之屬皆從糸。讀若覩。(Xu 2010: 271).

十, meaning ten, component to it, and argues that this is the ancient symbol for knot on the rope. Following this the author argues that the oracle bone form  *zhuān* 專 and its graphic variants , , ,  are also shown to be derived from the above-mentioned rope with a knot by adding a hand component to it. This component symbolizes the individual tasked with tying the knot and, crucially, memorizing the information encoded in it. Thus, *zhuān* 專 came to denote not only the act of knotting but also the role of the dedicated record keeper within the society. The author supports his claim by the meaning of the following expressions all originate from the above-mentioned character *zhuān*-*mén* 專門 ('specialist, specialized'), *zhuānyī* 專一 ('concentrated'), *zhuānxīn* 專心 ('to focus one's attention, to concentrate on doing something').

The final character analysed is  and its graphic variants ,  *chuán* or *zhuàn*³⁷ 傳, whose form typically includes elements such as a 'hand' holding or pointing at a knot and a smaller human figure. This composition is understood to represent the process of passing on or transmitting the knotted record (either physically or the stories, matters, names etc. quasi-stored with the help of the rope) from one person to another. It encapsulates the dual function of reciting or 'explaining' the recorded content as well as formally handing it over to a designated successor. The author supports his claim by the meaning of the following expressions all originate from the above-mentioned character *chuánshòu* 傳授 ('to pass on'), *chuánshuō* 傳說 ('to repeat from mouth to mouth, legend, folk tale'), *chuándì* 傳遞 ('to pass on to somebody else'), *chuánshù* 傳述 ('to relay, to retell'), *chuánchéng* 傳承 ('to pass on to future generations; passed on from former times').

The author argues that the four characters together form a coherent sequence:

-  – *mì* (or *sī*) 糸 – 繩, for the physical rope (recording material),
-  – *zhuān* 專, for the formation of the knot (record symbol),
-  – *zhuān* 專, for the specialized person who ties and memorizes the knots, and
-  – *zhuàn* (or *chuán*) 傳, for the transmission of this recorded information.

³⁷ Note that coincidentally (or not) the two modern phonetic value represent two similar meanings related to cord knotting. *Chuán* means to pass on something (like the stories or names of relatives from the rope), while *zhuàn* is the noun, the biography itself.

The author argues that this sequence not only corrects past misinterpretations of the oracle bone script but also reveals the sophisticated internal structure of the cord-knot record system. It supports the idea that the system was a fully functional method for record-keeping, a precursor to later writing systems.

While arguing for the sophistication of the cord-knot system, the paper also realistically assesses its limitations, such as the heavy reliance on a specialized memory keeper and the inherent difficulty in reading the symbols without prior training. This balanced view lends credibility to the argument. The reasoning extends beyond mere character analysis. By connecting the cord-knot system to later developments in writing and state organization (e.g., the institutionalization of historians or storytellers), the author suggests a continuous cultural evolution from prehistoric record-keeping to historical documentation in later dynasties.

3.8 Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒

Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒 in his paper³⁸ provides a detailed account on the topic including the above-mentioned classic citations, socio-complexity requirements, accessibility to ropes, moreover based on the historical account of Liu Xie 劉勰 mentions the Qiang 羌, Hu 胡 used tying knots, moreover points out the Yao 瑤 people in Guangxi 廣西, who in his own time, still used knotted cords for keeping accounts.

As indirect evidence the author further examines how the following ancient Chinese characters derive from depicting a line of rope:

Shēn 申: In oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, this character is shown with a form that resembles a bending or bifurcated rope 𠂔, 𠂕, which is the original character for *shēn* 紳, to tie or bind an object; and the character *shēn* 伸, meaning to stretch, and the character *diàn* 电, meaning lightning, are both derived from the shape (as a line in the sky) and nature (to be able to stretch and extend) of the rope.

Tún 屯: Presented in bronze script as 𠂔 depicting a rope that not only bends and splits into strands but also shows a knot. The knotting signifies difficulty or obstruction, leading to meanings such as difficult or hesitate, hence the modern meaning to pause (*dùn* 頓).

Zhōng 終: Its *guwen* 古文 form in *Shuowen jiezi* is 𠂔, and its bronze script form is 𠂔 said to mimic a rope with knots at both ends, symbolizing completion or depicting the end of the ropes as finality, and giving rise to the

³⁸ Xu 1998. Characters in this section stem from the same article.

notion of a rope tied on both ends as in ending or culmination. The character meaning winter *dōng* 冬 also comes from this ancient graph, symbolizing the end of the year.

Additional characters are analysed for their resemblance to rope forms or actions associated with ropes, such as *dé* 德 and *guān* 關. The author analyzes that the key element in *dé* 德 is *zhí* 直, which in its OBI form , and bronze script form  consists of a rope and an eye looking at it. Supporting his claim with historical accounts he concludes that the rope refers to a carpenter's line marker (chalk reel or chalk line), which even today is still in use for construction to mark a straight line. Reinforcing the idea that many ancient glyphs were inspired by the physical attributes of rope and its use in binding or measurement. *Guān* 關 in bronze script appears as  關, illustrating two doors each tied with a cord, indicating closure by linking and tying or binding together. According to the author Xu Shen's analysis of having ear, *ěr* 耳, as a semantic component is erroneous.

The author realizes the limitations of this method and mentions several characters that have a similar component, that looks like a rope with a cord (a dot on a line), but acknowledges that they are not related to cords or ropes, and each character should be investigated separately.

The paper explains that one of the primary uses of cord knots in antiquity was for counting. Because numbers are easily forgotten or misremembered, knots provided a reliable mnemonic device. The discussion highlights several numeral characters:

Jí 計: Originally meant to count or calculate and is linked to the act of knotting. It consists of the semantic components speech *yán* 言 and ten *shí* 十, but the component ten here is not restricted only to the number ten, since in its bronze form  it resembled a knot on a rope, which could both mean the number ten and to calculate. The small dot later in its seal form became a short horizontal line thus losing the resemblance to the knot. But note that in its OBI form the dot was also missing , the author explains that this is due to the fact that in early times carving a round shape was difficult.

Niàn 廿: The character for 20 in its OBI form can be observed as U shape, while in its bronze inscription form  can be observed with two knots in the middle of the rope, hence the meaning $10+10=20$.

Sā 卅: The character for 30 in its OBI form can be observed as  shape, while in its bronze inscription form  or  can be observed with three knots in the middle of the rope, hence the meaning $10+10+10=30$.

Xì 卅: The character for 40 in its OBI form can be observed as  shape, while in its bronze inscription form  can be observed with four ropes tied into one, hence the meaning $10+10+10+10 = 40$.

The author continues that above forty, they started to use compound characters, e.g. for the number 50 there is 5 and 10 placed on top of each other .

In the next category the author demonstrates how cord knots were employed to record various types of transactions and agreements such as sales, gifts, and loans.

Mài 賣: Bronze inscriptions show a form  that mimics a person using a knotted cord  to signal a sale. This practice is still observed in some regions, like in today's Sichuan 四川, where objects for sale are marked with tied materials.

Guì 貴: The character's structure in bronze inscription form  consists of the semantic component , which has the following semantic element inside it  showing two hands holding a rope with a knot, symbolizing the assessment of value, implying that valuable items were marked with specific knot patterns.

Sòng 送 and *yìng* 媵: The bronze form of these characters  and  respectively, are analysed for their component  (yìng 倂), which in its bronze inscription form shows  two hands holding up a rope with a knot, later an eight, *bā* 八, component has been added to it  emphasizing the meaning of the threads being stitched, as it can be seen even more enlarged in its small seal form . These elements reminiscent of knotted cords originally conveyed meanings related to delivering or transferring something, in contexts such as gifting or bride price.

Gòng 共: In bronze script, the character appears as  or , both depicting two hands holding two ropes, symbolizing offerings or contributions. Since offerings were typically made to those of higher status, *gòng* 共 extended its meaning to signify respect and later evolved into *gōng* 恭, meaning reverence.

Yè 叶, *xié* 叶, *zhī* 汁: The author argues that these three characters were historically interchangeable with *xié* 協 meaning to unite, and in this case all their phonetic value is *xié*. While in their bronze inscription form , ,  respectively looking more complex forms, in its OBI form 協 was depicted in its simplified form as . The component *fēng* 丰 in these characters resembles the notches carved into bamboo or wood, symbolizing contracts or agreements. The symbol  represents the shape of a knotted cord, while  and  depict containers used to store such contracts. The clerical script form of *yè*/*xié* 叶 is a variant of . The forms of *xié* 叶 and *zhī*/*xié* 汁 are simplified versions of .

The author argues that in ancient times, recording events with knotted cords was limited in complexity. Therefore, carved wooden contracts were sometimes necessary. As noted in Zhou Qufei's *Lingwai daida* 周去非《嶺外代答》the Yao 瑤 people used wooden contracts:

The Yao people lack written language; for important agreements, they carve matching notches on two wooden boards, with each party keeping one. They trust these deeply. When submitting petitions to local authorities, they also use such wooden contracts.³⁹

瑤人無文字,其要約以木契合二板而刻之,人執其一,守之甚信。若其投牒於州縣,亦用木契。

Shì 貰 to sell on credit and *dài* 貸 to lend: The author argues that the character *shì* 貰 in bronze script derives from *shì* 世, which resembles a knotted rope attached to a stopping point, suggesting a record of credit or deferred payment (for explanation see genealogies). The character *dài* 貸 in bronze script appears as , also symbolizing a knotted rope, reinforcing the idea that loans and credit transactions were recorded using rope knots.

The knots served dual functions, not only to count but also to authenticate and memorialize the details of exchanges, providing a durable, non-written record in societies that had not yet fully developed a written language.

The author then moves onto the third category of cord knot character type. With the deep-rooted practice of ancestor worship in China, cord knots were also used to record family lineages and generational succession.

Gǔ 古: Bronze inscriptions illustrate a form that, through its knot-like features, symbolizes antiquity and the continuity of ancestral records. The character is explained as being derived from knot imagery. Its bronze inscription form shows  a knot on a rope above a mouth. Then it is compared to the semantic component *gǔ* 古 in the character *gǔ* 姑, which shows as . Inside the upper part of it one can observe the knotted cord. The author emphasizes that the two shapes  and  indicate two different types of knots, a simple knot and a more complex knot, which align with the classic model big knot for big matter, small knot for small matter. Moreover, the author argues that the definition provided by Xu Shen, that the character old *gǔ* 古 consists of the semantic components ten *shí* 十 and mouth *kǒu* 口, and explained as what is passed down through ten mouths is ancient, is too metaphysical and does not reflect the original meaning of character creation. The author argues that the Xu Shen's explanation is too abstract and doesn't reflect the original, practical origins of the characters for

³⁹ Xu 1998: 260.

ancient *gǔ* 古, to sell *gū* 沽, and ruthless *kù* 酷, and suggests that they all carry the meaning of selling, which should also derive from the practice of tying knots.

Shì 世: The author critiques the *Shuowen jiezi* for its explanation of this character, as it is defined as thirty years make one *shì* 世, generation (*sanshi nian wei yi shi* 三十年为一世[世]) and is explained that the character is derived from *huì* 卉, meaning plants, with an extended stroke. However, according to bronze inscriptions, the character *shì* 世 is derived from *zhǐ* 止, foot and not from *huì* 卉. The author argues that the *Shuowen* relies on a later form of the character, which is unreliable. In bronze inscriptions, *shì* 世 is written as , depicting *zhǐ* 止, foot and a knotted rope. *Zhǐ* 止 refers to the footprint or trace of a foot. The author cites the *Book of Songs Shījīng* 《詩經》 poem *Xià Wǔ* 《下武》, which states: ‘繩其祖武’, which means ‘Following [to mark by ropes] the footsteps of their ancestors’, the commentary explains, that here *wǔ* 武 means ‘footprint’ (武,迹也). The author argues that this refers to the traces left by feet and this is the accurate interpretation of the character *shì* 世. It is likely that in ancient times, ancestral altars were adorned with knotted ropes to record genealogies. Thus, the *Book of Songs*’ poems *Yì* 《抑》 and *Zhōngsī* 《蠡斯》 mention ‘宜爾子孫繩繩兮’, meaning descendants continuing in an unbroken line, which is a factual record of this practice.

For the character *sūn* 孫 (‘descendant’ or ‘grandson’) the author argues that the semantic component is *xì/jì* 系 (‘to relate’ or ‘to tie’), which also resembles the shape of a rope, which signifies the succession from father to son as a ‘generation’, where the son’s generation is tied to the father’s footprint. This is why people today still say stepping into the ancestors’ footsteps, a remnant of ancient customs.

Additionally, the characters for *xiān* 先 (‘before’) and *hòu* 后 (‘after’) are also derived from the classifier *zhǐ* 止 (‘foot’) and the shape of a rope. In bronze script, *xiān* 先 is written as , with *zhǐ* 止 above a person. *Hòu* 后 in bronze script is written as , with the semantic component , inverted foot, tied below a rope.

The archaic variant character *zhēng* 烝 of *zhēng* 蒸 (a sacrificial offering) in bronze script is written as , depicting two hands holding a ritual vessel *dòu* 豆 in front of two feet. The author cites the commentary in *Rites and Ceremonies, Yǐlǐ · pìnlǐ* 《儀禮·聘禮》, which states: 凡饌以豆為本。Which roughly means all offerings are based on the ritual vessel *dòu* 豆. Jia’s annotation Jiǎ · Shū 賈《疏》 explains: 凡設饌者,皆先設豆,乃設餘饌。When setting up offerings, the ritual vessel *dòu* 豆 is placed first, followed by the rest. Thus, holding the ritual vessel in front of the feet symbolizes worshiping ancestors. Since *shì* 世 (‘generation’) resembles knots on a cord  the character *xiè* 紲 is interpreted as a long rope.

The character *yìn* 胤 (‘progeny’) signifies the continuation of descendants, with the meat semantic component *ròu* 肉 indicating bloodline. It is derived from 𠂔, and shares the same meaning as *sūn* 孫 (‘descendant’) and *hòu* 后 (‘after’).

The character *shén* 神 (‘deity’) derives from *shēn* 申, which resembles the shape of a rope. Initially, it likely referred to ropes hung at ancestral altars to record generational order, later extended to refer to all deities.

The character *jǐ* 己 (‘self’) is explained that it also resembles the shape of a rope, curved like *shēn* 申, but without diverging ends. The argument is that generational succession was recorded with ropes in ancient times, so *jǐ* 己 must also represent this with a rope, hence *jì* 紀 (‘record’) means to chronicle.

Whenever generations or eras are recorded, they are marked with knotted ropes. Thus, twelve years make a *jì* 紀, generational succession is called *běnjì* 本紀 (‘biographic sketch of an emperor’), *shìxì* 世系 (‘genealogy or family tree’), *jìtǒng* 繼統 (‘continuation of lineage or to succeed on the throne’), or *shàoxù* 紹緒 (‘inheritance of tradition’), all conveying this idea.

The author’s argument is that many Chinese characters related to ancestry, succession, and rituals are rooted in the ancient practice of using ropes to record generational order and mark significant events. This reflects a cultural emphasis on lineage, continuity, and the preservation of tradition. The author uses etymological analysis of characters in bronze script to support this claim, linking their forms to the symbolic use of ropes in ancient rituals and record-keeping.

The author concludes that although written characters eventually supplanted cord-knot methods, many of their features survived within the script. The influence of the earlier system can still be detected in the form and meaning of Chinese characters, reflecting a rich and complex cultural evolution.

3.9 Plausibility of visual pun method

Both Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒 and Jin Qingwan 靳青万 raise an interesting approach to support the claim to ancient cord knotting, which is the analysis of visual forms of oracle bone-, and bronze inscriptions with the help of later etymological explanations. The theoretical background is explained in great detail by David N. Keightley.

In his paper⁴⁰ Keightley argues that the Chinese script did not simply evolve from naturalistic pictures but was born out of a sophisticated system of coded, aesthetic signs. In his analysis, the characters are seen as much more than mere

⁴⁰ Keightley 1996.

pictograms, they are logographs that record spoken words through a process of abstraction and schematization.

Keightley explains that early Chinese characters often emerged by replacing a naturalistic image with a simplified, conventional symbol that still recalled the original object. For example, the OBI show instances where the image of an eye or an ear is not depicted in full realistic detail but is instead represented by a schematic graph that functions as a visual pun. In these cases, the visual element serves a dual purpose: it provides an aesthetic reference to the original object while simultaneously acting as a code for the corresponding word.

Building upon the prior character analysis and the visual pun methodology, it would be a compelling avenue for future research to investigate all characters associated with the silk component. After conducting a brief visual similarity search on characters in the OBI dictionary, I suggest future researches should put emphasis on the following characters: lì 吏 ('minor government official'), shì 事 ('affair, matter'), shǐ 使 ('envoy'), shǐ 史 ('annals, history, official historian'), which in their OBI form show , , ,  respectively. The above-mentioned characters in their early forms all resemble a knot on a rope and a hand showing it, or pointing at it. Upon the logic of the reviewed authors, one could say that the above-mentioned modern terms all root in ancient cord knotting practice, as a person telling the stories memorized with the help of the knots, as the Inka *khipukamayuk*.

Conclusion

The question of the origins of writing, especially in China has always been a fascinating topic among scholars. However little archaeological evidence there is for the origins of writing in China. Chinese scholars argue that ancient Chinese legends about the origins of writing are largely credible. Although these legends (like those involving rope-knot record-keeping and the creation of characters by Cang Jie 倉頡) mix myth with historical memory, they still contain valuable insights into early record-keeping practices. A major point is that the development of writing was driven by the need to manage increasingly complex societal affairs, especially during times of large-scale warfare and social stratification. This necessity, rather than a widespread, popular movement to invent writing, spurred the creation of more sophisticated systems.

While no knotted cords themselves survive, convergent evidence strongly suggests their probable use: cord-impressed walls at Neolithic sites (e.g., Banpo), rope-patterned pottery motifs, textual accounts of *jiesheng* 結繩 in classical literature, and crucially, the silk classifier 糸, whose interlaced form provides the

most compelling graphic echo of knotted cords in the writing system. Though direct material proof remains elusive, these indicators collectively point to cord knotting as a plausible prehistoric practice.

This phenomenon can be described as a form of textual primacy bias. In this context, many Chinese scholars tend to rely heavily on classical texts, treating their descriptions as self-evident historical facts, without demanding independent, hard archaeological evidence. In other words, because ancient texts mention practices like cord knotting for record-keeping, these accounts are accepted at face value, even though there is little to no physical proof to corroborate them. This uncritical acceptance of traditional literary sources often leads to conclusions about ancient practices that remain speculative rather than empirically verified. Scholars must interpret these texts carefully, as they may reflect ritualized, mythologized, or theoretical aspects of cord knotting rather than everyday practical use. We must also tread carefully when dealing with folk etymologies and the virtually limitless homonymic associations within the Chinese lexicon—otherwise, we risk circular reasoning, as in the popular notion that Cang Jie, the “storer of knots,” must therefore have invented writing. His name, *Cāng Jié* 倉頡, happens to be homophonous with *cáng* 藏, ‘to store’ and *jié* 結, ‘to tie’ or ‘knot’), a coincidence that, while intriguing, illustrates how easily retrospective interpretations can become self-confirming myths—when in reality it is merely another linguistic artifact of a phonemic inventory comprising approximately four hundred syllables in modern Chinese.

Unfortunately, these grass cords compared to other writing mediums like wood or bones decompose relatively quickly, so the chance of actually finding such evidence from ancient times is very low, unless it was hidden and sealed away airtight (e.g. in a storing container clay pot, just like the Inkas did store them in their archives). Naturally, let us not forget that in the early stages of China’s writing history people drew what they saw, such as cowry shells, which formed the first medium of exchange and later became the symbol for money and value (*bèi* 貝). It is plausible that, from this same era of creating new characters, bookkeeping, or simply put, counting with the help of knots on ropes, was also depicted by early people, leaving its mark in today’s character classifiers (e.g., *mì* 糸) and in characters related to certain numbers or genealogy. Moreover, a closer examination of the silk classifier suggests that while its primary association is with silk and textiles, some of its graphical elements might also reflect the ancient practice of cord knotting. Rather than all characters containing the silk classifier being a direct representation of silk, it is possible that the abstract forms of some characters were partly influenced by the visual imagery of knotted cords. The intricate patterns produced by tying knots could have contributed

to the evolving aesthetics of early Chinese script, embedding within these characters subtle echoes of an earlier, practical record-keeping system.

Much attention has been given to character-creating methods in Chinese linguistics; however, these approaches are problematic, and the currently available evidence regarding the six principles remains ambiguous. Consequently, our focus should shift more toward the origins and formative periods of Chinese characters. If Keightley's theory on the visual pun method is correct, then it might be plausible that during the early stages of Chinese writing development, when cord knotting was still in use, this practice influenced the evolution of writing itself (as suggested by the above-mentioned characters). In this view, the eventual disappearance of the cord knotting system could be attributed to the evolution of counting methods (for instance, with the adoption of the abacus), much like the transition observed in the case of Japanese *warazan*.

This hybrid origin underscores how early Chinese culture may have merged everyday practical activities, such as counting and record-keeping with ropes, into the symbolic vocabulary that eventually became a cornerstone of written language.

While many arguments in the cited literature remain speculative, core pre-conditions for cord knotting systems are archaeologically attested in ancient China. These include:

1. Material availability: widespread rope production evidenced at Neolithic sites like Banpo and Hemudu,
2. Socioeconomic complexity: emergence of stratified societies during the Longshan period,
3. Demonstrated counting needs: mathematical markings on oracle bones and pottery.

Moreover, while the later attested knotting practices of neighbouring groups cannot serve as direct evidence for ancient periods, they demonstrate the technique's viability in culturally adjacent milieus.

For logical reasons the practice of cord knotting is a significant cultural element for China and its people, however without the discovery of sufficient number of knotted cords and a Rosetta stone (or rather a Rosetta cord) like deciphering medium, empirically proving the existence of cord knotting in ancient China remains nearly impossible.

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LÁSZLÓ ZALA

(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

A Thematic Analysis of *Guya* in Chinese Connoisseurship Literature from the Ming Dynasty

Abstract

This study examines the aesthetic terminology used in placing judgment in Chinese connoisseurship literature from the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644). This literary genre constitutes a collection of texts that served as guides for literati antiquarians, instructing them on how to consume material culture in a way fit for a true connoisseur. In providing instruction, the texts place judgment, both positive and negative, on certain objects and behaviours. While most of the judgment terms employed in the texts have clear, explicit meanings, other terms require further analysis to determine their implicit semantic values. In particular, this study focuses on the use of the erudite term *guya* 古雅 ('[exhibiting] ancient elegance'), which occurs 16 times across two late Ming texts: the *Qing mi cang* 清秘藏 (QMC; *The Pure and Secret Collection*) and the *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (ZWZ: *Treatise on Superfluous Things*). In introducing the Chinese connoisseurship genre and one of its predecessors from the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), the article explores the changing socioeconomic backdrop of the Ming dynasty onto which the texts were created. With dissolving societal boundaries between the roles of the literati and merchant classes, the texts served an order-making role, in terms of restoring both a schematic of aesthetic preference and the traditional social hierarchy. Subsequently, the article examines the ways in which judgment is passed onto objects and behaviours in the genre's texts. Particular attention is paid to how approaches to judgment placing changed over time, echoing the growing need for distinction in the late Ming period. The study then examines the aesthetic term *guya*, considering historical contexts and implicit meanings that it accrued over time. To elucidate the implicit meaning of the term in the QMC and ZWZ, a thematic analysis is conducted. In the analysis, a reading of the passages results in a first phase of coding, whereby semantic associations are tabulated based upon the surrounding context of each of the term's instances. The codes are then refined into essence-encompassing themes. Overall, the analysis yields four themes: restraint, craftsmanship, usefulness, and value. Further analysis is then provided of the two most prevalent themes (i.e., restraint and craftsmanship), considering both the socioeconomic context of the late Ming era and the *guya* aesthetic theory of the well-known scholar and poet Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877–1927).

Keywords: Chinese connoisseurship literature, *guya* 古雅, *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志, *Qing mi cang* 清秘藏, thematic analysis, Chinese decorative arts, Chinese aesthetic theory, Wang Guowei 王国维

Introduction

Chinese bronze vessels, jade implements, furniture items, scholars' objects, architectural elements, instruments, and other objects that we now refer to in the West as *objet d'art* or decorative art objects were originally created to serve a functional purpose, and only later, as the subject of *a posteriori* judgment, were celebrated for their aesthetic value. Among the objects, some of the most renown, such as ancient bronze *ding* 鼎 ritual vessels, have been the subject of discourse since ancient times. For example, passages mentioning *ding* vessels in the *Liji* 禮記 (*Classic of Rites*) refer to the importance of ancient ritual bronze vessels through the notion that their possession and proper usage signified a sort of socio-political power.¹ In this sense, their role in historical records highlights, again, their function. Ancient jade carvings assumed a similar role in the pantheon of esteemed objects. The raw stone, nephrite especially, is rare and difficult to mine and carve. The possession of a fine jade carving in ancient times signified one's wealth of resources, whether financial or in terms of accessible labour.²

By the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), written discourses on decorative art objects extended beyond their role in authority-claiming ritual and entered the realm of *a posteriori* judgment. They were no longer only discussed in terms of their charismatic power in determining one's political *puissance* but were seen as objects whose possession and proper consumption could elevate one's status to being a 'true connoisseur' (*jian shangjia* 鉴赏家) of antiquity. Moreover, changing socio-political circumstances of the Ming dynasty, marked by the accumulation of personal wealth among a burgeoning *nouveau riche* merchant class and the simultaneous occupation of the literati in material pursuits, led to both increased collecting among both classes and the conflagration of traditional roles. Against this backdrop, a distinct literary genre emerged in the late Song and early Ming dynasties called Chinese connoisseurship literature, whose texts act as prescriptive guides for the true connoisseur on what elements of material culture to consume and how.

The Chinese connoisseurship literature texts all feature judgment statements regarding the value (whether aesthetic or monetary) of particular objects. In most cases, the meanings of the employed descriptors are relatively straightforward, indicating that an object is, for example, the most expensive (*zui gui* 最貴), the best (*wei shang* 為上), the second best (*zhi ci* 之次), authentic (*zhen*

¹ See: 'Chong ding vessels, guan ding vessels, large jade pendants and tortoise shells are the ceremonial vessels of the Son of Heaven' 崇鼎、賁鼎、大璜、封父龜、天子之器也。(*Liji* 禮記, *Mingtang wei* 明堂位 [The places in the hall of distinction], 21). See also Chang 1983: 1–8, 56–89, 97. Note: all translations in this text are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

² Chang 1983: 97–101.

真), or vulgar (*su* 俗). However, particularly in the late Ming when the connoisseurship texts covered increasingly more objects and sought to create more nuanced distinctions in the face of the increasingly dissolved divisions between traditional societal roles, more erudite terms became employed, whose meanings are not immediately clear. One such term is *guya* 古雅 (lit. ['exhibiting] ancient elegance'). Overall, the aesthetic term exists 16 times in 15 passages between two Chinese connoisseurship texts, which both date to the late Ming, the *Qing mi cang* 清秘藏 (QMC; *The Pure and Secret Collection*) and the *Zhangwu zhi* 長物志 (ZWZ; *Treatise on Superfluous Things*).

This study sheds light on the implicit meanings of *guya* in Chinese connoisseurship literature texts from the Ming dynasty through the employment of a thematic analysis. First, the Chinese connoisseurship literature is introduced, focusing on the two texts that contain *guya*: the QMC and ZWZ. Subsequently, the thematic analysis is presented, which includes a brief overview of the historical context of the *guya*'s usage, and the results are presented, revealing four themes that emerge: craftsmanship, restraint, usefulness, and value. Finally, further analysis is presented on the two most prevalent themes: craftsmanship and restraint.

Chinese connoisseurship literature and its precursors

The scholarly, written discourse on the connoisseurship of Chinese decorative arts dates at earliest to the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), during which the first systematic catalogues of objects emerged. Among the catalogues, the oldest extant is Lü Dalin's 吕大臨 (1044–1091) *Kaogu tu* 考古圖 (KGT; *Investigations of Antiques Illustrated*), which contains illustrations and descriptions of 210 bronze and 13 jade objects that are dated to the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) through the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).³ Each of the original work's 10 volumes consists of a series of passages, each dedicated to a single object. Each object is given a name based upon a combination of the object's type, origin, and/or original ancestral relations, which is determined by the characters inscribed on the vessel's bottom. Furthermore, each passage contains an illustration of an object, followed by a combination of a rubbing of its inscription, a bronze script (*jinwen* 金文) version of the inscription, a regular script (*kaishu* 楷書) version of the inscription, a summary of the object's dimensions, informa-

³ The Qianlong-era (r. 1735–1796) *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書 version of the text indicates that the original version consisted on 10 volumes, with five addition volumes and a commentary later being added.

tion on where the object was found (i.e., its provenance), and a brief comment upon its inscription.

Overall, the KGT is primarily concerned with cataloguing the types, dimensions, and origins of particular ancient bronze ritual vessels, and analysing their inscriptions, all within the framework of a concrete classification system. Moreover, the passages also include illustrations and inscription rubbings to aid readers in better understanding the vessels' appearances. While some inscription analysis passages do include inferences and suppositions, the actual object descriptions, whether in appearance, dimension, or provenance, are entirely devoid of judgment. For example, there is no indication that any particular *ding* vessel is superior to another. No passage indicates that *ding* vessels are historically more important or aesthetically more pleasing than other vessels, such as a *gu* 觚 or *yi* 匜 vessel. There is no comment on the presence of certain types of patination as indicators of authenticity or aesthetic marks. Interestingly, no hierarchy is mentioned at all.

Rather, instead of placing any form of explicit judgment on the objects depicted therein, the catalogue serves as a neutral guide on identifying particular bronze vessels based upon objective parameters. In KGT's original introduction, Lü Dalin himself confirms this role of the text as a sort of accurate reference material for future scholars:

Using thought to reconstruct the intent [of the ancients], or to explore the origins of their craftsmanship, supplementing the gaps in classical texts, I correct the errors of Confucian scholars. For future generations of scholars who have an interest in antiquity, this book will serve as a reference.

以意逆志，或探其制作之原，以補經傳之闕亡，正諸儒之謬誤。天下後世之君子有意於古者，亦將有考焉。⁴

Overall, Lü Dalin states that at that time, there were gaps in classical texts⁵ and thus errors in further works by Confucian scholars that obscured any complete, clear understanding of the classification of ancient bronze ritual vessels. Up until a Northern Song transformation⁶ in scholarship led by literati such as Lü Dalin, the knowledge of ancient bronze ritual vessels, including of their names and functions, was based upon descriptions of rituals and associated objects in the *San li* 三禮 (*Three Ritual Classics*)⁷ and its later, informed scholarship, most

⁴ KGT, *Ji Lü Dalin* 記呂大臨 (Preface by Lü Dalin).

⁵ This is likely referring to the *San li* 三禮 (*Three Ritual Classics*).

⁶ For more information on this transformation, See Moser 2023.

⁷ *San li* 三禮 (*Three Ritual Classics*) collectively refers to three Zhou dynasty-era texts: *Yili* 儀禮 (*Book of Etiquette and Rites*), *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Rites of Zhou*), and *Liji* 禮記 (*Book of Rites*).

significantly Zheng Xuan's 鄭玄 (127–200 CE) *Sanli zhu* 三禮注⁸ (*Commentary on the Three Ritual Classics*) from the Eastern Han (25–220 CE). Extant research⁹ indicates Nie Chongyi's 聶崇義 (d. 962) Northern Song-era *Sanli tu* 三禮圖 as being influenced and informed by Zheng Xuan's scholarship and points to the *Sanli tu* as an albeit err-ridden work that had played a significant, authoritative role in the early Northern Song court's understanding of court rituals and their related paraphernalia. In fact, the text's images were copied onto the walls at the imperial court, and many prefectural schools proliferated the study of the text's illustrations.¹⁰ For the purpose of this study, the *Sanli tu* plays an important role in demonstrating the change in the discourse on decorative arts objects over time in early modern China.

By the late Song dynasty, with the ritual traditions of ancient times restored and the naming and classification schema of ritual bronze vessels revitalised, the discourse on decorative arts experienced a major shift. At that time, a distinct genre of literature emerged that would continue to create texts until the end of the Ming dynasty. Van Gulik was the first to identify the genre of 'Chinese connoisseurship literature', stating that its texts read as 'compilations meant as guide-books for the scholar of elegant taste'.¹¹ Indeed, the genre's texts do contain explicit prescriptions on collecting and consumption behaviours that one should follow in order to be considered 'a scholar of elegant taste' or a 'true connoisseur' (as opposed to a 'would-be aficionados' [*hao shi zhe* 好事者]¹²), such as which types of objects to collect, which to avoid, how to determine forgeries, how to arrange spaces, and even how to behave in situations both in and out of the home. Another important feature of the genre is that many of its texts strongly resemble one another, 'borrowing freely from each other, quoting *verbatim* entire passages'.¹³ This phenomenon of text reuse¹⁴ within the

The term *Sanli* was coined by Eastern Han scholar Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 CE) in his commentary on the three texts, titled *Sanli zhu* 三禮注 (*Commentary on the Three Ritual Classics*).

⁸ Zheng Xuan's *Sanli zhu* was used as the paradigm and reference material for scholarly works on ritual objects through the early Northern Song dynasty, when transformations in scholarly work on ancient bronze ritual vessels revealed many errors in the text. Nevertheless, the text was significant as the first substantial collection of illustrations of ritual objects, including of 'hundreds of different robes, hats, vessels, and vehicles named in the ritual classics' (Moser 2023: 3).

⁹ See Ebrey 2008 and Moser 2023.

¹⁰ Ebrey 2008: 158; Moser 2023: 26.

¹¹ Van Gulik 1958: 51.

¹² Li 2022: 116.

¹³ Van Gulik 1958: 51.

¹⁴ Clough et al. (2001) define text reuse as 'the reuse of existing written sources in the creation of a next text' (p. 152). For more information on text reuse in Chinese literature, see Sturgeon (2017, 2018), Gelein (2019), de Weerd (2020).

genre is beneficial when comparing and contrasting the texts to determine the changes that occurred across the texts over time, in the sense that it is not difficult to isolate differences between the texts when so much of their content is shared. Along these lines, even a cursory analysis of the connoisseurship texts reveals a trend of general discourse entropy, with the latter texts built upon the skeletons of the former but covering a greater breadth of decorative arts objects, connoisseurship behaviours, and terms used to describe and judge the objects and behaviours.

Scholars have analysed the Chinese connoisseurship literature texts from several perspectives. Clunas¹⁵ has extensively researched the genre from the lens of an art historian, in detail examining the texts, in particular the ZWZ, in the context of the concept that in the mid-to-late Ming, ‘the relationship between the manufactured goods and the social order of the power-holding elite was of particular concern to them’.¹⁶ As such, he pays attention to subtle insights that can be gleaned by considering the context in which the text was produced, including the contemporary changes in consumption habits, socio-economic structure, and individuality; the nuanced use of complementary opposites¹⁷ to describe certain objects and behaviours; and contemporary European texts and social phenomena.

Overall, Clunas identifies 17 different texts that fit within van Gulik’s definition of the Chinese connoisseurship literature.¹⁸ Among them are two other texts, besides the QMC and ZWZ, whose analysis helps inform this study. The first is the genre’s earliest text, *Dongtian qinglu* 洞天清錄 (DTQL; *Records of Pure Blissfulness in the Cavern Heaven*), written by Zhao Xigu 趙希鵠 (1170–1242) in the early 13th century. While few secondary sources exist that examine this text, its analysis is important for better understanding the texts of the late Ming dynasty, due to the fact that all subsequent extant texts from the genre are built upon the DTQL’s base. Moreover, the DTQL’s judgements are comparably more straightforward than those of the QMC and ZWZ, which helps shed light on the implicit meanings of latter employed more erudite qualifiers, such as *guya*. The second text is the *Gegu yaolun* 格古要論 (GGYL; *The Essential Criteria of Antiquities*), written by Cao Zhao 曹昭 (fl. late 14th c.) and dated to 1388, two decades after the establishment of the Ming dynasty. The GGYL underwent extensive scholarly work by Sir Percival David in the mid-

¹⁵ Clunas 1991.

¹⁶ Brook 1999: 181.

¹⁷ Clunas 1991: 82. In particular, he focuses on the *ya* 雅 vs *su* 俗. For further information on this complementary opposite pair and its relation to aesthetic thought in Chinese connoisseurship literature, see Li 2022.

¹⁸ Clunas 1991: 34–37.

20th century, with his full, annotated translation into English being published posthumously in 1978.¹⁹ His translation and annotations help guide researchers who focus on later Chinese connoisseurship literature texts, providing valuable insights into how to digest otherwise terse passages.

Of the two late Ming Chinese connoisseurship literature texts that contain *guya* and are thus the focus of this study, only the ZWZ has undergone significant analysis. Chen Zhi's 陈植 posthumously published *Zhangwu zhi jiaozhu* 长物志校注 (Annotated *Zhangwu zhi*) provides a version of the ZWZ with highly detailed annotations in modern Chinese.²⁰ The author's philological approach entails references to other relevant documents both to describe the meanings of otherwise terse, arcane terminology and to reveal discrepancies between various versions of the ZWZ in order to set the record straight. Chen, a scholar at Nanjing Forestry University, was particularly concerned with Ming dynasty garden design and ancient Chinese gardening literature and accordingly states:

Zhangwu zhi is among ancient China's most famous pieces of gardening literature, besides *Yuan ye* 园冶.²¹ In consideration of the book's integrity, it was decided that the subject of the annotated translation is the whole book, not just the parts concerned with gardening, to preserve the whole picture of the book.

《长物志》为我国古代造园文献中《园冶》而外之有数名著，为考虑该书整体性起见，校注内容，决定以全书为对象，而不仅限于有关造园部分，以存书之全貌。²²

Despite Chen's preoccupation with landscaping, his annotations to all of the ZWZ's sections are thorough, including those of the portion of text upon which this thesis specifically focuses, in order to maintain the text's integrity. However, it is clear that Chen sees the value of the ZWZ in contributing to the knowledge on garden design in the late Ming. It is also important to note that beyond a brief introduction and the annotative notes, Chen does not provide a translation of the original text into modern Chinese, nor does he employ exegetical methods to provide a commentary on or an analysis of the original text. Thus, Chen's contribution well serves the purpose of a bibliographical reference material, and

¹⁹ David 1978.

²⁰ Chen 1984.

²¹ This title is translated as *The Craft of Gardens* but literally means 'garden forge'. The 1631 text by Jia Cheng 计成 (1582–c. 1642) is the first known monograph on the art of gardening. Xiao and Xue 2014: 2–11 and Paolillo 2003: 210–235.

²² Chen 1984: 8.

indeed it has been utilised by other scholars, including Clunas²³ and Li Ruihao 李瑞豪.²⁴

Wei²⁵ in turn acknowledges and depends upon the work of Clunas to provide a novel reading of the ZWZ as a text that contributes to the field of leisure research, especially to the burgeoning movement in Chinese academia to attach importance to ancient leisure wisdom.²⁶ More specifically, Wei argues that the leisure activities of the Chinese literati are difficult to understand in a modern context due to the strong influence and restrictions of Confucianism and Daoism on one's conduct, including on the leisure activities in which they engaged, and aims to elucidate these connections so that more scholars can understand Chinese leisure thought of the past and present.²⁷

A recent, comprehensive exegetical contribution to the literature on the ZWZ is Li,²⁸ which is an annotated translation of the original text into modern Chinese that also includes additional contextual notes for each subchapter. In the preface to the study, Li posits that the ZWZ not only expresses the interests of the literati but is a manifestation of their situation of the time. Their situation, according to Li, is that of 'a great hermit living in the city',²⁹ a topic that Clunas addresses in his description of 'absentee landlordism' as

a significant feature in the increase of social distance between the top and the bottom of society, with the rich being more and more based in the walled cities or their immediate suburbs, which offered them more stimulating arenas for social interaction with their peers, better access to luxury manufactures and protection from any potential social violence directed at them by a peasantry for whom the old forms of patriarchal authority had less and less meaning.³⁰

²³ Clunas 1991: 184.

²⁴ Li 2012: 8–9.

²⁵ Wei 2019: 1–7.

²⁶ Wei (2019: 2) adds, '*Zhang Wu Zhi* plays an important role in the evolution of leisure culture in ancient Chinese scholar-bureaucrats'. It is unclear to what time period he refers with 'ancient'. In the modern Chinese language, *gudai* 古代 ('ancient times') refers to the time before 1840 (coinciding with the beginning of the First Opium War). However, in English and the West, 'ancient' loosely refers to the time preceding the Middle Ages, which began at the 6th century CE or even earlier. If Wei intends the latter sense, then perhaps he refers to *Zhangwu zhi*'s value in providing insights into leisure culture exclusively during the dynasties that roughly correlate with those that preceded the Sui (581–618 CE). Otherwise, he likely refers to what *Treatise* contributes to understanding of leisure during the Ming and Qing.

²⁷ Wei 2019: 5.

²⁸ Li 2012.

²⁹ Li 2012 5. See original text: '*Da yinyin yu shi* 大隱隱于市'.

³⁰ Clunas 1991: 160.

Clunas highlights that the traditional forms of authority that once had a hold on the peasantry were losing their acumen, while Li argues that such breaks from tradition were the greatest temptation for (and thus threat to) the literati, and were to be avoided. In addition to its analytical preface, Li presents thorough, footnoted annotations to the ZWZ, utilising Chen's previous work as well as his own research. Each of the original text's subsections includes a *tijie* 题解 ('topic explanation') in which the author provides additional contextual information with which the reader can further understand the text's meaning. These *tijie* are primarily thematic and strategically match the subject-driven division of the text. Overall, Li contributes the most thorough exegetical analysis of the ZWZ to date and acts as an invaluable reference material in understanding both the literal and implicit meanings of the ZWZ and its passages.

Overall, the extant literature on the Chinese connoisseurship literature genre provides substantial information on the socioeconomic backdrop of collecting decorative arts objects during the Ming dynasty. Such analyses provide further insight into the motivations behind the texts' authors to create their treatises. In addition, annotated translations of the texts, both into modern Chinese and English, aid subsequent scholars in their readings of the texts by explaining historical references to clarify passages' explicit meanings. Regarding the implicit meanings of obscure aesthetic terms and how they are employed in the genre, however, few studies exist. In particular, there is a lack of research on how judgment is placed in the genre's texts and on the semantic weight of such judgment terms, whether explicit or implicit.

Placing judgment

As discussed above, the Northern Song catalogues described the parameters, inscriptions, provenance, and ritual purposes of ancient objects. While there is an inherent implication that the objects in the catalogues are worth of inclusion, they do not include any language to indicate that any one type of object was superior to another, nor that any type of design or style was preferred. Conversely, providing such value statements is at the core of the connoisseurship literature texts.

In the texts, value is placed in various ways, with some judgment terms used in similar ways throughout all of the texts, but ultimately in a way reflecting the respective text's goal. To list all of judgment terms that exist across all of the connoisseurship texts would be exhaustive, but below are several of the most commonly occurring: *shang* 上 ('top, best'), 為上 *weishang* ('as the top, best'), *shan* 善 ('good, excellent'), *miao* 秒 ('ideal, wonderful'), *zhichi* 之次 ('second-

ary'), *yi* 宜 ('suitable'), *jia* 佳 ('excellent, fine'), *qihao* 奇好 ('wondrous and excellent'), *qi* 奇 ('extraordinary'), *mei* 美 ('beautiful'), *jing* 精 ('fine'), *ya* 雅 ('elegant'), *gui* 貴 ('expensive'), *liang* 良 ('skilled'), *nande* 難得 ('difficult to obtain'), *ke'ai* 可愛 ('appealing'),³¹ *xiu* 秀 ('elegant'), *xi* 細 ('fine'), *zhen* 真 ('authentic'), *zhen* 珍 ('cherished'), *bao* 寶 ('treasured'), *chao* 超 ('surpassing'), *fengyun* 風韻 ('charming and elegant'), and *you* 優 ('excellent [quality]').

The modes and frequencies with which judgment is placed upon objects varies between the above-introduced texts, in ways that relate to the different goals assigned to the texts in their introductions. For example, the DTQL, primarily concerned with identifying and describing objects suitable for a true antiquarian to possess, often begins its passages with extensive description and contextual information before passing any judgment. This is evident in its passages on *duanxi* stones (used for inkstones).³² The passage begins by describing the appearance of the raw stone in the lower pits of *duanxi*, before explaining techniques for extracting the stones from water. It then proceeds to providing historical reference to a Tang dynasty text that may have misidentified *duanxi* stones as another type due to the colour of the raw material. The text suggests that the two stones might be the same, because they produce almost no sound when struck or grinded. Only then does the text provide a judgment statement:

Both of these superior types of stone improve with prolonged use—their sharpness remains intact, they do not become dull, and they require no artificial polishing.

已上二品石，久用鋒芒愈出，不退鈍，不假磨礪。³³

The two types of *duanxi* stones from the lower pits (or perhaps, as the text suggests, the one type of stone) are the superior type for inkstones, because their carvings endure and they do not require additional polishing after their initial production.

In its passages about *duanxi* stones, the GGYL takes a similar approach as the DTQL but with greater brevity. It begins by providing much of the same contextual information but omitting certain parts, including the information on extraction techniques, the contemplative historical text reference, and much of

³¹ This generally indicates that something is attractive but not worthwhile. See: '[Regarding *Jurong* ware] many of them bear the monograms of supervising officials, which are thin, light, dark black, and fine. Although they are appealing, they do not exhibit *guya*' 故其上多有監官花押，其輕薄、漆黑、歛細，雖可愛然要非古器，歲久亦有微青色者。DTQL, *Gu zhong ding* 古鐘鼎 (Ancient bells and tripods), 翬器辨 *Yi qi bian* (Discerning ritual vessels), 句容器 *Jurong qi* (Jurong ware).

³² DTQL, *Gu yan bian* 古硯辨 (Discerning ancient inkstones).

³³ *Ibid.*

the description of the raw material. When it comes time to place judgment, the GGYL states

These two types of stone are the most valuable.

二種石最貴。³⁴

In the GGYL's introduction, Cao explains that he had developed a deep intimacy with and knowledge of antiquities from a young age. He may take contextual information for granted, finding it of secondary importance to help scholars identify what qualifies as a worthwhile object and what does not. Instead, he focuses more on identifying among the extant worthwhile objects which are true and, in this case, valuable, by describing their appearance and helping one determine its authenticity. In this vein, he passes judgment.

In its discourse on *duanxi* stones, the ZWZ takes a different approach. The ZWZ's argument that further differentiation needed to be made among worthwhile objects indicates that a more nuanced critique was required in assessing objects due to an oversaturation of collectors with the means to accrue antiquities, which had led to a deterioration of the scholar's aesthetic. In this way, in the *duanxi* passage, and elsewhere throughout the text, the ZWZ begins with a poignant judgment statement and then proceeds to dive more deeply into the object's genre to identify the best subcategories. The passage begins with the straightforward statement:

For inkstones, those made from Duanxi are considered the best.

研以端溪為上。³⁵

To dispel any doubt, it is clarified that regarding materials for making inkstones, *duanxi* is the best (*weishang* 為上). The passage then continues by ranking types of *duanxi* stones by appearance.

The best stones have a deep purple colour, feel smooth and moist to the touch, and produce a clear, resonant sound when tapped. Those with layered halos or small greenish-blue 'parrot's eye' patterns are the most prized. The next best variety is reddish in colour, which becomes more lustrous when breathed upon. Stones with slow, broad patterns belong to the Xikeng (Western Pit) variety, which is less valuable.

³⁴ GGYL, *Juan zhong* 卷中 (Middle chapter), *Duanxi xiayan jiukang shi* 端溪下畝舊坑石 (Stones from the old pit at the Duanxi lower cliff).

³⁵ ZWZ. 7.

石色深紫，襯手而潤，叩之清遠，有重暈、青綠、小鸚鵡眼者為貴。其次色赤，呵之乃潤。更有紋慢而大者，乃西坑石，不甚貴也。³⁶

This type of systematic critique of subtypes, from best to worst, is typical of the ZWZ. It resonates with its concern to further divide worthwhile antiquities into a hierarchy to separate the true purveyors of classical taste from the would-be aficionados. This passage features another element that is prevalent throughout the ZWZ. Not only does the text often state what is valuable, but it often identifies what is *invaluable*. The passage continues by listing other types of similar inkstones. While it describes some that are also highly prized, it also describes some whose ‘craftsmanship is exceptionally vulgar’,³⁷ whose forms are ‘slightly vulgar’,³⁸ whose manufacture demonstrates ‘an abominable practice’,³⁹ and whose styles are ‘all vulgar and should not be employed’.⁴⁰

Guya 古雅

The majority of qualifiers used to describe objects in the ZWZ have clear, explicit meanings. The text’s interest in creating hierarchies is evident in its commonly employed judgments of *weishang* or *shang* to denote that a particular type or subtype of object is the most worthwhile of its kind. *Weishang* exists 22 times in the ZWZ describing a variety of objects, including *chensu* 沉速 (‘incense’), coral-coloured lacquerware from the Song dynasty, *duanxi* inkstones, the blue colour of patination on bronze, red *jun* ware (鈞窯), a special type of begonia from Xifu 西府, and dwellings near mountains and water. As the ZWZ sought to provide a wider, more nuanced hierarchy of worthiness, the related nomenclature also expanded. The terms *e* 惡 (‘evil’ or ‘inferior’) is included 12 times in the ZWZ, often in the phrase *e dao* 惡道 (lit. evil path; path of inferiority),⁴¹ to reinforce a particular object’s subjugated position. The phrase *you shen* 尤甚 (‘especially bad’) is also used to express an object’s bottom rank. At the same time, *gui* 貴 (‘expensive’) is used in the ZWZ more than twice as many times as it exists in any of the other connoisseurship texts examined in this research. While these terms have clear, explicit meanings, denoting obvious placements

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ ‘Its manufacture is exceptionally vulgar’ 其製最俗. ZWZ, 7; Translation by Blishen 2019: 110.

³⁸ ‘Gourd-shaped inkstones are rather vulgar’ 葫蘆樣稍俗. *Ibid.*

³⁹ ‘It is an abominable practice’ 皆入惡道. *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ ‘As for red sandalwood, ebony, and carved red lacquer, these are all vulgar and should not be employed’ 至如紫檀，烏木及雕紅彩漆，俱俗不可用. ZWZ, 7; Translation by author.

⁴¹ Blishen (2019) translates it as ‘an abominable practice’ (p. 110).

on the worthiness spectrum, the meanings of other, more erudite terms are not so immediately clear.

A noteworthy example is the term *guya* 古雅 ('ancient elegance'), which exists 11 times in the ZWZ and five times in the QMC. Examples of the terms in passages from the two texts can be found below.

The jades produced during the three dynasties, the Qin, and the Han display ancient elegance.

三代、秦、漢人製玉古雅。⁴²

Some antique versions [of couches, *ta* 榻] showcase ancient craquelure patterns or Yuan dynasty mother-of-pearl inlays, exuding a natural and ancient elegance.

有古斷紋者，有元螺鈿者，其製自然古雅。⁴³

From these two examples, it is clear that *guya* is a positive term, especially by the fact that it is used to qualify jade implements from the Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties, which mark a period of high antiquity. However, beyond the obvious positive connotation, what *guya* denotes is not clear. Is it an aesthetic marker? Does it relate to monetary value, form, craftsmanship, or a combination of these elements? Below, a thematic analysis of the term and an accompanying overview of its use in historical contexts aim to shed light on its implicit meanings in the Chinese connoisseurship literature texts.

Guya in historical contexts

Overall, it is necessary to understand the historical context of the use of the term *guya* to understand its implicit meanings in the Chinese connoisseurship literature texts. Modern Chinese dictionaries and research variably define *guya* as 'of elegant beauty and in elegant taste',⁴⁴ 'ancient elegance',⁴⁵ and 'wonted elegance'.⁴⁶ The meaning of the term's first character, *gu* 古, carries little semantic variance, referring rather explicitly to 'old' or 'ancient'.⁴⁷ The meaning of the term's second character, *ya*, has carried more semantic variance over time. The Kangxi Dictionary (*Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典) points to instances in classical

⁴² QMC, *shang* 上 ('Upper').

⁴³ ZWZ. 6.5.

⁴⁴ <https://www.zdic.net/hans/古雅>.

⁴⁵ Clunas 1991.

⁴⁶ Li 2022.

⁴⁷ *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *gu* 古.

texts in which *ya* carries a meaning of ‘correct’ (*zheng* 正). In particular, it refers to the following passage from the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects):

What the master used correct pronunciation for: the *Odes*, the *Book of History* and the performance of the rites. In all these cases he used the correct pronunciation.

子所雅言，詩、書、執禮，皆雅言也。⁴⁸

Here, the *Lunyu* indicates that only can the meaning of the classical texts be complete if one’s enunciation is correct.⁴⁹ In analysing historical usages of *ya*, Li states that in addition to the phrase *yayan* 雅言 (‘correct speech’), as used in the *Lunyu*, there are also instances of the phrases *yayue* 雅樂 and *yasheng* 雅聲 to refer to the music that was linked to the foundational Zhou ritual and political order.⁵⁰ In this sense, from at least the Zhou, *ya* carried some meaning of a type of correctness that embodies an ancient spirit whose possession has some order-making quality.

The use of *yayan* in a Western Han text, *Jiaoshi yilin* 焦氏易林, which contains poems for each of the 64 hexagrams describes in the Confucian classic *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*), reinforces this notion. The passage on Hexagram 12 (*pi* 否 ䷋) states:

Qi and Lu sought to govern their states by upholding benevolence and virtue, supporting morality, promoting propriety and correct speech, and bringing stability to Duke Ding’s rule.

齊魯求國，仁聖輔德，進禮雅言，定公以安。⁵¹

Here, *yayan* is placed alongside other traditional Confucian values, *ren* 仁 (‘humaneness’) and *de* 德 (‘virtue’), and when they are practiced together, political stability can be achieved. Another passage from the *Xunzi*’s 荀子 section on royal regulations (*wangzhi* 王制) also addresses *yayan*’s role in helping create order, but with a slightly nuanced additions.

As for music, all sounds that are not considered refined are abolished. Regarding ornamentation, all patterns that deviate from the ancient designs are discontinued. As for implements, all tools not based on ancient forms are destroyed. This is called ‘returning to antiquity’, which is the foundation of a true king’s system.

⁴⁸ Translation: (D.C. Lau [1979]: 88). Original *Lunyu*, *shu er* 述而 (Transmission), 18. See: *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典, *zhuibu* 隹部 (*Zhui* radical), *si* 四 (Four).

⁴⁹ Li 2022: 92–94.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Jiaoshi yilin* 焦氏易林, *kanzhi* 坎之 (Chapter of *kan* changing).

聲、則非雅聲者舉廢，色、則凡非舊文者舉息，械用，則凡非舊器者舉毀，夫是之謂復古，是王者之制也。⁵²

In the passage, *ya* is again connected to *sheng* (music), but the *ya* attribute of music is also mentioned in parallel to patterns (or colours) that follow ancient designs and implements that follow ancient forms. Overall, following these established standards is called *fugu* 復古, returning to antiquity, and doing so is the core of establishing a stable kingdom. In conjuring past patterns to contemporary purposes, the passage suggests that *ya* also carries an implicit meaning of ‘precedented’. Not only are *ya* forms old and elegant, they embrace a type of established ideal that can be transmitted, received, employed, and, apparently, deviated from.

From about the 3rd century CE onwards, Li argues that *ya* became ‘associated with high principles, learning, and cultivation. The moral valence of *ya* runs through literary and aesthetic thought as notions of order, balance, restraint, and filiation with the canonical classics’.⁵³ The moral quality of *ya* is apparent in the 5th century text *Shi shuo xin yu* 世說新語 (*A New Account of the Tales of the World*), attributed to Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444):

[He] Jiao, was elegant and correct, despised [Xun] Xu for his flattery and sycophancy.

嶠性雅正，常疾勸諂諛。⁵⁴

In the text, He Jiao possesses *ya* and *zheng*, elegance and correctness, which in this case are clearly moral attributes related to principle and restraint based upon established patterns of behaviour that a gentleman should exhibit. His moral character is juxtaposed to that of Xun Xu, who, unable to control his desire for self-gain, practices flattery and sycophancy. This type of moral attribute of *ya* relates to the social dilemmas presented in the introduction of the ZWZ. According to the text, by the late Ming, there were an increasing number of people who had access to the consumption of material culture that was originally the domain of the principled scholar-gentleman. The improper appreciation for antiquity, or perhaps the wrong motivation to collect certain objects and engage in certain behaviours, expressed a sense of moral degradation, conflating a once-noble pursuit with self-gain and material wealth.

⁵² *Xunzi* 荀子, *wangzhi* 王制 (Royal regulations), 14.

⁵³ Li 2022: 93.

⁵⁴ *Shi shuo xinyu* 世說新語, *fangzheng* 方正 (Upright and correct [character]), 14.

In the Tang dynasty, the disyllabic *guya* first enters the aesthetic discourse to describe poetry and music. One passage from the late 8th/early 9th century *Tangdian* 唐典 (*Comprehensive Institutions*) states:

Zhang Hua submitted a memorial with a poem on elegant music, stating: ‘The Wei dynasty’s Shangshou and Shiju poems, as well as those used by the Han dynasty, have uneven lengths in their lines and do not align with ancient elegance’.

張華上雅樂詩表云：「魏上壽、食舉詩及漢氏所施用，其文句長短不齊，皆未合於古雅。」⁵⁵

Here, the text suggests that certain poems from the Wei and Han dynasties feature uneven line lengths, and this attribute renders them inharmonious with *guya*. Evidently, an ideal precedent had been set by poems from other dynasties that featured even lines. Because the poems mentioned in the passage did not conform with these established norms, they were deemed improper.

Finally, by the Song dynasty, *guya* is used to describe visual art in the form of calligraphy. A passage from the late 10th century *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽 (*Readings of the Taiping Era*) states:

His regular script was brilliant and exquisite, surpassing his teachers. It combined strength and flexibility, and within the strokes and dots, there was often unique charm. Although it lacked complete divine perfection, it could be described as profound and boundless, with an abundance of ancient elegance.

真書光妙，乃過於師。剛柔備矣，點畫之間，多有異趣。雖神明不備，可謂幽深無際，而古雅有餘。⁵⁶

The text praises the calligraphic style of Zhong Yao 鍾繇 (151–230) as nearly completely perfect. That his style possessed an abundance of *guya* is determined by the fact that was strong yet flexible with a unique charm. It surpassed the style of his teachers’, which suggests that it followed an established stylistic precedent that was transmitted to Zhong. Again, the emphasis here is on an ancient ideal that can be observed, learned, and practiced.

Overall, this brief exploration of the historical context of *ya* and *guya* reveals several enduring associations with this particular type of elegance. It is related to a correct, standard form that has been transmitted from the distant past. Exhibiting such elegance is order-creating, in that it harkens back to the forms

⁵⁵ *Tangdian* 唐典, *yueqi* 樂七 (Music, section 7), *sanchao shangshou youyue yi* 三朝上壽有樂議 (Discussion on the three court rituals for longevity felicitations).

⁵⁶ *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽, *Gongyi buwu* 工藝部五 (Crafts, part five), *shuzong* 書中 (Writing, middle section).

of the ancients who are revered for the stability that they created, both politically and socially. Regarding the latter, maintaining social order also relates to one's moral character. Elegant speech and music are required in certain contexts to express one's superior moral standing. Such decorum is juxtaposed to pursuits of extravagance and self-gain, but at the same time proper behaviour can help rein them in. In other words, *ya* or *guya* can be lost or obscured, but returning to antiquity by following *ya*'s precedented forms can help restore one's own moral standing and general social order.

Thematic analysis

A thematic analysis is a 'method for systematically describing and interpreting the meaning of qualitative data by assigning codes to the data and reducing the codes into themes, followed by an analysis and presentation of these themes'.⁵⁷ Such analyses are used in various disciplines that deal with qualitative data, such as in social science where a thematic analysis might be used to understand the explicit and implicit messages of transcribed interviews, or in literature studies, where researchers aim to understand the underlying themes that exist in a text or across a whole corpus. In the case of literature studies, as texts are read, researchers assign 'essence-capturing' descriptive codes to units of text that sufficiently represent the units' implicit or explicit meanings. After that, codes are refined and combined into themes that encapsulate the meanings of the examined textual units. Finally, the themes are analysed to understand how they represent the informing texts, or in the case of historical sociopragmatics, intertextuality analysis, or further content analysis, to understand how the themes might reflect contemporary cultural patterns⁵⁸ or how they relate to the given social text.⁵⁹

In a study of thematic analyses on the *Laozi* 老子, Csikszentmihalyi examined seminal studies on the text that had taken part in the 19th and 20th centuries to reveal important concepts in the primary source.⁶⁰ Overall, his research yielded two families of themes: *in vivo* themes (those that focus on certain terms found in the *Laozi* [e.g., *dao* 道]) and descriptive themes (those that relate to larger categories [e.g., politics]).⁶¹ In his analysis, Csikszentmihalyi presents and analyses the following themes in light of further etymological, historical,

⁵⁷ Waeraas 2022: 153.

⁵⁸ Neuendorf 2019.

⁵⁹ Allen 2000.

⁶⁰ Csikszentmihalyi 2015. Waeraas 2022.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

and cultural context: *dao* 道, *de* 德, *ziran* 自然, *wuwei* 無為, mysticism, politics, gender, and science and ecology. Subsequently, he analyses each theme to determine how each one relates to the *Laozi*'s meaning and the relevant social texts. The analysis requires knowledge and further examination of the primary source and its contexts in order to suss out insight.

As stated above, the meaning of *guya* in the Chinese connoisseurship literature is not immediately obvious. In order to gain insight into its meaning, a thematic analysis was carried out of the passages in which *guya* is used to describe an object. Overall, the term appears 16 times across two texts, including five times in the *QMC* and 11 times in the *ZWZ*. All five mentions in the *QMC* are used to described scholars' objects.

Text	Location (chapter)	Object
QMC	6 (x2)	Ancient jade
QMC	31	Longquan 龍泉 porcelain
QMC	50	Ancient swords
QMC	76	Jingchuan 荆川 paper

Table 1: Instances of *guya* in *QMC*

As show in Table 1, the objects in whose description *guya* appears are ancient jades, Longquan 龍泉 porcelains, ancient swords, and Jingchuan 荆川 paper. The passage from the *QMC* on ancient jade effectively demonstrates how the context surrounding the occurrence of *guya* helps inform its particular meaning.

The jade craftsmanship of the Three Dynasties [Xia, Shang, Zhou], Qin, and Han eras is characterised by an ancient elegance. They are neither overly intricate nor intentionally shaped to resemble specific forms, yet they inherently possess a natural and refined charm.

三代、秦、漢，人制玉古雅，不煩，无意肖形，而物趣自具。⁶²

For jade carvings from the Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, and Han dynasties, the text praises the craftsmanship of the pieces produced during that time as exhibiting *guya*. The second sentence provides extra information into what elements of the craftsmanship might be of particular importance. In this case, the patterns and shapes of the *guya* objects are evidently simple and restrained and do not resemble specific forms from nature. Their abstraction in pattern and form aid in their exhibition of a natural and refined charm.

⁶² *QMC*, 6.

Codes were created for the passages containing *guya* in the QMC to encapsulate the nuanced meanings of the term in its specific contexts.

Text	Location (chapter)	Object	Context clues	Parallel	Codes	Themes
QMC	6 (x2)	Ancient jade	制，不煩，无意肖形	—	Craftsmanship, not complex, pattern, without realistic depictions	Craftsmanship
QMC	31	Longquan 龍泉 porcelain	稍拙制法	—	Slightly crude craftsmanship	Craftsmanship
QMC	50	Ancient swords	鋒，制	—	The blade's craftsmanship (sharpness)	Craftsmanship
QMC	76	Jingchuan 荆川 paper	细花	—	Fine patterns	Craftsmanship

Table 2: Codes and themes of *guya* passages in QMC

The codes for each passages were created based upon the surrounding context in which the term *guya* and the object to which it is assigned exist. For example, the passage on ancient jade implements contains the phrases *zhi* 制 ('craftsmanship'), *bufan* 不煩 ('not complex'), and *wuyi xiaoxing* 无意肖形 ('without realistic depictions'). These codes are used to capture the essence of *guya*'s implicit meaning in the specific context of describing ancient jade objects. As stated above, there is a certain emphasis on the objects' craftsmanship, specifically on the patterns and forms with which they were made. The passage on Longquan porcelains reveals a prevalent yet lesser common mode in which *guya* is used in the connoisseurship literature: in the negative. Specifically, the passage includes the following phrase:

Slightly crude in craftsmanship, they do not particularly exhibit ancient elegance.

稍拙制法，不甚古雅。⁶³

⁶³ QMC, 31.

Earlier in the passage, the text admits that although some Longquan porcelain vessels are excellent and may rival those of the imperial kilns, they lack craquelure patterns, are not well coloured, and, particularly important, are too thick. While there may be good examples of Longquan ware, they do not abide by the aesthetic ideals of the imperial kiln pieces, which *do* exhibit *guya*, and thus their judgment of *not* being *guya* relates to these elements of poor craftsmanship. The code assigned to the Longquan passage reflects this sentiment.

After the codes were assigned, the passages were again analysed to create codes that synthesise the assigned codes. All of the codes of the passages containing *guya* in the QMC related to either patterns, forms, styles, or overall how an object was designed and created. While the ZWZ contains passages on flora, such as flower and trees, or peculiar rocks, none of the objects described as *guya* in the QMC are naturally formed. They were all consciously designed and crafted from selected materials following a certain pattern or standard. In some cases, such as in that of jades, swords, and Jingchuan paper, using particular materials and following established, precedented standards of craftsmanship resulted in an object that exhibits *guya*. On the other hand, in the case of Longquan ware, they were created in a way that strayed from the ideal patterns of other types of porcelain ware that *do* exhibit *guya*. As a result, based upon these context clues, all of the passages in the QMC were assigned the theme of craftsmanship.

The thematic analysis of passages containing *guya* in the ZWZ yielded a wider range of codes and themes assigned to a wider range of objects and decorative elements. While four passages describe scholars' objects, five describe furniture items, one describes an architectural element, and one describes houseware. Below, Table 3 presents an overview of the objects that are described as *guya* in the ZWZ.

Text	Location (chapter)	Object
ZWZ	1	Dwellings, roof beams
ZWZ	6	Tables and couches
ZWZ	6	Couch-beds
ZWZ	6	Platform tables
ZWZ	6	Buddhist cabinets and tables
ZWZ	6	Chests
ZWZ	7	Paperweights
ZWZ	7	Inkstones
ZWZ	7	Jades
ZWZ	7	Longquan porcelain
ZWZ	11	Tableware

Table 3: Instances of *guya* in ZWZ

The ZWZ's expansion of items in whose descriptions *guya* exists reflects the overall discourse entropy described above regarding material culture by the late Ming. In its introduction, the ZWZ states that one of its goal is to expel the excessive through providing more nuanced judgments on what is appropriate and what is not for the true antiquarian to distinguish themselves from the would-be aficionados. Overall, *guya*'s presence expanded from beyond the discourse on scholars' objects, as seen in the QMC, into more quotidian realms, such as furniture, architectural elements, and tableware. These elements exist outside of the scholar's studio and into realms that would be witnessed by a greater audience. The passage on dwellings and roof beams states:

Swastika patterns are suitable for inner [women's] chambers but do not particularly exhibit ancient elegance.

卍字者，宜閨合中，不甚古雅。⁶⁴

Again, *guya* appears in the negative. In this case, a particular pattern (i.e., a swastika pattern) on the edifice of roof beams is described as not being suitable for the exterior of a dwellings. In fact, its presence on the façade is considered *bu shen guya* 不甚古雅 ('not particularly exhibiting ancient elegance'). However, such a pattern could be appropriate for inner chambers.

The passage on platform tables states:

Platform tables crafted by the Japanese come in various sizes and styles, all exhibiting exceptional ancient elegance and exquisiteness... However, designs like those with red lacquer, narrow dimensions, or triangular shapes should not be used.

倭人所制，種類大小不一，俱極古雅精麗... 若紅漆，狹小，三角諸式，俱不可用。⁶⁵

Again, this passage takes the aesthetic discourse out of the studio and into the other various spaces of a scholar's residence, where a platform table may be placed. The passage argues that those platform tables crafted by Japanese, in their various sizes and styles, all exhibit *guya*. Like the passages presented above, here the text again refers to a certain established style of platform table that had precedent in the genre. However, the passage presents two new phenomena.

First, the text contains a type of parallel structure that exists in six other passages of the ZWZ that use the term *guya*. The parallel structures all appear later

⁶⁴ ZWZ, 1.

⁶⁵ ZWZ, 6.

in the passages, after the judgment of *guya* is placed, and provide information on subtypes or variations of the object that *do not* exhibit ancient elegance. These parallel structures are particularly insightful, because they provide further context clues that help in the code-making stage of the thematic analysis in the overall understanding of *guya*'s meaning in the given context. For example, in the passage on platform tables, after establishing that those examples crafted by Japanese exhibit *guya*, the text states that 'designs like those with red lacquer, narrow dimensions, or triangular shapes should not be used'. This information is revealing for two reasons. First, it informs the reader of how Japanese platform tables *do not* appear, providing information on how the reader may be able to discern between what is Japanese (and thus *guya* worthy) and what is not. Secondly, this information also highlights what parameters are the most important to consider. That a platform table actually originates from Japan or that it is made from a certain type of wood is not the most important consideration. Rather, it is that the craftsmanship of the table follows certain established patterns.

Moreover, four of the parallel structure refer directly to contemporary deviations from the precedented *guya* designs. For example, a passage containing *guya* on Buddhist cabinets, after stating that examples with imperial carved patterns or ancient craquelure lacquer patterns and cabinet made in Japan exhibit *guya*, adds:

In recent times, there are objects pieced together from crackle-patterned materials; if crafted without vulgarity, they can also be considered suitable. However, items with new lacquer finishes, octagonal or rounded-corner designs, or incorporating Jian kiln Buddha statues are entirely inappropriate and should not be used.

近有以斷紋器湊成者，若製作不俗，亦自可用。若新漆八角委角及建窯佛像，斷不可用也。⁶⁶

From this parallel structure, it can be surmised that at the time of ZWZ's writing, during the late Ming, there were Buddhist cabinets that featured certain finishes, designs, and ornamentation that rendered them inappropriate for use. That these new cabinet examples went against the standardised forms made them unworthy of *guya* designation. It is possible that built into this context is an argument for restraint against new styles that were inappropriate and gaudy. Such restraint is evident in the other parallel examples that explicitly address new preferences that emerged during the late Ming. For example, the passage on jades cautions against a certain colour of translucent emerald-green jade (*cuisse tongming* 翠色通明) that is in fact not actually jade,⁶⁷ and the passage on tables and couches

⁶⁶ ZWZ, 6.

⁶⁷ It refers to jadeite. In modern times, jadeite and nephrite are considered two types of jade (*yu*

admonishes readers to avoid modern creations that merely emphasise elaborate carvings and embellishments that serve to please the eye, which have been embraced at the abandonment of the ancient styles.⁶⁸ Overall, these passages suggest that at the time there was a sort of rampant deviation from established *guya* styles that the ZWZ sought to combat by promoting restraint against new, extravagant forms.

The second noteworthy concept that this passage presents is that objects of Japanese style can also exhibit *guya*. In the QMC, only scholars' objects, with a deep connection to Chinese literati culture, receive the designation. In the ZWZ, however, objects unlinked to the ancient Chinese aesthetic tradition can also be considered to exhibit ancient elegance that is in sync with traditionally ideal forms. Such an instance also exists in a passage on another type of furniture item, *tan* 榻 couch-beds.

There are Yuan dynasty mother-of-pearl inlays that exude a natural and ancient elegance.

有元螺鈿者，其製自然古雅。⁶⁹

The text states that some examples of *tan* couch-beds from the Yuan dynasty that feature mother-of-pearl inlays exude *guya*. While it is not known for certain, it is possible that the designs of such items could have also received influence from outside of the traditional Chinese aesthetic sphere. Still, the surrounding context clues point to the notion that it is the following of an established, accepted pattern that drives the *guya* designation, regardless of that pattern's origin.

From the relatively rich contextual information read from the ZWZ's passages containing *guya*, a thematic analysis yielded a wider range of codes compared to in the QMC. Likewise, in the synthesis phase, a wider range of themes emerged.

玉). During the late Ming dynasty, however, only nephrite was considered to be jade, while jadeite was given a different, lesser designation.

⁶⁸ 'Modern craftsmen in this productions merely pursue carved and painted decoration, in order to please a vulgar eye, and ancient standards are abandoned' 今人製作，徒取雕繪文飾，以悅俗眼，而古制蕩然。ZWZ, 6.

⁶⁹ ZWZ, 6.

Text	Location (chapter)	Object	Context clues	Parallel	Code	Theme
ZWZ	1	Dwellings, roof beams	卍字，不	—	Meander (swastika) patterns not <i>guya</i>	Crafts- manship
ZWZ	6	Tables and couches	製，可愛 ，無不便 適，用	今人製作 徒取雕繪 文飾，俗	Crafts- manship, charming, conve- nient and appropriate, useful	Crafts- manship, restraint, usefulness
ZWZ	6	Couch- beds	古斷紋， 元螺鈿， 製，自然	近 ...大非 雅器，長 大諸式...俗	Craquelure design and mother-of- pearl inlays, natural, craftsman- ship	Crafts- manship
ZWZ	6	Platform tables	制，精麗 ，貴	若紅漆、狹 小、三角諸 式 (uncon- ventional forms)，俱 不可用	Craftsman- ship, exqui- siteness, expensive	Crafts- manship, value
ZWZ	6	Buddhist cabinets and tables	朱黑漆， 極華整， 而無脂粉 氣，花， 紋，製， 自然	近 ...不可 用也	Certain patterns, without excess, crafted, natural	Crafts- manship, restraint
ZWZ	6	Chests	奇巧，絕 倫，式， 用，不俗	—	Exquisitely crafted, unparal- leled, patterns, useful, not vulgar	Crafts- manship, useful- ness, restraint

ZWZ	7	Paper-weights	古，玉兔、玉牛[等]	其瑪瑙、水晶、官、哥、定窯，非雅器	Certain patterns and materials	Crafts-manship ⁷⁰
ZWZ	7	Ink-stones	宣和舊研，製，樣，式	葫蘆(等)樣...俗，other designs...皆入惡道	Certain patterns and shapes	Crafts-manship, restraint
ZWZ	7	Jades	製，不煩即，細	今所尚翠色...非玉也	Craftsman-ship is not common-place, fine details	Crafts-manship
ZWZ	7	Long-quan porcelain	厚，第工匠稍拙，不甚古雅	—	Thick, crude craftsman-ship	Crafts-manship
ZWZ	11	Table-ware	精，潔，毫涉市販屠沽氣	—	Exquisite, pure	Restraint

Table 4: Codes and themes of *guya* passages in ZWZ

Overall, the analysis yielded four themes: craftsmanship, restraint, usefulness, and value. Table 5 below shows the total division of the themes between the QMC and ZWZ, indicating the passages in which they occur, and reveals that the two most prevalent themes are craftsmanship (15 occurrences) and restraint (five occurrences).

Theme	QMC	ZWZ	Total
Craftsman-ship	6, 6, 31, 50, 76	1, 6, 6, 6, 6, 6, 7, 7, 7, 7	15
Restraint	—	6, 6, 6, 7, 11	5
Usefulness	—	6, 6	2
Value	—	6	1

Table 5: Themes and their locations and totals in QMC and ZWZ

⁷⁰ ‘The double-outline engraving technique, smooth, flowing, and delicate, exhibits hair-thin precision’ 雙鉤礪法宛轉流動細入毫髮涉. ZWZ, 7.119.

Restraint

As a theme, restraint refers to restraint against embracing that which is gaudy and vulgar. By the late Ming, an increasing number of individuals had become engaged in the consumption of material culture that had in earlier centuries been an erudite pursuit of a limited number of antiquarian scholars possessing the knowledge of what objects embodied *guya*. Those engaging in collecting not only included an increasing number of literati but also merchants who had been able to accrue personal wealth.

Writing about changes in the socioeconomic makeup of China during the late Ming dynasty, Brook states that ‘Huizhou merchants were keen to see the boundary between them and the gentry dissolve’.⁷¹ Ownership of land and particular objects was no longer an indication of one’s social standing. At the same time, Brook also writes about the ‘gentry-yet-merchants’, those of the literati who had themselves become increasingly engaged in economic and material gain, originally the domain of the merchant class. As a result of this increased wealth and the dissolving boundaries, ‘extravagance became excessive and distinctions were confused’.⁷² Such distinctions in a sense *do* refer to distinctions within the social hierarchy. Li refers to ‘mountain-recluse literati’ who sought to withdraw from their official duties in the name of purely aesthetic pursuits and the ‘Confucian merchant’ who sought recluse in activities out of their traditional domain.

However, by extension the distinctions also relate to those between approaches towards traditionally scholarly behaviours, such as accumulating and engaging with certain objects. Evidently, there was a predominant trend to engage with extravagance in the face of elegant standards. In order to demonstrate one’s fight against the gaudy, Li suggests that motivation is key.⁷³ In other words, one’s intention, motivation, and mode of appreciation are what create distinctions between ‘true connoisseurs’ and ‘would-be aficionados’. The introduction of the ZWZ and its language suggest that by informing the worthy on correct distinctions between objects and behaviours it aims to re-establish traditional hierarchical distinctions. This refers back to the allusion of *ya* as an order-making attribute. By properly exhibiting *ya* through prescriptive behaviours, a threatened social order could be re-established.

⁷¹ Brook 1999: 157.

⁷² Clunas 1991: 155.

⁷³ Li 2022.

Such a notion is suggested in ZWZ's passage on tableware:

Furthermore, drinking vessels and tableware must embody elegance and cleanliness, avoiding any association with crude commercial or butchering atmospheres.

又如酒槍皿合，皆須古雅精潔，不可毫涉市販屠沽氣。⁷⁴

Even by simply employing appropriate tableware can a true scholarly antiquarian combat the extravagance associated with the *nouveau riche* merchant class and the gentry-yet-merchants focused on material wealth.

Other passages that refer to restraint employ a parallel structure to indicate both that which is appropriate and should be embraced and often specific examples of against what true connoisseurs should restrain themselves. The passage on Buddhist cabinets exemplifies this mode of distinction. First the author presents suitable standards for Buddhist cabinets (i.e., those which exhibit imperial carved patterns or ancient craquelure lacquer patterns and cabinets made in Japan), then he explicitly presents specific contemporary examples (i.e., those with new lacquer finishes, octagonal or rounded-corner designs, or incorporating Jian kiln Buddha statues) that are vulgar. Due to their mention in the text, it is reasonable to assume that such examples existed and were collected during the late Ming. In this context, they were likely the gaudy domain of the *nouveau riche* and thus were to be avoided by true connoisseurs. It is proliferation of restraint against the attraction to embrace such gaudiness that is a main goal of the ZWZ, and seemingly doing so possesses a certain power of restoration, first on the level of aesthetic conservatism and then on a greater scale of social hierarchy.

The theme of restraint is also palpable in the text's introduction, particularly in the passage below.

'My fear is that as time passes and, as you said, the people of Wu⁷⁵ change in mind and artistry, then the knowledge of the source of these leisured pursuits and superfluous things will be lost to later generations. I make this compilation as a precaution against that'. True indeed! The phrase 'excise the elaborate, expel the extravagant' could well suffice as a foreword to this book.⁷⁶

The text indicates that at the time of the ZWZ's writing, a sociopolitical change was occurring among the literati in Suzhou. The landed literati class had become exceedingly engaged in leisured pursuits, such as collecting and appreciating

⁷⁴ ZWZ, 11.3.

⁷⁵ This refers to the literati class of Suzhou.

⁷⁶ Blishen 2019: 17.

decorative objects, which had obscured both the original intention of such pursuits and shared knowledge of what was actually worth pursuing. It indicates a rising tension between those purveyors of the original antiquity-collecting tradition and those who collected to the point of excess, thus rendering long-esteemed objects superfluous. Seemingly, the latter had become the majority, and the ZWZ's author saw it as his goal to push against such extravagance to restore the original tradition. The passage ends with a particularly concise aim of the text: 'excise the elaborate, expel the extravagant'. In this vein, the ZWZ pays particular attention to clarifying not just what is worthwhile to collect and pursue but also what is gaudy and should be avoided.

Craftsmanship

As a theme, craftsmanship combines codes that relate to object's patterns, dimensions, styles, shapes, and decorations and the methods with which an object is made. Across these codes, there is an underlying theme that they all follow certain aesthetic precedents that craftsmen follow in order to create an object that exhibits *guya*, whether based upon ancient Chinese traditions or following a later, established style. For example, the passage on platform table refers to a particular standardised style that is appropriate and examples of designs and shapes that are vulgar. In such passages, it is the object's following a proven model that is celebrated, not an artisan's attempt at establishing new norms. In fact, the latter practice is to vehemently be avoided.

However, in one particular passage from the ZWZ an actual craftsmanship technique is mentioned as yielding *guya*-worthy jade carvings.

The double-outline engraving technique, smooth, flowing, and delicate, exhibits hair-thin precision.

雙鉤碾法宛轉流動細入毫髮涉。⁷⁷

That the text is not clear regarding to which exact carving method the text refers is insignificant.⁷⁸ Noteworthy is that again there is an emphasis on established, precedented craftsmanship.

⁷⁷ ZWZ, 7.

⁷⁸ For more information on Shang, Zhou, and Han jade carving techniques, see Sax et al. 2004: 1414–1418.

An understanding of craftsmanship as a determining factor of *guya* can be glimpsed through Wang Guowei's⁷⁹ 王国维 (1877–1927) late 19th/early 20th century *guya shuo* 古雅說 aesthetic theory. Overall, Wang's theory aims to understand the aesthetic elements of traditional Chinese painting, poetry, and decorative arts objects.⁸⁰ He juxtaposes *guya shuo* (the refined) to *jingjie shuo* (the poetic state), with the former being used to qualify objects and the latter to qualify poetry and painting, arguing that traditional Chinese poetry and visual art aim to elicit two senses: *youmei* 優美 ('beauty') and *zhuangmei* 壯美 ('the sublime'). *Youmei* is exhibited through precise, realistic, smaller depictions of nature in fine detail, whereas *zhuangmei* is exhibited on a more macro scale, through slower pace and grandiose scenes. Overall, the two senses aim to express true feelings (*zhen ganqing* 真感情) through the depiction of true scenery or objects (*zhen jing wu* 真景物).

Conversely, Wang argues that *guya* is an aesthetic value independent of *youmei* and *zhuangmei*. Objects that exhibit *guya* do not express true feelings and do not depict true scenery or objects from nature. In fact, its value, unlike beauty and the sublime, cannot be found in nature. Rather, its value is contained within an established form. The object itself, not its motifs or patterns alone, represents the target of aesthetic appreciation. In his research on Wang Guowei's theory, Wang Keping further delineates five traits of *guya* as an aesthetic form.

1. It is an artistic creation by a learned person
2. Its production depends on personal effort rather than natural talent
3. Its appeal is not rooted in nature (in contrast to landscape painting or poetry)
4. It does not possess *youmei* or *zhuangmei*,
5. It is the subject of a posteriori judgment.⁸¹

The first two traits explicitly relate to craftsmanship. They suggest that it is an artisan's ability to study and learn a craft in order to transmit an established form that is important. In other words, *guya* cannot be expressed through an artisan's creation of a new style or pattern. This sense also relates to restraint, in that novel designs that deviate from established patterns should be avoided. The last trait is also relevant in the case of the objects described as *guya* in the

⁷⁹ Wang Guowei 王国维 was a well-known poet, scholar, and philosopher active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was a pioneer in 'introducing Western philosophy to China and is regarded as the founder of Chinese ideas about philosophical and literary-aesthetic modernity' (He 2014: 61).

⁸⁰ See Wang 2002: 38–56, Shi Wei 史伟 2024: 126–135.

⁸¹ Based upon Wang 2002: 51–53.

Chinese connoisseurship literature. Following accepted forms established in the past, they exhibit aesthetic value that is established after the fact. In contrast to a painting or piece of poetry (or an object following a new style created explicitly to please its eventual patron), which its creator intentionally produces for aesthetic value, the objects described as *guya* in the QMC and ZWZ are decorative arts objects, which were originally created for a functional purpose. This is particularly evident in Shang dynasty bronze vessels, which were made for ritual purposes, or scholarly objects such as inkstones or paper, which were created as implements for calligraphy writing.

Conclusions

Overall, this study aimed to elucidate the implicit meanings of the term *guya* in Chinese connoisseurship literature texts from the late Ming dynasty. In addition to background information on the genre's texts and its Northern Song predecessors, the methods with which judgment is placed in the treatises was also discussed.

The thematic analysis yielded two main themes: restraint and craftsmanship. Restraint relates to the goals of the late Ming dynasty connoisseurship texts to aid true connoisseurs in distinguishing themselves from the *nouveau riche* would-be aficionados of the time, who had become increasingly concerned with the consumption of vulgar material objects and behaviours. Such restraint not only aimed to help restore a precedented aesthetic tradition but also dissolving social boundaries. The theme of craftsmanship also relates to precedent, in that a certain set of existing patterns, colours, and designs, and the methods that yielded them, were worthy of *guya*. Along these lines, it was not the artist who crafted novelties with the intention to create an object of aesthetic value who was celebrated but rather the artisan, who in following established ways, simply purveyed an existing tradition. In this sense, objects that exhibit *guya* are the objects of a posteriori judgment in that they are only exalted after the fact, which relates to the Western tradition of decorative art appreciation.

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JANKA BALÁZS

(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

Xingyun's Buddhist Environmentalism in the Context of The Contemporary Discourse on *Fangsheng* 放生

Abstract

This paper aims to explore Xingyun's 星雲 (1927–2023)'perspective within the contemporary discourse of *fangsheng* 放生 (literally 'life release'), a widely practiced Buddhist ritual in Taiwan. A primary focus of the study is to demonstrate Xingyun's Buddhist environmental philosophy in context of the ritual, as well as his ideology of life protection (*husheng* 護生) being superior to *fangsheng* in terms of Buddhist environmentalism.

Fangsheng refers to the popular Buddhist ritual of buying captured animals and releasing them at a designated ritual site with the purpose of earning spiritual merit. While it is a common religious practice in Chinese-speaking Buddhist communities, and in other East Asian countries, in recent decades *fangsheng* has received criticism for the dangers it might impose on ecosystems by the release of potentially non-native, invasive species. In turn, this criticism has created a discourse around its ecological impact as well as its religious legitimacy in Taiwanese Buddhism. To provide a solid foundation for this discussion, this paper first briefly introduces the history and development of the *fangsheng* ritual. After establishing the historical background of *fangsheng* practice, the discussion continues by examining its contemporary discourse, paying particular attention to the reasons why the ritual has been criticised for its ecologically negative impact. As the dialogue surrounding *fangsheng* is contemporary, the primary sources utilised for demonstrating the discourses include modern media and news articles as well as comments and speeches recorded from contemporary Buddhist figures of Taiwan. Analysing how different modern Buddhist leaders in Taiwan respond to criticism contextualised by doctrinal legitimisations, this paper establishes a spectrum of conservative, centrist, and reform narrative responses in the context of *fangsheng* ritual. Finally, Xingyun's own perspective is placed within this spectrum, highlighting his role as a reformist and his nuanced approach to the relationship between *husheng* and *fangsheng*.

Keywords: Xingyun, environmental philosophy, Taiwanese Buddhism, discourse analysis, Buddhist reformism, Buddhist environmentalism, Buddhist animal release ritual (*fangsheng* 放生)

¹ This paper utilises the standard pinyin romanisation system of Chinese names, instead of the Wade-Giles romanisation system (in which Xingyun's name would be Hsing Yun) commonly used in English scholarship regarding the Republic of China. The reason for this is that this paper's focus, rather than the study of Taiwan, is in the fields of sinology and Chinese philology, which utilise the standard Mandarin romanization.

Introduction

Fangsheng 放生, which in international scholarship is often translated as ‘mercy release’, ‘animal release’, or simply ‘life release’, is a popular Mahāyāna Buddhist ritual with Chinese cultural origins. While its roots are Chinese, it is practiced widely across East Asia and Southeast Asia, particularly in Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, and Japan, and has even found its way into some Western Buddhist communities.²

Although it can be performed individually, *fangsheng* is usually a large-scale ritual, typically led by authorised monastics and performed alongside lay community members. The translated ‘animal release’ term comes from the fact that for the occasion of the ritual, participants purchase captive animals, which are ceremonially released into the wild. These animals can be fish, snakes, birds, or any other small-sized species that can scatter after being released. Turtles are especially popular as a choice of *fangsheng* animal since they symbolise longevity in Chinese culture.³

The primary aim of the *fangsheng* ceremony is to cultivate compassion (*cibei* 慈悲), an aspect of the Mahāyāna Buddhist principle of bodhicitta (*putixin* 菩提心).⁴ More importantly, the act of releasing animals destined for slaughter—whether domesticated or captured wildlife—is also believed to accumulate spiritual merit. *Fangsheng* can be practiced at any time and can be ordered as a religious service from a monastery by practitioners, but it can also be coordinated by a monastery on a large scale, similarly to other Buddhist celebrations on the birthday of Siddhārtha Gautama and important bodhisattva figures.⁵ The more extensive rituals also provide substantial income for the temples.⁶

Many of those who participate in the ritual believe that the spiritual merit and positive karma that they accumulate by releasing the animals can actually cure illnesses, ensure longevity, or even result in the occurrence of miracles. Holmes Welch recalls a massive *fangsheng* event in Hong Kong in the year 1963, when 3,000 sparrows accompanied by monkeys, turtles, and deer were released in order to alleviate a long period of drought.⁷ He describes how the more resourceful pet shop keepers trained the birds to come back after being released, so that they can be used again in another mercy release ritual. The aspects of practicing compassion towards animals and the positive religious

² Severinghaus–Chi 1999: 301.

³ Shiu–Stokes 2008: 186.

⁴ Buswell–Gale 2004: 54. Bodhicitta is the aspiration to attain buddhahood to guide all beings toward liberation, cultivated through continuous mental and ethical development.

⁵ Welch 1973: 268.

⁶ Buswell–Gale 2004: 819.

⁷ Welch 1973: 378

achievements of collecting merit however do not contradict themselves in the religious logic of *fangsheng*. Rather they make the practice even more widespread and favourable to believers.

Regardless of how popular the religious practice is, it has also attracted a considerable amount of negative attention over the last few decades. The main object of the *fangsheng* criticism is its significant ecological consequences, which can be seen in a number of studies conducted on the topic.⁸

These studies demonstrate that the main conflict between the *fangsheng* practice and the aspects of ecological well-being are the introduction of certain species to unfitting environments. Most Buddhist communities that perform the ritual are unaware that the animals that they release may be non-native to the environments in which they are placed. If the released animals survive the traumatic process of being transported from a shop or market to where the ritual is taking place, lacking natural predators in their new habitat, they might become invasive, endangering native species and disrupting the equilibrium of the local ecosystems.⁹

Another major concern that arises during the organisation of large-scale *fangsheng* events is animal welfare. In regions where *fangsheng* is practiced frequently and with large amounts of animals, the ritual has become commercialised. An industry has emerged to supply animals specifically for these ceremonies. In some cases, traders recapture the released animals to sell them again, perpetuating a cycle of captivity. These animals often suffer from poor living conditions, and many die due to the stress of repeated release and recapture.

In summary, from an ecological and animals' rights perspective, *fangsheng* practices often produce harmful outcomes rather than positive ones, which strongly contradicts the original intentions of mercy release. This has led to a contemporary debate over whether *fangsheng* can still be considered a legitimate religious practice, whether it tarnishes the image of Buddhists in society, and whether the tradition should be maintained at all. This debate primarily exists in regions where *fangsheng* is widely practiced, but the focus of this research is specifically on Taiwan, where the ritual is quite widespread and where the most material can be found about the discourse surrounding its potential ecological damage.

When examining the arguments made in the critiques of contemporary *fangsheng* practice, the following questions arise: What positions do representatives of Taiwanese Buddhist communities take regarding these criticisms? Do they acknowledge and admit the dangers of the practice, or do they deny its negative impacts? Furthermore, what religious narratives and Buddhist references do

⁸ Yang 2015: 141.

⁹ To learn more about the ecological dangers of alien species being introduced to a new habitat via *fangsheng* activity, see Agoramoorthy–Hsu 2007: 253 and Everard 2019: 139.

they use to support these attitudes? Understanding these narrative can provide valuable insight into the dynamic of the transformation of contemporary Buddhist religious practice and can demonstrate how Buddhist leaders engage with critical issues facing their communities.

This topic is particularly relevant in understanding Xingyun's contribution to the discourse of Buddhism and modern issues involving environmentalism, as his views offer a unique perspective on *fangsheng* that balances tradition with modern concerns. As the founder of the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist organisation and monastic order (Fo Guang Shan 佛光山), and later the Buddha's Light International Association (*Guoji Fo Guang Hui* 國際佛光會), he was arguably one of the most prominent figures in modern Taiwanese Buddhism.¹⁰ Xingyun's interpretation of *fangsheng* reflects a critical, reformist stance that aims to align Buddhist practices with contemporary ethical and ecological values. His arguments are particularly interesting because they do not reject the practice outright but rather emphasise a shift in focus—from releasing life to protecting life as an expression of compassion. By contextualising Xingyun's arguments within the broader *fangsheng* debate, this paper aims to highlight how his stance bridges traditional Buddhist values and modern ecological perspectives while also emphasising his own unique narrative that derives from his views about the 'protection of life' (*husheng* 護生) as the foundation for his environmental ethics.

Emergence and development of animal release practices in Chinese Buddhism

Regarding the origins of *fangsheng*, several contentious threads and questions have emerged through research. Various masters and monks of later schools, as well as the contemporary scholarship of Chinese Buddhism, reference the *The Brahma's Net Sūtra* (*Fanwang Jing* 梵網經, T.245, 8) and the *Benevolent Kings Sūtra* (*Renwang Huguo Jing* 仁王護國經, T.1484, 24) as canonical sources for the practice. According to historical records, these presumed Sanskrit sources were translated by Kumārajīva, who lived between 334 and 413 CE.¹¹

In *The Brahma's Net Sūtra*, the practice of *fangsheng* is established by the notion of the interconnectedness of life by endless birth and death circles within *samsāra* (*lunhui* 輪迴). The text implies that all beings (and even water and earth) in the Six Realms are from the same flesh and have been mothers and fathers of each other, thus releasing the life of any being is the same as liberating the life of one's parent:

¹⁰ Madsen 2008: 51.

¹¹ Shiu–Stokes 2008: 183.

[The reason why] one disciple of the Buddha, out of compassionate kindness engages in the releasing of living beings, [is because he/she believes the following:] 'All men are my fathers, and all women are my mothers. In every lifecycle, I have been born through them; thus, all living beings in the six realms are my parents. To kill and consume them is equivalent to killing my parents, or my own former body. All earth and water are my former bodies, and all fire and wind are my fundamental essence; therefore I frequently practice releasing living beings'.¹²

若佛子以慈心故行放生業，一切男子是我父、一切女人是我母。我生生無不從之受生，故六道眾生皆是我父母。而殺而食者，即殺我父母，亦殺我故身。一切地水是我先身，一切火風是我本體，故常行放生。

It is important to note that both *sūtras* mentioned above are considered as Chinese apocryphal works by many modern scholars.¹³ Aligned with this argument, Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes claim that there are not any literal indications of the origins of animal release practices in Indian Buddhism, as there is no direct reference to it in canonical Sanskrit texts.¹⁴ However, Chinese-language scholarship, on top of the above-mentioned two *sūtras*, trace the original teachings to animal release practice to the *Sūtra of the Sublime Golden Light* (*Jing Guang Ming Jing* 金光明經, T.663, 16), a text with an existing Sanskrit original.¹⁵ One chapter in particular is highlighted to indicate the early existence of animal release ritual: 'The Merchant Son Udakaśrotas' (*Liushui zhangzhe zi pin* 流水長者子品),¹⁶ in which Udakaśrotas deliberately shows compassion to dying fish by putting them in a pond full of water, giving them food, and most importantly, sharing with them the wisdom of the Dharma, and thus when the fish die they are able to reincarnate as *devas* (*tian* 天)¹⁷:

He took the food and scattered it throughout the lake. The fish obtained the food, then he thought: 'I have given the fish food to make them full, in the future, I shall grant the food of the Dharma!¹⁸

¹² Translation by author from: T24, no. 1484, p. 1006b9. Digitally accessed at: <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1484>.

¹³ Linrothe–Buswell 1992: 9.

¹⁴ Chengzhong 2014: 113.

¹⁵ Chen 2008: 121. and Shengkai 2013: 17.

¹⁶ In fact, Xingyun himself also mentioned this chapter when talking about mercy release and natural life release ponds (*haichi* 海池). For example in: Xingyun 2008. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhsingyun.org/ArticleDetail/artcle976>

¹⁷ Buswell–Gale 2004: 333. Deva is a celestial being or god, characterised by greater power, longevity, and happiness compared to humans.

¹⁸ Translation by Peter Alan Roberts. In: Roberts 2023. Digitally accessed at <https://84000.co/translation/toh555/UT22084-089-012-chapter-25>.

從子邊取飲食之物散著池中，與魚食已，即自思惟：『我今已能與此魚食，令其飽滿，未來之世當施法食。』

It is possible, that this passage may have inspired aspects of the *fangsheng* ritual. When the animals are freed, the participants of the ritual usually chant scriptures—thus gifting the animals the privilege of hearing the dharma—or the name of Amitābha Buddha, which can help the animals undergo a more fortunate rebirth after their current lifecycle.¹⁹ However, it is evident that the story of Udakaśrotas is not a literal example of *fangsheng*, and it is not direct evidence to prove that *fangsheng* existed in Buddhism before Chinese Buddhism. Hence, Shiu and Stokes argue that the practice of releasing animals is rather an indigenous Chinese cultural and religious ritual that was only later associated with Buddhism.²⁰ The two researchers base this argument on a literal reference in the *Liezi* 列子, which contains both the word *fangsheng* and the description of the ritual in the chapter of “Explaining Conjunctions” (*Shuofu* 說符) as follows:

The people of Handan offered doves to Zhao Jianzi on the morning of the first day of the first Lunar Month. Jianzi was delighted and rewarded them generously. A guest asked the reason for this. Jianzi replied: ‘On the first morning of the first Lunar Month, we release living beings to show kindness’.²¹

邯鄲之民，以正月之旦獻鳩於 子。 子大悅，厚賞之。客問其故， 子曰：正旦放生，示有恩也。

The first literary references to the *Liezi* appeared during the Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 CE), which predates the timeframe of Kumārajīva’s purported translation.²² While this *Liezi* quote demonstrates that *fangsheng* may have already existed in China as a ritual, whereby living animals such as birds were released on a set date in a display of empathy, apart from this single citation, as of now scholarship has not identified further evidence of *fangsheng*’s existence in pre-Buddhist Chinese classics. Additionally, Pu Zhengzhong claims that the inclusion of the term *fangsheng* in the dove releasing ritual featured in the *Liezi* was the result of Buddhist influence, and mentions that many Chinese scholars regard *Liezi* as a ‘forgery made under Buddhist influence’.²³ Therefore, there is

¹⁹ Powell 2005: 51.

²⁰ Shiu–Stokes 2008: 184.

²¹ Translation by author from DZ 663. Digitally accessed at: <https://simple.taolibrary.com/category/category86/c86037.htm> See translation by Angus C. Graham. In: Graham 1990: 178.

²² Loewe 1993: 293.

²³ Chengzhong 2014: 120.

no universal agreement upon the origins of *fangsheng*, leaving its origins still uncertain.

The development of the life release ritual can be seen in historical records, especially those describing the establishment of *fangshengchi* 放生池 (life release ponds). These ponds—typically natural or semi-natural bodies of water—were specifically designated for the release of captive animals, such as fish, turtles, birds, or other small creatures. The earliest references of the building of life release ponds date back to the Liang dynasty (552–555).²⁴ Records show that emperor Wu (464–549) issued the construction of a life release pond and named it *changmingchi* 長命池 (pond of longevity). Consequently, during the 5th century, a belief that performing *fangsheng* could lengthen one's life was popularised.²⁵ From the 5th century up until the Song dynasty (960–1279), besides their religious function, building life release ponds thus also became an official method to show gratitude and respect towards the emperor and praying for his longevity.²⁶

In the meantime, *fangsheng* was also embraced as a doctrinally legitimised practice by Buddhist monastics. An important figure in this context is Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597), the intellectual founder of the Tiantai Buddhism (*tiantaizong* 天台宗), who aspired to make *fangsheng* more relevant in Chinese Buddhism by integrating it into the broader framework of Buddhist ethical and spiritual practices. Regarding the dynamic between *fangsheng* and Vinaya rules, Zhiyi emphasised that the act of non-killing is a virtuous deed made by observing the rules of Buddhism, while the spontaneous or organised release of animals is a free choice of performing a benevolent act of the believer. While non-killing is non-negotiable, *fangsheng* is a step taken beyond non-killing.²⁷ He was also active in the establishment of a number of *fangshengchi* around the area of Mount Tiantai, for which the above-mentioned story of the merchant's son was taken as inspiration.²⁸ A letter written by Zhiyi titled '*The Legacy of Zhiyi to Commander Jie Baguo of Linhai County: A Statement on the Mercy Release Pond*' (*Zhizhe yishu yu Linhai zhen jiang Jie Baguo: shu fangsheng chi* 智者遺書與臨海鎮將解拔國:述放生池 T.46, 1934) is an example and a written record of the establishment of a *fangsheng* pond:

This mountain stream connects to the river sources and reaches the sea. The fishing traps obstruct the way of the water, leading to countless deaths through capturing, boiling, and roasting. A premature loss of life like such is truly lam-

²⁴ Yü 1981: 72.

²⁵ Chengzhong 2014: 130.

²⁶ Zhang–Guo 2025: 2.

²⁷ Chengzhong 2014: 131.

²⁸ Feng–Xiong 2020: 223.

entable. [...] As a mere humble monk, though I am weak and slight, I express my wish to save lives. Therefore, I have encouraged the monks of the mountain to sell their clothes to collect resources. With the help of local residents, such as Kong Xuanda and others, we purchased the area used for the fishing business. It is now permanently used as a mercy release pond, changing the fish weirs into streams that flow just like the Dharma. By the request of the Prefect of Linhai County, who has great respect for the Dharma, I talked about the Sūtra of the Sublime Golden Light, especially the chapter of ‘The Merchant Son Udakaśrotas’.²⁹

此山溪接江源連巨海際。漁捕滬業交橫塞水，殺戮既多煮炙無算。夭傷物命有足悲者。[...] 貧道不惟虛薄，願言拯濟。仍率勵山僧貨衣資什物。就土民孔玄達等買茲滬業。永作放生之池，變此魚梁翻成法流之水。故臨海內史計尚兒敬法心重，仍請講說《金光明經》，至《流水品》。

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), official records of a 759 decree show that the emperor constructed 81 life release ponds. However, the *fangsheng* ritual as well as the construction of *fangshengchi* only gained significant popularity during the Song dynasty. Chun Fangyu attributes this rise in popularity to ‘outstanding evangelising monks’, the advances to amalgamize Pure Land and Chan teachings, as well as monastics having influence on governmental decisions, especially regarding the construction of life release ponds.³⁰ The ritual also started to gradually gain prominence in lay Buddhism. Chun describes the appeal of the life release ritual the following way:

The act of releasing was a celebration of reunion, during which the selfish human will, which alienates, was momentarily obliterated. The person who released life in fact released himself from human selfishness.³¹

The practicality of the ritual therefore started to attract a massive number of lay believers from all social classes, and it steadily became an asset of the proselytization of Chinese popular Buddhism. After the Song dynasty, the relevance and popularity of life release ponds and life release rituals started to decline. This was due to a lack of governmental funds and support for their construction. Since life release ponds provided no financial benefits, the reason for their establishment was the personal and religious motivations of a particular government official. The importance of building *fangshengchi* as well as larger-scale and official *fangsheng* rituals faded during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), except

²⁹ Translation by author from: T46, no. 1934, p. 822b6. Digitally accessed at: https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T1934_004

³⁰ Yü 1981: 72.

³¹ *Ibid*: 74.

for an isolated case of Kublai Khan (1215–1294) restoring the West Lake as a life release pond.³²

After a period of decline, *fangsheng* experienced a revival in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), primarily thanks to the Pure Land monks that made significant efforts to popularise the practice, as well as the upper classes and the literati supporting the tradition.³³ One notable piece of Pure Land literature in this context is Lianchi's 蓮池 (1535–1615)³⁴ *Treatise on Refraining from Killing and Releasing Living Beings* (*Jiesha Fangsheng Wen* 戒殺放生文 J.32, B277).³⁵ The *Jiesha Fangsheng Wen* serves as a critical reflection on the ethical responsibilities that Buddhists—and humans in general—hold towards animals. It urges practitioners to engage in acts of kindness, such as *fangsheng*, as a means of demonstrating compassion and upholding ethical conduct towards non-human beings.³⁶ Interestingly, Lianchi also highlighted the potential pitfalls of performing *fangsheng* incorrectly. He described such practices in his treatise as follows:

People may buy animals, keep them for one night, and release them the next morning, or they buy in the morning and keep them until the afternoon. Meanwhile the temple must be prepared for the ritual, and men and women must assemble, which causes delays. During this time, half the animals may die. If life release is done this way, it is nothing but empty words.³⁷

若隔宿買而來朝始放，或清晨買而午後猶存，必待陳設道場，會集男女，遷延時久，半致死亡。如是放生，虛文而已。

Lianchi's essay received significant enthusiasm. The mother of the emperor sent an envoy to his temple to receive teachings directly from him. Inspired by his writings, lay believers started organising 'life release societies' (*fangshenghui* 放生會), an organisational concept still extant today. These communities have been working with the help of or independently of monastics, and their main purpose is to raise funds for the construction of life release ponds and meetings for regular life release rituals.³⁸

As a result of Lianchi's work, *fangsheng* became highly associated with Pure Land Buddhism. The 13th Pure Land patriarch, Yinguang 印光 (1861–1940),

³² Zang–Guo 2025: 9.

³³ Smith 1999: 53.

³⁴ Also known as Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲株宏.

³⁵ Chen 2008: 244.

³⁶ Ryo 2022: 11.

³⁷ Translation by author from: J32, no. B277, p. 760c28. Digitally accessed at: https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/J32nB277_011

³⁸ Yü 1981: 76.

also dedicated significant efforts to either rebuilding these ponds or creating new ones.³⁹ Yinguang devoted his life to teaching the relevance of intensive and persistent cultivation of Pure Land practice, as well as separating Chan and Pure Land ideologies, by which he claimed that only the latter can ensure enlightenment and release from karmic cycles.⁴⁰ He gave his followers an easily understandable concept of the Pure Land as a religious goal and a well-articulated method for reaching it: by relying on the power of Amitābha Buddha and practicing the recitation of his name, a ritual known as *nianfo* 念佛, as well as following Mahāyāna ethics and performing good deeds to purify one's soul, which can be achieved by *fangsheng*. He also emphasised the importance of *fangsheng* as a compassionate and ethical practice that aligns with Buddhist principles, ensuring its survival and continued relevance in modern times.⁴¹

Charles B. Jones points out that the popularity of Pure Land religiosity in Taiwan can be attributed to Yinguang's influence, and his ideology being transported over to the island by his lay disciple, Li Bingnan (1890–1986),⁴² and claims that Yinguang's legacy provides a framework of contemporary Buddhist beliefs in Taiwan.⁴³

Religious narratives in the *fangsheng* debate in Taiwan

1. Criticism of contemporary *fangsheng* practice

Pure Land practices involving *fangsheng*, as well as Amitābha's worship, dominate the Buddhist landscape of Taiwan. Between 1941 and 1960, there were more temples and shrines dedicated to the worship of Amitābha Buddha than to any other divinity.⁴⁴ However, despite Buddhist animal release being a widely popular religious practice in contemporary Taiwan, there are controversies surrounding the potential ecological dangers that might arise from it, as well as the industry built to sustain the animals used in the ritual. There is not only signifi-

³⁹ Yinguang 1921: 5–8.

⁴⁰ Jones 1999: 116.

⁴¹ Jones 1999: 119.

⁴² *Ibid.*: 124: Yinguang's disciple Li was transferred to Taiwan in 1948. He was a practitioner in Chinese medicine as well as an intellectual who worked as a visiting lecturer at the major universities on the island. He was also a key figure in the Buddhist laity of 20th-century Taiwan and spent a fair amount of time and resources to popularise Yinguang's Pure Land thought. Jones points out that Li influenced at least two generations of Taiwan's rising intelligentsia, and his influence on Taiwanese Pure Land Buddhism cannot be overestimated.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: 115.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 115.

cant negative attention on *fangsheng* in the media, but students, ecologists, and organisations have also been promoting and campaigning against it frequently, since the mid-2000s.⁴⁵

The disputes happening between the religious and non-religious voices of Taiwan regarding animal release practices has resulted in a discourse within the Buddhist community as well. This discourse mainly deals with how each representing figure of Buddhism responds to these negative views on the ritual, whether it is still an important and legitimate practice that helps Buddhism to remain a living and dominant religious tradition in Taiwan today or whether it already has ceased to maintain religious legitimacy in contemporary society and should not be associated with Buddhism at all. Understandably, this discourse is quite nuanced and can be contextualised more appropriately as a spectrum of approaches and attitudes. Since this research aims to show Xingyun's views and religious rhetoric about *fangsheng*, it is necessary to first establish this spectrum, which is both a theoretical framework and a social context in which one should place his narrative. In the following subchapters, the author shows the most significant nuances in this discourse and how it appears in the textual reinterpretation and reimagination of the Buddhist tradition in each of the narratives that the author has identified. This paper defines these as the conservative, the centrist, and the reformist narratives.

2. Spectrum of religious responses

a. Conservative narrative

One specific Buddhist organisation that stands out when it comes to the amount and volume of *fangsheng* activity organisation in Taiwan is the Chinese Life Protection Association (Zhonghua Husheng Xiehui 中華護生協會).⁴⁶ The organisation is linked to a popular Taiwanese monk, Haitao 海濤 (1958–), who is consequently also mostly known and condemned for his propagation and support of large scale *fangsheng* events.⁴⁷ Despite attracting negative attention and having been fined repeatedly in accordance with conservation laws, Haitao

⁴⁵ Crook 2023. Digitally accessed at: <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2023/08/09/2003804454>.

⁴⁶ Xu 1995: 116.

⁴⁷ To learn more about the media coverage of Haitao's *fangsheng* activity and its responses in Taiwan, see Apple Daily 2015 Digitally accessed at: http://www.appledaily.com.tw/real-timenews/article/new/20150619/632212/?utm_source=FB and Mirror Media 2017 Digitally accessed at: <https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20170327soc006/>.

shows relentless support for the religious legitimacy of *fangsheng*, responding to the criticism in the following way:

In the future, we will compile more material so that those who criticise animal release and don't understand it can also understand the error in their views because they do not know what they are doing. Since not only human beings are important, how to save more lives is what we, the Life Protection Association, are concerned with, and what we will continue to deal with in the future as well.⁴⁸

未來我們將整理出更多資料，讓那些批評放生、不了解放生的人，也能夠了解牠們見解上的錯誤，因為他們不知道自己在做什麼。因為不是只有人類才重要，要如何才能解救更多的生命是我們護生協會現在和未來都會堅持做下去的事。

Haitao's argument can be contextualised as a representative of the conservative narrative on *fangsheng* that tends to completely disregard the criticism the ritual receives. As demonstrated in the quote above, Haitao represents this point of view and claims that those who criticise the tradition are in the wrong. He does not nuance the stance of *fangsheng* and its legitimacy in modern society at all. He encourages his followers to participate in the ritual mostly by highlighting its positive result in accumulating spiritual merit, performing a role of a religious populist. In the dilemma, arising from the relationship between religiosity and modern science, he chooses to completely disregards the idea of questioning tradition.

b. Centrist narrative

A centrist approach to *fangsheng* agrees with the criticism that it receives to a certain extent while retaining an apologetic attitude towards the tradition. It recognises the negative environmental effects that might arise from animal release practices. However, it contributes them not to the ritual itself but to those who do it incorrectly, and thus it still regards *fangsheng* as a legitimate and important Buddhist tradition, if done right. This *fangsheng*-apologetic narrative tends to agree with the criticism of mass animal release events, the release the non-native animals, and the *fangsheng* industry, built to supply the animals for the ritual. It can also direct the attention away from questioning legitimacy of a Buddhist ritual (and potentially the sangha as well) and divert it to the practitioners. Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009), the founder of one of Taiwan's biggest Buddhist organisations, Dharma Drum Mountain (Fa Gu Shan 法鼓山), is also one example of representing the centrist narrative. While his organisation has

⁴⁸ Translation by author from: ETtoday 2013. Digitally accessed at: <http://www.ettoday.net/news/20130104/148591.htm>.

long ceased organising collective animal release activities, Shengyan's views represent the stance of groups that continue to uphold the legitimacy of the practice, with the correct measures.⁴⁹ When talking about the religious legitimacy of *fangsheng*, Shengyan highlights its importance as a practice of compassion in the light of the Mahāyāna principles:

Animal release is derived from the precept against killing. We can say that the next step after refraining from killing is to practice animal release. While the precept against killing is a passive virtue, animal release is an active good deed. If we only refrain from evil without performing good deeds, this is not in line with the spirit of Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁵⁰

放生是從戒殺而衍生的，也可以說，戒殺的進一步必定是放生。戒殺僅是止惡，是消極的善行，放生救生才是積極的善行；如果僅僅止惡而不行善，不是大乘佛法的精神。

On the other hand, Shengyan highlights the incorrect way that *fangsheng* is practiced today. There is a term coined in this context, which he uses deliberately: 'blind animal release' (*mangmu fangsheng* 盲目放生).⁵¹ This term refers to either those groups who practice *fangsheng* without doing research on the animals and the environment into which they are being released or Buddhist believers who practice the rituals solely for earning merits without the knowledge of the original Buddhist teachings on *fangsheng*. When talking about the dangers of modern *fangsheng* practice, he said:

In the past, when transportation was not as convenient as today, the animals released in mercy release practices, such as birds and fish, were locally sourced or came from nearby areas. Therefore, there were no issues with environmental incompatibility or species differences. However, today many problems have arisen with mercy release practices. Often on the Buddha's birthday or at regular mercy release events, large groups gather, significant funds are raised, and entire batches of fish, birds, and turtles are purchased for release. Some of these animals were raised in captivity and have lost their ability to survive in the wild, making them entirely unsuitable for release. Consequently, releasing them becomes an act of condemning them to death rather than preserving their lives.⁵²

⁴⁹ Chen 2010: 104.

⁵⁰ Translation by author from: Shengyan 2000: 26.

⁵¹ Shengyan 2010. Digitally accessed at: https://fo.ifeng.com/guandian/detail_2010_11/08/3032246_0.shtml.

⁵² Translation by author from: Shengyan 2022. Digitally accessed at: <https://www.ddc.com.tw/ec/epaper/2022/a/20221019.html>.

以前交通不便利，放生的鳥、魚等，都產自本地或附近，放生並沒有水土不服或物種差異的問題。但現在很多放生有問題，常在佛誕日或定期舉辦的放生會，集合很多人、籌募很多錢、買整批魚、鳥、龜來放；有些動物是人工飼養的，已經失去野外求生的能力，根本不適合野放，放生反成放死。

Shegyan expresses his criticism toward large-scale animal release events, pointing out both the immorality of the *fangsheng* industry as well as its dangers to animal welfare. However, he starts his line of thought by justifying the original means and methods of the ritual. Therefore his attitude can truly qualify as *fangsheng*-apologetic.

c. Reformist narrative

Lastly, on the other end of this spectrum of attitudes, there is the reformist narrative, which criticises *fangsheng* openly and does not try to justify its existence in contemporary Buddhist religion. What differentiates the reformist narrative from the centrist one is that it tends not only to condemn the *fangsheng* industry and the incorrect practitioners but also to hold the organising Buddhist groups accountable. The reformist narrative does not necessarily denounce *fangsheng*'s importance in Buddhism from a doctrinal point of view, but it surely does not encourage believers in participating in it, and those who represent a progressive attitude towards *fangsheng* more often than not offer alternatives when it comes to cultivating compassion as a Buddhist percept.

Zhaohui 昭慧 (1957–), for example, in an article released in 2001 for her organisation, Life Solicitude Association (Guanhuai Shengming Xiehui 關懷生命協會) advocates for solving Taiwan's stray dog epidemic instead of performing animal release as a way of practicing compassion. Ordained by Yinshun 印順⁵³ (1906–2005), she is a key figure in progressive Buddhism in Taiwan, as she is outspoken for issues such as women's rights in the sangha and LGBTQ rights.⁵⁴ She is also the first and only monk at the moment in Taiwan to officiate same sex couples at weddings.⁵⁵ On top of her activism for women's right in Buddhism, she is also an environmentalist and animals rights activist.

⁵³ Buswell–Gale 2004: 913. Yinshun was a monk and a Buddhist academic, who is also considered as one of the most important successors of the legacy of Taixu's Humanistic Buddhist ideology, a religious reformist movement that started in the early 19th century, in China. Yinshun escaped the communist regime in the mainland and defected to Taiwan, where he became a central figure of Taiwanese contemporary Buddhist religious life and philosophy.

⁵⁴ Chu 2012: 11.

⁵⁵ Cheng 2013: 4.

Her aforementioned article is an appropriate reflection of her overall attitude towards *fangsheng*, which she sees as a tradition that has outlived its purpose and is completely driven by selfish desires, whether profit or earning spiritual merit:

When releasing life is motivated by the pursuit of merit, the intention is self-serving rather than selfless. This approach prioritises personal gain over the welfare of other beings, exhibiting a strong utilitarian mindset. Moreover, many contemporary life releasing groups do not rescue endangered lives spontaneously but instead organise donations to pre-arrange the purchase of animals. This fosters exploitative practices among merchants who capture birds, animals, and fish solely to sell them for release.⁵⁶

為了功德而放生，動機上是自私而非「無我」的。因為這是從自己的利益（而非眾生的利益）出發，終究帶著強烈的功利心態。在做法上，由於當前許多放生團體不是隨緣搶救瀕死生命，而是張羅善款，預約購買，這就促成了商人為一筆筆「放生生意」而捕獵鳥獸蟲魚的造孽行為。

Her emphasising the selfishness and self-centeredness of *fangsheng* is a way to disillusion *fangsheng* supporters. This is also her theological argument against those who are defending the ritual justifying it as defending freedom of religion:

The ecological consequences of life releasing practices have prompted environmental scholars and conservation organisations to speak out. At this point, those seeking to accumulate merit cannot justify their actions under the guise of 'religious freedom' or 'freedom of behaviour'. Instead, they must humbly revisit the original Buddhist principle of 'protecting life', examining the structural implications of their actions within the broader ecological system. This re-evaluation aligns with the Buddhist law of 'dependent origination', emphasising interdependence and mutual preservation.

「放生」造成的生態問題，已迫使生態學者與保育團體群起撻伐，這時，再好「做功德」的人，也都無權以「宗教自由」或「行為自由」來做搪塞，而要謙卑地回顧佛教「護生」的原始意義，並在整個生態體系中，檢視其「放生」行為所牽連的結構，重新衡量目前「放生」型態的合理性與必要性——這其實也是基於萬有相依相存的「緣起」法則所做的宗教反省。

Zhaohui parallels Buddhist religious philosophical logic with the non-religious, scientific term of ecological balance. This re-contextualisation of the Buddhist

⁵⁶ Translation by author from: Zhaohui 2001. Digitally accessed at: <https://www.lca.org.tw/node/952>.

teaching is not foreign to reformist at all and can be found in Xingyun's rhetoric too, as well as in scholarship concerning Buddhist environmental ethics.

Based on the presented quotations, we can observe the narratives and attitudes that have emerged in the discourse surrounding *fangsheng* in Taiwan. What is common to all of them is that each response in some way legitimises itself by referring to Buddhist teachings, forming various positions within the dynamics of religious worldviews and modern science.

Xingyun in the *fangsheng* discourse

Despite belonging to an older generation of Taiwanese Buddhist masters, Xingyun, similarly to Zhaohui adopts a reformist stance on *fangsheng*, particularly in response to the criticism that it faces in modern Taiwanese society. His views may not be as progressive as the nun's, but he emphasises the negative effects of the ritual more elaborately than his Humanistic Buddhist⁵⁷ contemporary, Shengyan, which indicates that he should be placed around the midpoint between the centrist and reformist positions of the spectrum. In one aspect that he is particularly critical of contemporary animal release practice is the commercialisation and industry that has developed around the ritual. Highlighting the ecological and ethical consequences that may arise from this industry, Xingyun remarked:

We humans have endlessly exploited and destroyed nature for the sake of economic development. However, humans and nature are inseparable and should thrive together. Actually, many people do not understand the true meaning of release; they buy many small fish, birds, and various animals and release them. This not only sacrifices their lives but also destroys the ecology and feeds the greed of businessmen. Therefore, we advocate that protecting lives is more important than releasing lives, and that it is the true expression of respect for life.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Buswell–Gale 2004: 263. Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao* 人间佛教) is a modern Buddhist movement that emphasises active engagement with contemporary social issues, including education, poverty, environmentalism, and healthcare. It was developed by the Chinese Buddhist reformer Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) and further advanced by scholars and monastics, such as Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005). Rooted in the idea that Buddhism should not be confined to monastic life, Humanistic Buddhism seeks to make Buddhist teachings relevant and applicable to daily life. It shares similarities with Engaged Buddhism, which also promotes social activism but was more directly shaped by the work of Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022). Humanistic Buddhism has been particularly influential in Taiwan and China, where it has inspired large-scale humanitarian efforts.

⁵⁸ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9850>.

我們人類為了經濟發展，無止盡的開發和破壞大自然，然而人與自然之間密不可分，共生共榮。許多人由於不明白放生的真義，買了許多小魚、小鳥、各種動物隨意放生，不只犧牲牠們的生命，也破壞了生態，增長了商人的貪婪。所以我們提倡護生重於放生，甚至以護生來代替放生，才是真正尊重生命的表現。

Here, Xingyun critiques not only modern *fangsheng* practices but also frames these actions within the broader context of humanity's exploitation of nature for profit. This framing underscores how *fangsheng*, when misunderstood or misapplied, may outwardly appear compassionate but ultimately exacerbates ecological harm and animal suffering.

Another pattern of his reformist narrative is providing alternatives for animal release rituals, in the context of showing compassion to non-humans. This attitude manifests in the way that he emphasises that protecting life (*husheng* 護生) is superior to releasing life. This perspective diverges from traditional views that regard *fangsheng* as an integral act of Buddhist compassion. For Xingyun, the protection and non-harming of life—a notion that extends to non-living things as well, such as water, air, and earth in his narrative—aligns much more with Buddhist environmentalism than animal release rituals. He often connects this ethical teaching to the story of Śyāmaka Bodhisattva from the Śyāmakajātaka-sūtra (*Foshuo shanzi jing* 佛說睺子經, T031752) a telling of the former birth of the Buddha, where he is a filial son to his blind, hermit parents. While this particular Jataka tale has been shown as an important example of the Confucian ethic of filial piety appearing in Buddhism, Xingyun emphasises another ethical aspect of the story, which is Śyāma's mindful interaction with nature:

As it is said in the Śyāmakajātaka-sūtra, Śyāmaka Bodhisattva's love and care for nature was truly remarkable. When he spoke, he didn't dare raise his voice, fearing he might disturb the earth as it rested. Not only was his speech gentle, but he also walked lightly and slowly, careful not to hurt the earth with any heavy steps or sudden movements. The earth provides us with sustenance and a place to exist, so why would we cause it pain?⁵⁹

在《佛說睺子經》裡說到，睺子菩薩對大自然愛護的行為，真是了不起。他講話的時候，不敢大聲，怕吵醒熟睡的大地；不但講話不會大聲，走路的時候，腳步也放輕、緩慢，生怕一奔跑跳動，踩痛了大地。土地給我們生長、給我們存在，為什麼要踩痛它呢？

⁵⁹ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2008. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article671>.

This story profoundly influences Xingyun's views on environmentalism and compassion, which he extends to his critique of modern *fangsheng* practices. For example, in 2004 he was aware of the problem of releasing of invasive species, such as piranhas, and the ecological implications of the rituals, which he addressed in a speech in Taipei:

Recently the news have been discussing the issue about animal release. It is because people don't cherish life, and thus the ritual turns from life release to death release. Without understanding ecosystems, people even release dangerous species like piranhas into the waters of Taiwan, creating ecological threats. Although they do it in the name of releasing life, in fact, it is putting [these animals] to death. Hence in our society today, protecting life is superior to releasing it.⁶⁰

最近報紙一再討論放生的問題，由於大家不愛護生命，放生已成了放死。甚至有人到南美洲買了食人魚回到台灣放生，對生態完全不了解，雖名為放生，卻是放死啊！所以今天的社會，放生不如護生。

It is evident how, in the narrative of Xingyun's environmentalism, the whole of the ecosystem and the systematic balance of life carries more importance than the individual lives of the animals that may (or may not) be saved during a *fangsheng* ritual. For Xingyun, environmental ethics manifests as a systematic attitude towards nature as whole, just like in the Jataka story, rather than in the occasional practice of cultivating compassion. On the other hand, it is important to note that Xingyun bases this concept of Buddhist environmentalism within the particular story of Śyāma on a mere six character line: 蹈地常恐地痛 ('treading on the earth, he was often afraid to hurt it'). It is possible that Xingyun's own interpretation of the story is outstretching its original meaning, and he specifically selected it to support his own rhetoric, re-inventing the tradition to fit his progressive views. In this way, Xingyun seeks to relieve the dilemma between Buddhist traditional religiosity and aspects of modern science, by claiming that the scientific (in this case, the ecological) approach already exist in scriptural Buddhism.

Not only does Xingyun condemn contemporary animal release practices from an ecological point of view, but he also expresses criticism towards those who partake in it for self-serving motivations. He describes how people use the practice as a superstitious way to gain merit or longevity, often at the expense of the animals' well-being:

⁶⁰ Translation by author from: *Ibid.*

For instance, some might say, 'To celebrate my 80th birthday tomorrow, please catch some fish for me to release'. These fish waiting to be release end up in water buckets, and since they are crowded into a small space, a good amount of them die before they can even be released.⁶¹

例如有人說：「捕魚的，明天我八十歲大壽要放生，你幫我抓點魚來放生！」[...] 這些等待放生的魚在水桶裡，由於空間太擁擠，還沒放生就死了一大半。

He argues that such acts reflect a misunderstanding of karma and Buddhist teachings. Misguided motivations transform *fangsheng* from an act of compassion into one of harm and futility:

Talking about some incorrect interpretations of Buddhism that have lost their original and true meaning, we must point them out and correct them in order to understand what the Buddha's real intentions were. For example, [there is the] improper mercy release that may turn into the act of killing. People want to release animals with the hope of longevity by having others capture fish or birds, not knowing how many of them die during the process. How will you achieve longevity like this? This is an incorrect understanding of the principle of karma. Using vegetarianism for health or prayer for wealth, all of these violate the principle of karma.⁶²

對於佛教一些錯誤的說法，失去了本來的真義，總要提出來做一些修正，體會佛陀的心懷是什麼。好比，不當的放生，反而成了殺生的愚行；例如求長壽的人要放生，就讓人來捕魚、捉鳥，捉放之間不知死了多少，這樣怎麼會長壽呢？對因果沒有正確的了解，吃素只為了要身體健康，拜佛是為了要發財，這都是違背了因果。

The last two quotes further emphasise the way Xingyun that views the practice as an empty ritual without any reference to the real ethical and moral implications of Buddhist compassion shown to animals. Similarly to Zhaohui, Xingyun shows the unattractive and banal side of animal release, stripping away spiritual implications, such as good karma and merit, that often appear in the narratives of the traditionalists and even in those of the *fangsheng*-apologetics. His views on contemporary *fangsheng* are also consistent of his overall approach to modernising Buddhism and making it more relatable for modern society. However,

⁶¹ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9436>.

⁶² Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018. Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9268>.

this attitude is not specific to animal release but rather to the representatives of Humanistic Buddhism, of which Xingyun is an important example.

While Xingyun is critical of contemporary *fangsheng* practices, he acknowledges the historical and cultural significance of *fangsheng* in its traditional context. In his way of paying tribute to the original teachings about animal release rituals, he also frequently quotes and references Lianchi's *Treatise on Refraining from Killing and Releasing Living Being*, which he views as important work in Chinese Buddhist *fangsheng* literature:

In Buddhism, beyond simply refraining from taking life, there is an active focus on protecting life, which reflects profound respect for all the living beings. The Ming Dynasty master Lianchi, in his *Treatise on Refraining from Killing and Releasing Living Being*, writes, 'In the world, to kill and harm others is the cruellest act. Therefore, captured [animals] want to flee; even lice know how to strive to avoid death. That ants move away before a rainfall proves that even they cravenly cling to life. So why do we then set nets in the mountains [...] That makes them utterly terrified, separating mothers from their offspring who may scatter away'. The master also said: 'A person without children feels sorrow; with children, they feel joy. Yet we seldom consider that animals, too, love their young. How can we rejoice in the birth of our children while ending the lives of others' offspring?' Humans and animals may look different, but a parent's love for their offspring is universal.⁶³

佛教除了不殺生，更積極護生，護生是對一切有情生命的尊重。明朝蓮池大師在〈放生文〉中提到：『天下最慘者殺傷。是故逢擒則奔，蟻蟲猶知避死；將雨而徙，螻蟻尚且貪生。何乃網於山 [...] 使其膽落魂飛，母離子散。』又說：『凡人無子則悲，有子則喜，但不思一切禽畜亦各愛其

⁶³ Translation by author from: Xingyun 2018: Digitally accessed at: <https://books.masterhs-yingyun.org/ArticleDetail/article9844>. For more context in how important this specific quote is regarding life-centred environmental ethics, I provide the more detailed segment from *Jiesha Fangsheng Wen*, for which the translation is provided by the author as the following: 'Thus have I heard, in the world, life itself is the most precious, while killing and harming is the cruellest [act]. As for what is the there are two [approaches]. First, ordinary people place equal importance on material goods, status and family, and so on, up until their own physical bodies. However, if one cannot simultaneously obtain all these, then one must choose what he values the most among all these. And this is the reason why one doesn't hesitate [to give up] material goods in order to save one's physical body. One doesn't care about status and rank when it comes to saving one's physical body. One doesn't consider wives and sons when it comes to saving one's physical body. This is the reason why people call these the "most important"'. 蓋聞，世間至重者生命，天下最慘者殺傷。至重有二：一者，世人於金寶、官爵、妻子，以至己身，皆其所重。然不可得兼，則重之中必取其尤重者。是以為救己身，不吝金寶；為救己身，不惜官爵；為救己身，不顧妻子，故云至重。

子，慶我子生，令他子死，於心安乎？』人類和動物雖然形體不一樣，但愛子之心其實都是相同的。

By quoting this particular text, Xingyun also enforces his Buddhist environmental ethical views of which the moral foundation is life itself. Using his narrative about the contemporary *fangsheng* ritual, he also encouraged his followers to shift their focus from releasing life to protecting life.

Conclusions

The ritualistic release of living beings, also known in Chinese as *fangsheng*, has been a significant part of Buddhist religiosity for several centuries. There are numerous key texts in the Chinese Buddhist canon to support the practice including the chapter of *Jalavāhana* The Head Merchant's Son in the *Sūtra of the Sublime Golden Light* as well as potential apocryphal texts, such as *The Brahma's Net Sūtra* and the *Benevolent Kings Sūtra*. These texts played an important role in legitimising the ritual within the religious framework of Buddhist faith, as they are referenced often in the work of later masters, such as Zhiyi, a key figure in putting effort into initiating a more systematic *fangsheng* practice by establishing life release ponds. Between the Tang and the Song dynasties, life release ponds started to gain popularity for both spiritual and official reasons. Releasing wildlife became associated with elongating one's life and showing respect for the emperor. However, due to a lack of government support, life release ponds and life release rituals experienced a decline during the reign of the Yuan dynasty. The life release ritual peaked in popularity in the late Ming dynasty, when the literati and upper classes elevated *fangsheng* to a quasi-status quo practice. The Pure Land patriarch Lianchi was also responsible in spreading the ritual to the masses, after which *fangsheng* became an immensely popular lay Buddhist practice in China, as well as in surrounding Asian countries.

To this day, large-scale *fangsheng* is organised frequently. However, in recent decades, its contemporary practice has received negative attention and criticism. The reasons behind the *fangsheng*-critiques are the dangers that the practice might impose to ecological balance: the mass amount of animals released into the wild are most of the time not native species, and thus they might potentially become invasive and dangerous to local eco-systems. Ever since these dangers have been exposed, the ritual's modern legitimacy has been argued and questioned. In Taiwan, this has materialised as a discourse, where different Buddhist representatives either defend or condemn *fangsheng*. These responses show a spectrum of narratives: a conservative attitude wholly justifying the practice and

disregarding any criticism, a centrist one directing attention from the ritual itself to its incorrect practitioners, and the reformist disapproving of contemporary *fangsheng* and offering alternatives. All three narratives base their arguments on different doctrinal grounds and references to advocate for their own religious followings.

Xingyun represents reformist ideas about *fangsheng*, criticising both the industry that has developed around the practice and the self-centred motivations of some Buddhist believers who engage in it without proper understanding. Karmic and ecological principles are deeply interwoven in Xingyun's narrative, which is also a foundation for his environmental ethical narrative. This narrative emphasises that the ethical support to Buddhist morale towards nature lies in the protection of life itself and interconnected value found in animals, plants, water, and earth. Saving a limited number of lives by disrupting this interconnected value is a misunderstanding of Buddhist principles in Xingyun's point of view. He emphasises that protecting life is superior to releasing life as a demonstration of compassion towards living beings, often connecting this idea to the qualities of Śyāmaka Bodhisattva as portrayed in the Śyāmakajātaka-sūtra. His reinterpretation of this particular story, however, can be considered text-handpicking or a reinvention of the tradition, in order to fit his own Buddhist ideology into the context of religion and science.

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LKHAGVASUREN ENKHSARUUL

(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

Text modules in the Manchu source *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* (A case of the Qing Dynasty's Sudden Attack on the Dzüüngar Empire in 1734)

Abstract

The Manchu source *Jun gar-i ba-be necihiyeme toktobuha bodogon-i bithe* ‘Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Dzüüngarian Territory’, appeared in print in 1770 and Chinese block print in 1772 before being included in *si ku quan shu* 四庫全書 ‘Complete Book of the Four Storehouses’ in 1781. Entitled in Chinese as (*qin ding*) *ping ding zhun ga er fang lue* (欽定) 平定準噶爾方略 (Imperially Endorsed) Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Dzüüngarian Territory’, which is a manifestation of political gratitude extended towards the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) for their unification of the Dzüüngar Empire (1671–1755), the Tibetan Plateau, and the Muslim city-states of the Tarim Basin. The tribal appellation Dzüüngar, also known as Man. *Jun gar*, Oirt. *Jöün yar* ‘Left wing’, Mon. *Jegün yar*, Chin. *zhun ga er* 準噶爾, Rus. Джунгар appeared in the first document in the 17th century as an integral component of the Oirat confederation with the Tsoros (Mon. *Čoros*) clan. The geographical location of the Tsoros lineage, on the left wing of the Oirat confederation, ultimately became the empire designation when Galdan (1644–1697, r. 1671–1697), the leader of the left wing, effectively consolidated their power and united the right wing, establishing a reputation as the last independent Mongol state with a non-Chinggisid bloodline. In the winter of 1678, the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngagwang Lobzang Gyatsho (Tib. *ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*; 1617–1682) bestowed on him the preeminent honorific title, Tib. *dga’ldan bstan* ‘*dzin bo shog thu khang*; Man. *šajin be jafara g’aldan bošoktu han* ‘Galdan Boshogtu Khan, Patron of Religion’. After five successors, namely Tseveenrabdan (1665–1727, r. 1697–1727), Galdantseren (1694–1745, r. 1727–1745), Tseveendorjnamjil (1730–1749, r. 1745–1749), Lama-darjaa (1724–1752, r. 1749–1752) and Davaach (d. 1759, r. 1752–1755), the empire was occupied by the Qing Dynasty in 1755.

As an official historical narrative covering the period from 1700 to 1765, *Jun gari bodogon-i bithe* reveals changes in the content of a primary source, which have been made based on fundamental rules intended to extend and safeguard the legitimacy of the ruling reign. On the other hand, it is a history written by the winner about the loser. The main feature of this genre is that sponsors and requests by individuals determine which historical events are considered significant, which facts are selected, and from what perspective these events are interpreted. Furthermore, the participants in its compilation influence how future generations will remember and evaluate these events by commenting on, summarising, deleting, explaining, and analysing primary sources. The present paper first introduces *Jun gari bodogon-i bithe*, including its content, volumes, block

prints, the location of the collection, and the biographies of 87 individuals who contributed to the compilation. The next section describes the historical background up to the Qing Dynasty's sudden attack in 1734, and how this attack is indicated in *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. Finally, it examines the primary sources related to the attack, reviews the real context of the event, and compares the primary sources with the narrative's content to determine how it was edited. The following two Manchu archive documents hold crucial significance to the present study: A report of Fupeng (福彭, 1708–1749), the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers (Man. *jecen-be tok-tobure amba jiyanggiyūn*, Chin. *jīng biān dà jiāng jūn* 靖邊大將軍), Prince of the Blood of the second degree of Pacified Commandery (Man. *doroi necin giyūn wang*, Chin. *duo luo píng jūn wáng* 多羅平郡王) on January 18 and February 13, 1734, and those were included in the third volume of *Qing dai xinjiang manwen dang'an huibian* 清代新疆滿文檔案匯編 ('Collections of the Manchu Language Archival Materials on the Qing Xinjiang'), published in 2012.

Keywords: Manchu archive documents, official historical narrative, Qing Dynasty, Dzüünger Empire, *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*, report of the Grand General Fupeng, sudden attack in 1734

A Brief Introduction to *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*¹

Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736–1796) and chief supervisor Fuheng 傅恆 (1722–1770) have included their viewpoints on why they should be compiling *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* in a preface. According to the Qianlong emperor's statement, this huge record is dedicated to forever remembering the achievements of the people who sacrificed their lives in the war: 'Relying on the collective strength, we were fortunate to achieve success. However, the number of our soldiers who faced the sharp edge of battle was by no means small. Therefore, the compilation of this record is primarily driven by the loyalty and righteous spirits of those who fell. I cannot bear to let their memory fade into oblivion. Thus, I have documented everything, not to boast about territorial expansion or conquest, but to honour them'.² On the other hand, the chief supervisor Fuheng declared that revealing the military accomplishments in the Strategy Book is expedient: 'The military campaign continued for no more than five years. The strategy has surpassed expectations and is unprecedented among a hundred kings. Inscriptions are put down among mountains in the distant regions, mark-

¹ A detailed study on *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* cf. Enkhsaruul 2024.

² A foreword of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* written by the [Qianlong] emperor. Manchu text is: /2v6/ geren-i hūsun-de /2v7/ aktafi jabšan-de gungge mutebucibe mini coohai ursei dacun /3r1/ agūra-de gasihyabuhange inu komso akū tuuntu ere bithe-be /3r2/ arahangge cohome tondo jurgangga fayangga-be burubufi ularakū-de /3r3/ isibure-de tebciarakū turgunde gemu yongkiyame arafi ejebuhe /3r4/ umai ba-be feshelhe jecen-be badarambuha jalin waka; Chinese text is: /1r4/ 藉衆之力, /1r5/ 幸底於績, 然我士卒之攬鋒鏑者, 不為少矣, 故此書之輯, /1r6/ 率因忠魂義魄, 不忍令其泯滅, 無聞具載以誌之而猶, /1r7/ 不在於擴土開疆之為也。

ing the extent of the realm. Order ministers to open an office for compilation, revealing the military accomplishments in the Strategy Book, is expedient'.³ As mentioned in the preface, completing the Manchu version in 1770⁴ took 15 years since it started in 1755.⁵ Subsequently, the Chinese block print was produced in 1772⁶ and then became the Historiography section's 115th–117th books and the Politics section's 357th–359th books of the 'Complete Book of the Four Storehouses' in 1781. This Manchu source comprises four sections:

- Man. *šutucin*, Chin. *xu* 序, Mon. *orosil* 'A Preface', Man. *julergi banjibun*, Chin. *qian bian* 前編, Mon. *emünedü jökiyal* 'The First Collection' of 54 books from 1700 to 1753
- Man. *jingkini banjibun*, Chin. *zheng bian* 正編, Mon. *jingkini jökiyal* 'The Main Collection' of 85 books from 1753 to 1760
- Man. *sirame banjibun*, Chin. *xu bian* 續編, Mon. *daruy-a jökiyal* 'The Supplemental Collection', 32 books from 1760 to 1765.

The preface has four different parts:⁷

- Man. *Han-i araha jun gar-i ba be necihiyeme toktobuha bodogon-i bithei šutucin* 'A foreword written by the [Qianlong] emperor of Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Dzüüngarian Territory; Chin. *pingding*

³ An account [of Fuheng] respectfully presented to the [Qianlong] emperor. Manchu text is: /2v7/ coohalaha inenggi /3r1/ hono sunja aniya-be baibuhakū /3r2/ dorgi bodogon yargiyan-i tanggū han-ci colgoroko lakcaha /3r3/ jecen-i alin dabagan-de eldengge wehe ilibufi ne /3r4/ hešen-ci casi ba na-be badarambuha-be dahame /3r5/ bithei ambasa-de afabufi kuren neifi bithe banjibume /3r6/ coohai gungge-be /3r7/ bodogon-i bithe-de iletuleburengge giyan; Chinese text is: 师期甫再闰而不逾, /3v7/ 庙算为百王所未有。 碣树龙堆绝徼流沙, 诂尽提封; /3v8/ 觚操虎观新编聚米, 宜昭/4r1/方略。

⁴ A foreword of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* written by the [Qianlong] emperor. Manchu text is: /4r3/ Abkai wehiyehe-i šanyan tasha gūsin sunjaci aniya juwe biyai sain inenggi han-i araha; Chinese text is: /2r5/ *Qianlong sanshi wu nian gengyin zhongchun yue ji yubi* 乾隆三十五年庚寅仲春月吉御筆 'The Metal Tiger year of the 15th of Qianlong's reign, the second month's propitious day, [it] recorded'.

⁵ An account [of Fuheng] respectfully presented to the [Qianlong] emperor. Manchu text is: /15v1/ [n]iohon ulgiyan aniya weileme deribuhe-ci ebsi /15v2/ towohon aniya oho; Chinese text is: /9r4/ 始於亥春閏時十/9r5/ *shi yu hai chun yue shi shi you wu nian zhi jiu* 有五年之久 'It started in the Wood Pig year and lasted for fifteen years.'

⁶ An account [of Fuheng] respectfully presented to the [Qianlong] emperor. Chinese text is: /1r4/ *Qianlong sanshiqi nian daxue shi fu heng deng gong zhuan* 乾隆三十七年大學士傅恒等恭撰 'The 37th year of Qianlong's reign, Grand Secretary Fuheng and others wrote'. This text only appears in the Chinese variant of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*, published in 1990 by Tibetan Studies Chinese Literature Editing Office, Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, cf. Wu Fengpei – La Ba Ping Cuo et al. 1990.

⁷ The author discussed the content, publication, block-prints, volumes, and editor members of the *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* in her previous article, cf. Enkhsaruul 2024.

zhungaer fanglüe xu 平定準噶爾方畧序; Mon. *qayan-u bičigsen jégün yar-un yaǰar-i töbsidken toyataniyuluysan boduly-a-yin bičig-ün orosil*

- Man. *gingguleme ibebuhe jun gar-i ba be necihiyeme toktobuha bodogon-i bithei iletuleme wesimbure bithe* ‘An account [of Fuheng] respectfully presented to the [Qianlong] emperor of Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Dzüüngarian Territory; Chin. *gong jin pingding zhungaer fanglüe biao* 恭進平定準噶爾方畧表; Mon. *kičiyenggüyilen dabsiyulaysan jégün yar-un yaǰar-i töbsidken toyataniyuluysan boduly-a-yin bičig-ün ilerkeyilen ayiladqaqu bičig*
- Man. *jun gar-i ba be necihiyeme toktobuha bodogon-i bithei hacin-i ton* ‘A catalogue of Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Dzüüngarian Territory; Chin. *pingding zhungaer fanglüe mu lu* 平定準噶爾方略目錄 (in 1772 version while *zong mu* 總目 ‘a general catalogue’ in 1781 version); Mon. *jégün yar-un yaǰar-i töbsidken toyataniyuluysan boduly-a-yin bičig-ün jüil-ün toy-a*
- Man. *jun gar-i ba be necihiyeme toktobuha bodogon-i bithei ujui debtelin* ‘A First Book of Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Dzüüngarian Territory; Chin. *pingding zhungaer fanglüe juan shou* 平定準噶爾方略卷首; Mon. *jégün yar-un yaǰar-i töbsidken toyataniyuluysan boduly-a-yin bičig-ün terigün debter*

Manchu and Chinese prefaces identify 87 individuals who contributed to the compilation and publication of this source in nine different roles, including chief and vice supervisor, controller, collector, chief reviser, Chinese and Manchu reviser, corrector, and official translator. Furthermore, these 87 individuals represented 16 institutes in the Qing government, namely, the Boards of Civil Appointments, Revenue, Rites, War, Justice and Work; the Court of Colonial Affairs, the Department Director of the Imperial Household, the National Academy, the Imperial Equipage, the Workshop of the Imperial Household, the Imperial Patent Office, the Imperial Clan Court, the Court of Banqueting, the Grand Secretariat, and the Court of Imperial Instruction. Regarding their ethnic background, the authors consisted of three main groups: Manchu, Mongol, and Chinese. Among the members, 50 were Chinese, 57 per cent of the total, followed by 34 Manchu, 39 per cent, and three Mongols: Bandi 班第 (d.1755) from the Borjigin clan, Nayantai 納延泰 (d. 1762) from the Sartuk clan, and Bayansan 巴延三. There were three personalities on the compilation board list who had passed away before the completion of the source composition, and their case exemplifies the current source’s authorised feature through their heroic actions and ungrateful service to the ruling reign. Bandi of the Borjigin clan was appointed as vice-general for the Left side of the Pacification



Figure 1. Manchu version of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* (from the State Museum in Berlin)

of the Frontier in July 1754. He, alongside the Manchu councillor Oyonggo (1714–1755), took their own life when besieged by Dzüüngarian rioters on the Ili River around August 24, 1755. Recognising their remarkable actions during the adversary's siege, the editors have honoured them as heroes, exemplifying a profound loyalty that transcends generations. Contrary to the above case, Yarhashan (Man. *Yarhašan*, 1689–1759), a member of the Manchu Aisin-Gioro clan, exemplified the consequences of being incapable of leading an army and nonachievement. *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* indicates that the Chinese troops of the Green Banner died because of his lack of leadership skills.⁸ Furthermore,

⁸ The 72nd book in the Main Collection of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. May 14 (Man. *sahahūn meihe inenggi* 'Water Female Snake Day'), 1759 (the 24th year of Qianlong). Manchu text is: /57r2/ coohai bade nimeme akū oho niowanggiyan turun-i /57r2/ cooha-de /57r3/ gosire kesi isibuha, /57r4/ aliha bithei da sade /57r5/ dergi hese wasimbuhange, Jaohūi sei baci hese-be /57r6/ dahame yerkiyang ni bade nimeme bucehe, jai ebsi /57v1/ jidere de jagūn-i unduri nimeme bucehe niowanggiyan /57v2/ turun-i cooha be getukeleme baicafi wesimbuhebi {...} /57v6/ te /57v7/ ere jergi nimeme bucehe urse gemu Yarhašan-i /58r1/ guca-ci gaifi genehe

he let the rebels escape from his siege: ‘When Yarhashan and others besieged the rebel Hojijan (d. 1759) in Kucha [city], and if Yarhashan and others had strictly watched them, the rebels would be unable to escape’.⁹ Four years after he was appointed vice-general tasked with quelling Dzüüngarian nobleman Amarsanaa’s (1722–1757) rebellion in December 1755, he faced execution at the military camp, yet was considered innocent later. These three individuals became a perfect case to demonstrate the Qianlong Emperor’s intention to compile this source: as revealed earlier, ‘I have documented everything, not to boast about territorial expansion or conquest, but to honour them (our soldiers who faced the sharp edge of battle)’.



Figure 2. Chinese version of Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe
(from the Palace Museum in Beijing)

cooha, guilehe-i jergi /58r2/ jaka-be fatafi jeme dabnaha turgunde, ilhi /58r3/ hefeliyeneme nimeme buche seme turgun be tucibume /58r3/ wesimbuhe be tuwaci, gemu Yarhašan-i kadalhangge fuhali /58r4/ fafun šajin akū-ci banjihangge; Chinese text is: /23v5/ 恩卹軍營病故綠旗兵丁。/23v6/ 上諭大學士曰，兆惠等遵旨將進攻葉爾羌及歸途/23v7/病故之綠旗兵丁查明具奏從。 {...} /24r1/今據奏病故兵丁，皆係雅爾哈善自/24r2/庫車帶往，因採食否實等物過多，腹泄病故等語，/24r3/ 似此情節皆雅爾哈善毫無紀律所致。 ‘The Chinese troops of the Green Banner who died in the military camp have been bestowed the mercy of favour [by the Qianlong emperor]. The emperor’s order was issued to the grand secretary. Jaohūi and others reported on the investigation of the Chinese troops of the Green Banner who attacked Yarkent and who died of illness on the way back. {...} According to the report, the soldiers who died of illness were all brought by Yarhashan from Kucha. They died of diarrhoea due to eating too many apricots and other foods. This situation was caused by Yarhashan’s lack of leadership skills.’

⁹ The 80th book in the Main Collection of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. October 10 (Man. *fu-lahūn ulgiyan inenggi* ‘Fire Sow Day’), 1759. Manchu text is: /30r1/ te bicibe Yarhašan /30r2/ se guce-de Hojijan-be horiha manggi, ce aika ciralame /30r3/ tuwakiyambihe bici, fudarkan hūlha aide bahafi tucimbini; Chinese text is: /14v2/ 若如雅爾哈善等在庫車圍困霍集占使，/14v3/ 伊等嚴加防守，逆賊安能出走。

The main question concerns whether or not distinctions occur between the Manchu and Chinese versions and between the two Chinese versions. Throughout the comparison, a notable distinction can be seen only in the preface on the content and number of volumes in the first, central, and supplementary collections of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. This additional information, unrecorded in the 1770 Manchu version, emerges with minor compositional alterations at two locations within the two Chinese block prints. The 1772 Chinese version placed this additional information before the preface and catalogue on three pages and 47 columns,¹⁰ while the 1781 Chinese version placed it after these sections on three pages and 44 columns.¹¹

Chinese 1772 version	Chinese 1781 version
<i>Qianlong sanshi qi nian, daxue shi fu heng deng gong zhuan zou jin</i> 乾隆三十七年，大學士傅恒等，恭撰奏進 ‘The Qianlong’s thirty-seventh year [1772], grand secretary Fuheng and others respectfully wrote an account’	<i>Qianlong sanshi wu nian, daxue shi chen fu heng deng bianzuan biao jin</i> 乾隆三十五年，大學士臣傅恒等，編纂表進 ‘The Qianlong’s thirty-fifth year [1770], grand secretary and minister Fuheng and others compiled the accounts presented to the throne on festive occasions’
‘ <i>Qianbian</i> ’ <i>wushisi juan, suo ji zi kangxi sanshijiu nian qi yue yiwei, zhi qianlong shiqi nian jiu yue ren shen</i> 《前編》五十四卷，所紀自康熙三十九年七月乙未，至乾隆十七年九月壬申 ‘The First Collection’ has fifty-four volumes, covers the period from the Kangxi’s thirty-ninth year [1700], the seventh month, Wood Coat [4th] Day to the Qianlong’s seventeenth year [1752], the ninth month, Water Monkey [15th] Day.	<i>zi kangxi sanshijiu nian qi, yu qianlong shiba nian zhi shi, ji wei ‘qianbian’, fan wushisi juan</i> 自康熙三十九年迄，於乾隆十八年之事，緝為《前編》，凡五十四卷 ‘From the Kangxi’s thirty-ninth year [1700] to the Qianlong’s eighteenth year [1753], matters, were compiled as ‘The First Collection’ with fifty-four volumes’
‘ <i>Xu bian</i> ’ <i>sanshis an juan</i> 《續編》，三十三卷 ‘The Supplemental Collection’, thirty-three volumes.	‘ <i>Xu bian</i> ’ <i>fan sanshier juan</i> 《續編》，凡三十二卷 ‘The Supplemental Collection’, thirty-two volumes.

Table 1. Differences in the preface of the two Chinese block prints

¹⁰ Wu Fengpei – La Ba Ping Cuo et al. 1990: 1–2.

¹¹ Taiwan Commercial Press Company Limited (ed.) 2008: Vol.1, 25–26.

The first difference to be pointed out is the publication date of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. Particularly, the 1781 edition mentioned the Manchu block print date of 1770, while the 1772 version cited the Chinese block print date of 1772. The next two differences are considered the author’s mistake. For instance, the fact that the First Collection ended in the seventeenth year [1752] of Qianlong contradicts the fact that on the 50th page of the 54th volume of the First Collection in the 1772 version, it indicated *Qianlong shiba nianchun zhengyue wu yin* 乾隆十八年春正月戊寅 ‘The Qianlong’s 18th year [1753], spring first month, Earth Tiger [22nd]’. Furthermore, the Supplementary Collection in the 1772 Chinese version comprises 32 volumes spanning 51 pages, which contradicts information regarding the total number of volumes, 33, mentioned in its preface. The next apparent conflicting data relates to the total count of all books in the compilation under consideration. The Manchu version asserts that there were more than 170,¹² while the Chinese versions of 1772 and 1781 state that there were approximately 170¹³ and 171.¹⁴ In reality, the total number of books in the compilation, including three collections and a preface, is 172. Returning to the main concern of whether differences occur between the Manchu and Chinese versions, it is certain that there will be minor differences derived from the two languages’ structures and lexicology, as well as the two-year gap in the block-printing allowed to correct (or edit) the Chinese version. The following three cases can be illustrated.¹⁵

Manchu version (Preface 4v–5r): <i>amcame gūnici, arutai-i aiman halaḥi jun gar seme gebulehe</i>	Chinese version (Preface 4v): <i>su zi a lu tai zhi bu bie wei zhunga'er zhi ming</i> 溯自阿魯台之部，別為準噶爾之名
‘Thinking back in retrospect, the tribe[s] in the Arutai switched [their] name to Dzüüngar’	‘Tracing back to the tribe of Alutai , it later became known as the Dzüüngar.

The modern standardised Chinese character for Altai is *a le tai* 阿勒泰. Due to limited access to the additional source, it remains unclear why the Manchu version referenced Arutai, how it can be explained, or if it was the writer’s mistake.

¹² Manchu text is: *uheri emu tanggū nadanju debtelin funceme weilehe* ‘All made more than one hundred and seventy volumes’

¹³ Chinese text is: *Shu bai qishi juan* 書百七十卷 ‘One hundred and seventy volumes’

¹⁴ Chinese text is: *Ping ding zhun ga er fang lue yibai qishiyi juan* 平定準噶爾方略一百七十一卷 ‘One hundred and seventy-one volumes of the Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Dzüüngarian Territory’

¹⁵ A case study of comparison on the Manchu and Chinese block-prints of the *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*, cf. Enkhsaruul 2025c.

Manchu version (Preface 5v): <i>duin oirat daci ini hanci adaki bime ehe mujilen tebufi durime ejelehe</i>	Chinese version (Preface 4r): <i>sibu ben yi chunchi xiongxin yi chi jingtun</i> 四部本伊脣齒， 雄心 已侈鯨吞
‘[Galdan] annexed [them because he] kept evil intent even though the Four Oirats were his [Galdan’s] close partners’	‘[Galdan] annexed [them to seek his] great ambitions even though the Four Oirats were his [Galdan’s] close partners’

A Manchu expression in the above text, *ehe mujilen* ‘evil intent,’ has an equal meaning with the Chinese word *huo xin* 禍心[id.]; regardless of that, translating it as *xiongxin* 雄心 ‘great ambition’ appears to follow the Chinese classic stylistics.

Manchu version (First book 3v): <i>sirame aniya, ejen-i beye geli dailame genefi, conotu alin-de isinafi, fudarkan hūlhai jui sebtan banjur-be jafafi yabure kūwaran-de olji alibuha</i>	Chinese version (First book 2r): <i>Mingnian, jia fu qinzheng, chu lang ju xu shan, huo nizi sai bo tun ban zhu er, xian fu xing zai.</i> 明年，駕復親征，出 狼居胥山 ，獲逆子塞卜屯班珠爾，獻俘行在。
‘The next year (1696), the [Kangxi] emperor personally led the campaign, reaching Conotu Mountain , capturing the rebel [Galdan]’s son Sebtanbanjur, and presenting him as a booty at the imperial palace [for short stays away from the capital]’	‘The next year (1696), the [Kangxi] emperor personally led the campaign, reaching Langjuxu Mountain , capturing the rebel [Galdan]’s son Sebtanbanjur, and presenting him as a booty at the imperial palace [for short stays away from the capital]’

It seems that *Conotu* is the Mongolian name of the mountain, which is derived from the *činu-a* ‘wolf’: the Manchu expression for the wolf is *niohe*. Chinese ‘Langjuxu Mountain’ 狼居胥山 is a general term for referring to the northern desert, in particular nomads, ever since the Han dynasty (119 BCE). Tracking back the sources, Sebtanbanjur was captured around Barkhöl Mountain (Man. *Barkul*, Mon. *Bars köl*, Chin. *ba li kun* 巴里坤) while hunting in the winter of 1696 and sent to the Kangxi emperor’s military camp near Shenmu city 神木縣, close to the Shaanxi Province and the Ordos Mongols, at the beginning of 1697.¹⁶ The author couldn’t clarify the location (or usage) of the Manchu term *Conotu alin* at the moment due to source limitations. It should be noted that there are minor differences in some expressions between the Manchu and

¹⁶ Unda (1709), the 38th volume of the ‘Strategy Book for the Pacification of the Northwestern Territory Campaigned by Imperial’. A note on March 4 (Wood Doe Day) 1697 (the 36th year of the Kangxi), regarding Sebtanbanjur’s meeting with the Kangxi Emperor.

Chinese versions of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*; nevertheless, differences in the content require further investigation.

The accessibility of the present source has greatly improved, as major institutions have digitized it for free access. The National Library of France¹⁷ hosts a complete Manchu version, while the State Museum in Berlin¹⁸ holds an incomplete Manchu edition comprising 109 volumes. Another incomplete set of 49 volumes is preserved at the National Archive of Mongolia,¹⁹ which has cataloged the titles online. Due to its significance in 18th-century Mongolian history, Chakhar Mongolian historian Bүrd Buyanchuulgan (Mon. *Bүrd Buyančiyulgan*, 1885–1937) has translated the complete text into Uyghur-Mongolian script, titled Mon. *Jun yar-un yajar-i töbsidken toytayaysan boduly-a-yin bičig*, now kept at the National Library of Mongolia.²⁰ Additionally, the text attracted international attention, including a partial (four volumes) Chinese reproduction by the Japanese official Ota Nanpo (大田南畝, 1749–1823) in 1805²¹ to understand the interrelationship between the Russian Empire (1721–1917) and the Qing Dynasty. Two government offices, *gu gong bo wu yuan* 故宮博物院 ‘The Palace Museum’ in Beijing²² and *guo li gu gong bo wu yuan* 國立故宮博物院 ‘National Palace Museum’ in Taipei have a Chinese blockprint of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*, at the moment. As with the Manchu version, the Chinese version was also made accessible through websites thanks to the efforts of several universities and organisations.²³ The Chinese block print from 1772 was published in four volumes by the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences in 1990,²⁴ marking the first time Chinese block print collections had been made available. Soon after, the National Palace Museum produced the 1781 Chinese block print version in volumes 47th through 53rd of the Forbidden City Rare Book Collection in 2000 (which consists of 7 volumes),²⁵ and shortly later, Taiwan Commercial Press Company Limited published it in three volumes in 2008.²⁶ In light of the Chinese historians’ hard work in publishing and introducing the source into the academic framework, the Chinese version gained

¹⁷ The National Library of France 2025.

¹⁸ The State Museum in Berlin 2025.

¹⁹ The National Archive of Mongolia 2025.

²⁰ The National Library of Mongolia 2025.

²¹ For a detailed study on the Chinese reproduction of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*, cf. Kusunoki 2004.

²² The Palace Museum in Beijing 2025.

²³ Among them, Peking University – Byte Dance Open Lab for Digital Humanities has launched an edition of the 1781 Chinese version of *Jun gari bodogon-i bithe*, cf. Peking University 2025.

²⁴ Wu Fengpei – La Ba Ping Cuo et al. 1990.

²⁵ Li Shengzhao 2000.

²⁶ Taiwan Commercial Press Company Limited 2008.

popularity among those who recognise its historical significance. For instance, a collaborative effort involving The Institute of Uighur Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Национальная академия наук Республики Казахстан, Институт уйгуроведения), alongside The Abu Rayhan Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies at the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Академия наук Республики Узбекистан, Институт востоковедения имени Абу Райхана Беруни), released a book in 1994. Aligned with their primary objective, this book collected 55 reports from *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* concerning East Turkestan from 1755 to 1762²⁷ then made a Russian translation based on the Chinese version. Contrary to the Chinese version, the Manchu version was introduced much later, especially with the contribution of the National Library of France in 2010. It provided a new academic conversation to compare the Manchu and Chinese versions. An initial notable step in collaboration with this Manchu version was conducted by Mongolian historians because of its value in eighteenth-century Mongolian history, in 2020. Considering that Mongolians translated it completely into Uyghur Mongolian script in the 1930s, unfortunately, it was put aside a little from the academic frame due to the uncertainty of the original version used for translation. *Тод номын гэрэл төв* ‘The Centre of the Light of the Clear Script Books’, together with several Mongolian historians,²⁸ translated the Manchu version in the National Library of France into the Cyrillic Mongolian script. It became volumes 89 to 98 of the *Bibliotheca Oiratica* series, which included 10 volumes and 2547 pages with an additional index of personal and place names. As a project member, the author was pleased to participate in this significant project and translated more than 30 volumes from Manchu to Cyrillic Mongolian from the Main Collection of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*.

²⁷ Sadvakasov 1994: 75–141.

²⁸ Sukhbaatar – Oyunjargal 2020. General editor Na. Sukhbaatar; series editor B. Tuvshingtogs; volume editor O. Oyunjargal; an academic preface by Na. Sukhbaatar and O. Oyunjargal; Manchu and Chinese block prints were examined and reviewed by O. Oyunjargal; transcribed from Manchu to Cyrillic Mongolian by C. Jambaldorj, E. Jargalmaa, B. Natsagdorj, G. Odba-yar, B. Oljisaikhan, S. Taivanbaatar and L. Enkhsaruul.

Historical background

Four major military conflicts²⁹ can characterize a relationship between the Qing Dynasty and the Dzüünger Empire³⁰, each marking a distinct interaction phase. The main result of the first conflict (1690–1697) was the subjugation of the Khalkha Mongols to the Qing Dynasty in 1691. The second conflict took place on the Tibetan Plateau from 1718 to 1720, and in the end, the Qing successfully established ministers to govern the Qinghai-Tibet region from Xining and Lhasa. In the third phase (1730–1734), both sides established a border treaty in 1739. Finally, the fourth and most decisive phase, between 1755 and 1758, led to the ultimate demise of the Dzüünger Empire. The third conflict³¹ occurred in Yongzheng's (1678–1735) and Galdantseren's reign, as relates to the present study. Galdantseren Khan held the throne in an unstable political situation when his father, Tseveenravdan Khan, died of a poisoned meal from his second wife, Seterjab (d. 1727), in her fellows' attempt to turn the Dzüünger Empire's political rule. Meanwhile, the Yongzheng emperor carefully investigated Galdantseren's situation and devised a brilliant plan to conquer the Dzüünger Empire. The plan consisted of three main strategies:³² to make an alliance with the surrounding pivotal political strengths like the Russian Empire, Kazaks, and Kalmyk Mongols in the Volga region; to persuade Luvsanshunu (1695/6–1732), son of the Tseveenravdan and Seterjab, to become an opponent of Galdantseren; and to mobilise armies to the significant border locations of Khovd and Barkol. Furthermore, the Yongzheng Emperor appointed two generals to attack the Dzüünger Empire in 1729 based on two main roads named the West Road (Man. *wargi jugūn*, Chin. *xi lu* 西路) of the Barkhöl region and the North Road (Man. *amargi jugūn*, Chin. *bei lu* 北路) of the Altai region. Furdan 傅爾丹 (1680–1752) led the north road and was titled Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers. At the same time, Yue Zhong Qi 岳鐘琪 (1688–1754) led the west road with the title of Grand General for Stabilization the Distant Lands (Man. *goroki be elhe obure amba jiyanggiyūn*, Chin. *ningyuan da jiang jun* 寧遠大將軍). Due to ungrateful service to the emperor, coupled with a lack of leadership ability, the title of Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers was transferred to three individuals within

²⁹ A further study on the first conflict cf. Oyunbilig 1999, the second conflict in the Tibetan Plateau cf. Shim 2020, the third and the last conflicts cf. Atwood 2004: 622–624.

³⁰ For a detailed study of the ethnogenetic myth of the Tsoros clan, which established the Dzüünger empire, cf. Birtalan 2002.

³¹ The military operation had a notable impact on the lives of Dzüüngarian locals, leading to the creation of a proverb during that time (cf. Enkhsaruul, 2025a). At that time, the Dzüüngarians attempted to make an ally with the Khalkha Mongols, and Galdantseren Khan sent a letter to Lamajab, a Khalkha nobleman, in 1731 (cf. Enkhsaruul 2025b).

³² Oyunbilig 2017: 8–10.

five years: Furdan from 1729 to 1731, Xibao 錫保 (1688–1742) from October 1731 to 1733, and Fupeng between 1733 and 1735. As for the first two plans of allying with neighbours, the Qing Dynasty minister Tushi 托時 (d. 1760) was responsible for that, under the guise of congratulating Peter II Alexeevich (r. 1727–1730) in the Russian Empire. In addition to delivering the imperial letter to the Russian authorities at the beginning of 1731, he also brought four oral messages:³³ First, to inform the Russian authorities of the Qing Dynasty's war against the Dzüüŋgar Empire, and to inform Russia that if the Qing army fought near the Russian border, Russia should not have any suspicions; Second, if Peter II had any interest in the adjacent lands with the Dzüüŋgarian territory, please inform the Qing envoys about it when the Qing Dynasty conquered the Dzüüŋgar Empire, and these lands could be ceded to Russia; Third, if the Dzüüŋgarians fled into Russia during the war, Russia could accept and restrain them, but hand over their noblemen to the Qing dynasty. The last was a request to smoothly dispatch Man. *meiren-i janggin* 'Lieutenant-General' Mantai's³⁴ 滿泰 mission to the Kalmyks. It was intended to receive support from the Kalmyks in the war against the Dzüüŋgarians and cooperate with Luvsanshunu, who had taken refuge among his maternal relatives, the Kalmyks, to undermine Galdantseren's political power. Moreover, Mantai successfully fulfilled his request to meet the Kazakh envoy when staying in the Volga Region. Russians accepted the request but informed them that if they needed to contact the Kalmyks in the future, they must do so through Russia because 'these Kalmyk people were becoming the subject of her Imperial Majesty and could not do anything without her will and permission'. Despite their offers, the Russian Empire held a neutral stance, and Luvsanshunu politely refused to join.

In addition to the above two envoys, the assistant minister of the Board of Ritual, Hangilu 杭奕祿 (d. 1748), was dispatched to the Dzüüŋgar Empire in August 1730 to persuade them to accept the Qing Dynasty's authority.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Qing government mobilised 60,000 men to build the fortress of Khovd City. Due to these circumstances, the Dzüüŋgarians suddenly attacked the Qing border guards in the Barkhöl region at the end of 1730, which resulted in two well-known battles, Khoton and Khurga Lakes³⁶ in 1731 and Erdene Juu³⁷ in August 1732. The main purpose behind the attack was Galdantseren Khan's intention to manipulate the second Jebtsundamba Khutuktu (1724–1757) to

³³ Bantysh-Kamensky 1882: 178–181.

³⁴ Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 1: 248–260. Lieutenant-General Mantai presented his report about the mission to the Kalmyks and its results to the Yongzheng emperor on March 5, 1732.

³⁵ The 20th volume in the Main Collection of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. Yongzheng emperor issued an order on May 10 (Fire Cow Day), the 8th year (1730) of Yongzheng.

³⁶ Khoton and Khurga Lakes are in Tsengel district, Bayan-Ölgii province, Mongolia.

³⁷ Erdene Juu Monastery in Kharkhorin district, Övörkhangaï province, Mongolia.

make an alliance with the Dzüünger Empire and to unite Mongols under his reign; however, the Yongzheng Emperor was aware of that and had already issued an order to move the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu from the Erdene Juu monastery to the Dolonnuur monastery in September 1731.³⁸ The battle at Khoton and Khurga Lakes turned out to be an advantage to the Dzüünger Empire, while the fight in Erdene Juu ended up on the Qing Dynasty's side. Nevertheless, both sides feared each other's military power and withdrew their armies in the winter of 1732, and kept an eye on each other with strengthened border security. Moreover, the Qing Dynasty continuously investigated the Dzüünger Empire's situation through information provided by the Dzüüngarian refugees³⁹ to the Qing generals and then decided to make a sudden attack at the beginning of 1734; what is more, the Qing court received information regarding the Kazakhs starting to rear-attack the Dzüünger Empire in 1731, which directly connected Lieutenant-General Mantai's achievement to meeting the Kazakh envoy when visiting the Kalmyks in 1731.

Records of the 1734 sudden attack in *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*

The general process of the sudden attack has been reported to the Yongzheng emperor and ministers in the capital city throughout three phases: the first, a commander who led the army in the field reported to Tseren (Mon. *Čering*, Man. *Zering*, Chin. 策凌, 1672–1750), Vice-General for Pacifying the Eastern Frontier (Man. *jecen-be toktobure hashū ergi aisilara jiyanggiyūn*, Chin. *ding bian zuo fu jiangjun* 定邊左副將軍), who was appointed in 1733. Then, the vice-general reported it to Fupeng, the Grand General, and finally, Fupeng sent an official document to the capital city. *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* provides two records on the sudden attack which appear under the dates of February 26 and March 24, 1734.

³⁸ The 26th volume in the Main Collection of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. An order of the Yongzheng emperor on September 11 (Female Metal Goat Day), the 9th year (1731) of Yongzheng.

³⁹ Manchu archive documents on the Dzüünger Empire's inner and outer situations provided by the Dzüüngarian refugees to the Qing generals have been translated into Mongolian cf. Enkhsaruul 2023. These documents consist of two main collections: between 1717 and 1724, General Finingga's reports stored in the State Museum in Berlin, and the second is from 1730 to 1734, selected from Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012.

Record on February 26, 1734⁴⁰

[Yongzheng emperor's twelfth year (1734), the second month,] the Black Monkey [26th] day. An imperial edict was issued, assigning the responsibility of military deployment and strategic manoeuvring to the Imperial son-in-law Tseren as the chief manager. The [Yongzheng] emperor issued an edict to the Grand Ministers of the Council of State: In a report from the General [Fupeng], Prince of the Pacified Commandery, Talmashan (Man. Talmašan, d. 1760) and others advanced to attack but, upon reaching the region of the Irtysh River, discovered that the bandit [Dzüüngarian] forces had already evacuated, taking all their livestock with them. Consequently, they temporarily withdrew their troops. Hence, [Fupeng] sent an accusing letter to them for their failure to advance swiftly. Upon my [Yongzheng emperor] consideration, once our army initiates an assault, the rebel, having been forewarned, will inevitably retreat in advance. Under such circumstances, even a deeper incursion would be no strategic advantage. The Prince of the Pacified Commandery's accusing letter

⁴⁰ The 35th volume in the First collection of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. Manchu text is: /29v5/ sahaliyan bonio inenggi, /29v6/ hesei cooha yabure ba-i fidere forgošoro dosire bederere /29v7/ baita-be efu zering-de afabufi uheri /30r1/ icihiyabuha, /30r2/ coohai nashün-i baita-be icihiyara ambasa-de /30r3/ dergi hese wasimbuhange, amba jiyanggiyün necin giyün wang-ni /30r4/ wesimbuhe bade, talmašan sa dasihime dosifi, ercis birai /30r5/ bade isinafi, fudaraka hülhai niyalma ulha-be yooni /30r6/ bargiyafi genehe-be safi, uthai cooha gaifi mariha /30r7/ olihadame hūdun dosirakū turgunde wakašame bithe unggihe /30v1/ sehebi, bi gūnici musei coohai dasihime dosire babe /30v2/ fudaraka hülha serefi jailame gurime jabduhabi, uthai /30v3/ šumin dosika seme baita-de ai tusa, necin /30v4/ giyün wang-ni wakašame bithe unggihengge jaci dabnahabi, /30v5/ cooha yabure fafun hergin umesi cira amba jiyanggiyün-i /30v6/ afabuha babe, talmašan se dahame yabirakū oci, /30v7/ yargiyan-i acanarakū, aikabade faršame šuwe dosifi /30r1/ tabcilara-de umai baharakū oci, ne jing niyengniyeri /30r2/ erin, morin ulha turha, hūwaitaha kunese labdu akū-de /30r3/ ambula olhocuka, ainaha seme foi-horilame yabume baita-be /30r4/ tookabuci ojarahū, te wang-ni tehe amba kūwaran, /30r5/ dergi ergide bi, cooha yabure baci sandalabuhange umesi /30r6/ goro, eiten coohai nashün-i baita holbobuhange umesi /30r7/ ujen, efi zering-ni beye tubade bifi, musei coohai /31r1/ arbun dursun, fudaraka hülhai yargiyan tašan-be sahangge /31v2/ urunakū getuken, erci julesi yaya fidere forgošoro /31v3/ dosire bederere babe zering-ni alifi icihiyara /31v4/ baita oci zering gemu uheri icihiyakini, erebe /31v5/ necin giyün wang, efi zering-de sakini seme /31v6/ narhūšame bithe unggi sehe; Chinese text is: [雍正十二年二月]/14r7/王申, /14r8/命军行调拨进退机宜, 听/14v1/上谕办理军机大臣等曰: 据大将军平郡王奏称, 塔尔/14v2/玛善等进剿, 行至额尔齐斯河地方, 见逆贼人众牲/14v3/畜尽行收去, 遂领兵暂回。所有儒怯不行速进情由, /14v4/已经移咨该行等语。朕思我军进袭之处, 逆贼既已/14v5/探知, 先行移避, 即令深入, 于事何益? 平郡王移咨该行/14v6/行, 殊为过当。军行纪律甚严, 若以大将军所谕, 而塔/14v7/尔玛善等竟不遵行, 固属未便。倘勉强前进, 而掳掠/14v8/并无所得。方今春令, 马匹疲瘦, 口粮无几, 甚为堪虞, /15r1/断不得以轻忽贻误。今王之大营现驻迤东, 离行军/15r2/之处甚远, 一切军机, 所关甚重。额驸策凌身在彼地, /15r3/我军情形, 逆贼虚实, 知之必悉。嗣后凡调拨进退之/15r4/处, 系策凌承办事件, 俱听伊总理。著密行知照平郡/15r5/王及额驸策凌。

appears excessive. Military discipline is of utmost importance. If Talmashan and his forces have indeed disregarded the directives of the General [Fupeng], it is inappropriate; however, if they were to press forward recklessly and achieve no gains in plunder or combat, it would be equally futile. At present, with the arrival of spring, our horses are fatigued and emaciated, and provisions are scarce—a highly precarious situation. Any act of imprudence must be avoided at all costs. The prince [Fupeng]’s main camp is stationed far to the east and distant from the operational front; managing military affairs is paramount. Imperial son-in-law Tseren, being present in that region, is fully informed of our army’s conditions and the true state of the rebels [Dzüüngarians]. Henceforth, Tseren will be responsible for all matters concerning military deployment and strategic movement. Send a letter to the Prince of the Pacified Commandery [Fupeng] and the Imperial son-in-law Tseren to inform them of the edict.

Record on March 24, 1734⁴¹

[Yongzheng emperor’s twelfth year (1734)], the third month, the White Rat [24th] day. Discussed to evaluate by edict the achievement of Gempil (d. 1749) in the attack on bandits [Dzüüngarians]. The Grand Ministers of the Council of State deliberated to reported that Gempil, a duke of Khalkha, during the severe cold of the last winter (1733), led his troops across the Altai Mountains, cleared a snow-covered path of over a hundred li (里), penetrated deep into the bandit [Dzüüngarian] territory, and advanced directly to areas such as Tsagaan Khuir. The bandits, startled and scattered, abandoned their supplies and fled in all directions. Gempil’s forces captured men, women, and children of the bandits, as well as horses and livestock. As the bandits fled far away, Gempil and his troops

⁴¹ The 35th volume in the First collection of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*. Manchu text is: /34r6/ ilan biyai šanyan singgeri inenggi, /34r7/ hesei gempil-i hūlha-be gidaha gungge-be ilgama /34v1/ gisurebuhe, /34v2/ coohai nashūn-i baita-be icihiyara ambasai /34v3/ gisurefi wesimbuhenge, kalkai gung gempil, tuleke /34v4/ aniya tuweri cak sere beikuwen ucuri hafan /34v5/ cooha-be gaifi altai mulu-be dabame /34v6/ nimanggi jukūn-be tanggū ba funceme hafumbume /34v7/ neifi hūlhai jecen-de šumin dosifi šuwe /35r1/ cagan hūjar-i jergi bade isinaha-de hūlha /35r2/ golondufi jaka hacin-be waliyafi buran taran-i /35r3/ burulame samsire-de hūlhai haha hehe niyalma /35r4/ anggala-be oljilafi morin ulha-i jergi jaka /35r5/ baha, hūlha goro burulaha turgunde, cooha gaifi /35r6/ mariha, ambula faššame yabuha-be dahame, jecen-be /35r7/ toktobure amba jiyanggiyūn necin giyūn wang, /35v1/ aisilara jiyanggiyūn efu zering sede bithe unggifi /35v2/ gempil sei faššaha babe dangsede ejefi algama /35v3/ girurebuki seme wesimbuhede, /35v4/ dergici yabubuha; Chinese text is: [雍正十二年] /16v1/ 三月庚子, /16v2/ 命议叙根丕勒击贼功。/16v3/ 办理军机大臣等议奏言: 喀尔喀公根丕勒于 /16v4/ 去年冬月严寒之时, 率领官兵过阿尔台山岭, /16v5/ 开通雪路百余里, 深入贼境, 直抵察罕呼济尔 /16v6/ 等处。贼众惊溃, 抛弃輜重, 四路奔逸, 擒获贼夷 /16v7/ 男妇人口及马匹牲畜等物。因贼既远遁, 振旅 /16v8/ 还师, 甚属效力。应行文定边大将军平定王、副 /17r1/ 将军额驸策凌等, 以根丕勒等功绩注册议叙。/17r2/ 奏入, /17r3/ 上从之。

returned, having performed exceptionally well. It is proposed that a document be sent to the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery, and the Deputy General, Imperial son-in-law Tseren, to register and deliberate on the merits of Gempil and others. The report was submitted, and the emperor approved it.

The first record concentrates on the Khalkha nobleman, Vice-General, Tseren's appointment as the chief manager of military deployment and strategic decisions due to his leadership ability, skill to analyze situations properly and proximity to the frontlines. A conflict arose when General Fupeng accused Manchu commandant Talmashan and his forces of failing to advance quickly against the Dzüüngarians, who had already evacuated with their livestock. The emperor stated that Talmashan's withdrawal was justified, as an unnecessary pursuit would have been futile and risky given the exhausted state of the Qing army. On the other hand, the second record comments on the bravery of Khalkha Duke Gempil in the 1733 winter campaign against the Dzüüngarians. He led troops across the Altai Mountains in extreme cold, clearing over 50 km of snow-covered terrain. His forces successfully raided Dzüüngarian territory, causing their enemies to flee and capturing them with livestock. The Yongzheng emperor approved recognition of Gempil's achievements⁴², instructing officials to register and deliberate on his merits. It should be noted that neither the records sufficiently mentions the quantity of the Qing army and the enemy nor how many they captured, which place they crossed or when the army reached there; in general, neither records satisfactorily address the fundamental questions of when, where, and by whom.

Archive documents on the 1734 sudden attack

The Altai Road, also known as the North Road, played a significant role in the sudden attack, as documented in the Manchu archives. The army was divided into two divisions:⁴³ Man. *galai amban* 'Commandant of the Vanguard Division' Talmashan led the soldiers along Bulgan⁴⁴ Road, while Gempil oversaw Khüreet⁴⁵ Road.

⁴² The Manchu archive document in 1738 related to rewarding the 15 soldiers under Gempil's command was published in 2011, cf. Chuluun-Bicheldey 2011.

⁴³ The following content, from December 30, 1733, to January 8, 1734, is based on the report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery, on January 18, 1734, cf. Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 27–31.

⁴⁴ Bulgan River rises in the Altai Mountains in Bayan-Ölgii and Khovd Provinces, Mongolia, and flows south into the Ulungur Lake, the Altay Prefecture of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China.

⁴⁵ Mon. *Kūriyetü*; Man. *Kuriyetu* is supposed to be near Khoton Lake.

	Talmashan, Commandant of the Vanguard Division, led an army on Bulgan Road	Khalkha Duke Gempil led an army on Khüreet Road
December 30, 1733		Camped at Khoton Lake ⁴⁶
January 1, 1734		Foot soldiers cleared a snow-covered path of over 50 li (25km) to Khüreet Mountain by digging and trampling.
January 2, 1734		500 soldiers, led by Senbao, a Manchu <i>kūwaran-i da</i> 'commander elected by the officers of a camp', and Darjaa, Khalkha Lieutenant-General, cleared a snow-covered path by foot and horses over 50 li (25km) on the other side of the Khüreet Mountain.
January 3, 1734		Left soldiers on patrol at Khoton Lake and settled near the mountain with 3500 soldiers.
January 4, 1734		Passed the mountain by dawn darkness.
January 5, 1734		Arrived at Uu Belchir ⁴⁷ by the downstream Kiran River. ⁴⁸
January 6, 1734		One thousand soldiers who could ski were sent in advance to make a road and to investigate the Dzüüngarians.
January 7, 1734		Headed out to the Irtysh River to prepare for the sudden attack.

⁴⁶ Mon. *Qotung nayur*; Man. *Hotong noor* is in Tsengel District, Bayan-Ölgii Province.

⁴⁷ Man. *Oo Belcir*; Mon. *Uu belčir*, *belčir* refers to a confluence of rivers in Mongolian. The location is unclear, yet it is supposed to be near the Kiran River.

⁴⁸ Mon. *Kiren γool*; Man. *Kiran bira*; Chin. *ke lan he* 克兰河, discharges from Dayan Lake in Sagsai district, Bayan-Ölgii Province, to dAltay Prefecture.

January 8, 1734	Reached Tsagaan Burgas, ⁴⁹ captured five Dzüüngarian guardsmen and interrogated them. ⁵⁰	
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Manchu commandant Talmashan, upon coming to Argitai River,⁵¹ gave 1300 soldiers from the main army of approximately 10 thousand⁵² (or at least 3500) soldiers to Lieutenant-General Bursha (Man. *Burša*) and the fourth rank Khalkha prince Tsebden (Man. *Cebden*) to investigate Black Irtysh⁵³ and Shar

⁴⁹ Mon. *Čayan buryasu* ‘white willow’; Man. *Cagan burgasu*, the location is unclear; nevertheless, a unit named Tsagaan Burgas, near the borderline, is in Duut District, Khovd Province, Mongolia.

⁵⁰ Commandant Talmashan interrogated those five Dzüüngarian guardsmen and collected the following information: In October 1733, they joined the Dzüüngarian army of 1,400 soldiers assigned to investigate Bulgan Road and cross the Altai. However, they stayed in Khada Qinggil (Man. *Hada Cinggil*, apparently in the Qinggil County, Altay Prefecture) as their horses were too weak. Later, they were chased after the army, and when investigating their old trail, the army had already gone back through the Bulgan and Ulungur (Mon. *Örönggö*; Man. *Ürünggu*; Chin. *wu lun gu* 乌伦古) Rivers. They were captured at Tsagaan Burgas while resting their weak horses that couldn’t catch up with the army. Furthermore, they also provided information regarding the nearest location of the Dzüüngarian people, including *jaisang* Mamut (d.1755), who settled down in the Black Irtysh with about 100 households, followed by the Dörvöd (Mon. *Dörbed*; Man. *Durbet*) nobleman Dalai Taish (Mon. *tayisi*; Man. *taisi*, a Chinese terminology to *tai shi* 太師 ‘Grand Preceptor’, Mongols used as a prominent title for noblemen) who lived with 1,000 households.

⁵¹ The location of Man. *Argitai Bira* is unclear; however, is supposed to be near the Black Irtysh River.

⁵² Dondob, a subject of Mamut, was captured at Dörböljin by commandant Talmashan’s division, and then, interrogated by Vice-general Tseren and Grand general Fupeng on January 28 and February 8, 1734, respectively. According to his statement, commandant Talmashan’s division had around 10 thousand soldiers. Man. /1-10/ *jaisang Mamut nukte-be* /1-11/ *jing dosi guribufi nuktebuki serede*, *Ulan* /1-12/ *Bulak-i karun tehe durbet-i Dalai* /1-13/ *Taisi-i emu niyalma jifi suweni cooha* /1-14/ *Bulgan jugūn deri tumen isime jidere* /2-1/ *baran sabuha seme alanaha manggi*, *Mamut* /2-2/ *nukte-be ere biyai juwen emu-de* /2-3/ *dosi nuktebum-bime Mamut-i beye ninju* /2-4/ *niyalma-be gaifi Cargiltu-i bade* /2-5/ *tefi meni juwan ninggun niyalma-be* /2-6/ *juleri karun sindame cooha jidere baran-be* /2-7/ *yargiyala seme tucibufi durbeljin gebungge* /2-8/ *bade isinjifi suweni cooha-de gaitai* /2-9/ *teisulebufi meni ilan niyalma jafabufi* /2-10/ *funche juwan ilan niyalma gemu burulafi tucike sembi* ‘just at the time when Mamut moved his people inside, a subject of Dörvöd’s Dalai Taish stationed in Ulan Bulag said that your [the Qing] army entered from Bulgan Road with around thousand. Then, Mamut moved his people inside on January 11. He settled with 60 people at Cargiltu and sent our 16 people to an advanced outpost to verify the coming army. We arrived at Dörböljin and suddenly encountered your soldiers, they captured three of us, and another 13 people escaped.’ cf. Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 58–59. The report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery on February 13, 1734.

⁵³ Mon. *Qara Ercis yool*; Man. *Hara Ercis bira*; Chin. *hala e er qi si he* 喀拉额尔齐斯河 is located in Fuhai County, Altay Prefecture.

Bulag⁵⁴ due to the Dzüüngarians' evasion from the Argitai River. When he reached Black Irtysh later than January 11,⁵⁵ Talmashan gave a hundred soldiers to Khalkha Duke Shagja (Man. *Šakja*) to support Bursha's division. An unexpected situation of Dzüüngarians' escape from Shar Bulag occurred when the soldiers reached the destination; nonetheless, it was clarified that they went down the Irtysh River throughout the examination of their old trails, and hence, the commanders sent a division led by Khalkha Duke Shagja after the tracks. The division had encountered 14 (according to Dondob's statement, 16, see note 50) Dzüüngarian guardsmen in Dörböljin,⁵⁶ captured three of them, and 11 escaped (in the view of Dondob, 13). Without a doubt, the attack, a challenge for the Qing army to deal with the harsh conditions of snow and cold weather from the beginning, was initially planned to replenish their military strength through booty captured from the Dzüüngarians. As a consequence of not expecting the Dzüüngarians to backtrack, the original plan ultimately failed, which resulted in commandant Talmashan retreating his army from Shar Bulag earlier than January 28.⁵⁷

The main question concerns how the Dzüüngarians managed to escape the sudden attack; specifically, were they aware of the attack from the beginning or did they discover it by surprise? In the case of sudden discovery, how and when did they receive the information, and what was their reaction? It would be no wonder that this question was a puzzle for the Qing government as well; furthermore, the answer was revealed on January 28, 1734, through the interrogation of three Dzüüngarian guardsmen by Tseren, Vice-General. Besides that, their statements were double-checked by the Grand General Fupeng when he questioned them again on February 8. According to the declarations of the three Dzüüngarian individuals⁵⁸, Galdantseren Khan received information about the

⁵⁴ Mon. *Sir-a Bulay* 'Yellow Spring'; Man. *Sira Bulak*'s location is unclear; nevertheless, there are two possibilities in Fuyun County, Altay Prefecture, *sa er bulake* 萨尔布拉克 and *sha re bulake* 沙热布拉克.

⁵⁵ According to Dondob's statement, Mamut moved his people inside on January 11 when he received information about commandant Talmashan's division entering from Bulgan Road with 10 thousand soldiers. In detail, see note 50.

⁵⁶ Mon. *Dörböljin*; Man. *Durbeljin*, cf., Chin. *duo er bu li jin cun* 多尔布力金村 seems to be located in Fuhai County, Altay Prefecture. According to Dondob's statement, he was captured at Dörböljin by the Qing army, cf. note 50.

⁵⁷ The above content, commandant Talmashan division's military operation, is based on the report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery, on February 13, 1734, cf. Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 51–52.

⁵⁸ The following content, statements of the three Dzüüngarian war prisoners named Dondob, Baran, and Enkhbold, is based on the report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery, on February 13, 1734, cf. Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 58–72

Qing army deployed in the Khovd region through a Qing guardsman secretly captured by Dzüüngarian reconnaissance. As it was winter, with snow and cold weather around the area, their commander *jaisang*⁵⁹ Mamut, who ruled 100 households around Black Irtysh, had been calmly preparing to move inside after receiving the information about the Qing army deployment in the Khovd region in October 1733, yet, he suddenly received information from a guardsman that around 10 thousand soldiers entered from the Bulgan Road in their direction and moved his people rashly inside on January 11, 1734. Meanwhile, Mamut left a total of 16 guardsmen behind in charge of investigating the situation of the attack and three of them were captured at Dörböljin by the soldiers.

The following statement demonstrates that the Dzüüngarian commanders were convinced that the Qing army would not be able to cross the snow to their land; hence, they did not send additional divisions to the border stations around Altai Mountain.

/10/ *jaisang Cagūn-i gisun, ne* /11/ *Altai mulu-de nimanggi tuheke, ere* /12/ *tuweri beiguwen forgon-de manju cooha* /13/ *yabume muterakū seme ilibume hendure jakade* /14/ *G'aldan cering teni cooha unggire-be* /15/ *nakaha* 'A word of *jaisang* Chagun: now, Altai Mountain has snow, and it is winter, in this cold season, the Manchu [Qing] army couldn't go. When [*jaisang* Chagun] spoke to stop [sending army], Galdantseren just desisted on dispatching army.'⁶⁰

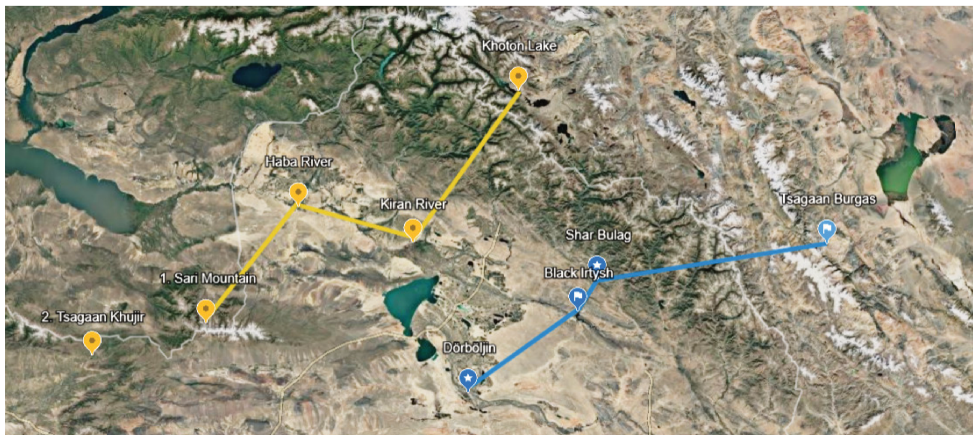


Figure 3. The locations of the two divisions traversed areas.
Yellow signifies Khalkha Duke Gempil, whereas blue illustrates Manchu commandant Talmashan.

⁵⁹ Mon. *jaisang*, a Chinese terminology to *zai xiang* 宰相 'Grand chancellor', refers to an official who ruled at most 800 households cf. Atwood 2010: 623.

⁶⁰ Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 62. The report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery on February 13, 1734.

As mentioned in *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe*, Grand General Fupeng accused Commandant Talmashan of failing to advance quickly against the Dzüüngarians. In conformity with the Manchu archive document, General Fupeng has the right to accuse Talmashan, as he sent the Dzüüngarian refugee Tögsjargal (Man. *Tegus jirgal*; Mon. *Tegüs jiryal*), who recently submitted to the Qing Dynasty and was familiar with where and who settled around the area, to assist the army by guiding on appropriate roads and providing the correct information about surrounding territories. General Fupeng's diplomatic letter to the Yongzheng emperor on 6 March 1734 mentioned his interrogation of Tögsjargal on 16 February, during which Tögsjargal stated that Talmashan paid no attention to his words. Furthermore, he burned charcoal during the journey, which allowed the Dzüüngarian people to notice the approaching army and escape in time.

/1-9/ *Cecen wang-ni baci* /1-10/ *mimbe aniya biyai ice-de galai amban* /1-11/ *Talmašan-i meyen-de amcabume benebuhe, ede bi* /1-12/ *galai amban-i meyen-de genefi, amba* /1-13/ *cooha-be gajarcilame Sira Bulak-i bade* /1-14/ *isinafi tuwaci, Mamut-i nukte-i urse gemu* /1-15/ *gurime jabdufi genehebi, songko-be tuwaci* /2-1/ *ice songko ofi, bi galai amban* /2-2/ *Talmašan-de, amban te cooha tucibufi* /2-3/ *hacihiyame fargabuci manggai emu dedun yabufi* /2-4/ *coro ainci amcabumbi dere seme alha-de* /2-5/ *galai amban mini gisun-be gaihakū* /2-6/ *Sira Bulak-i baci cooha-be gocifi* /2-7/ *amasi mariha, juwe tanggū cooha-be* /2-8/ *tucibufi turšul-de unggihe, amala* /2-9/ *turšul-de genehe urse ilan niyalma-be* /2-10/ *jafafi gajiha, jafaha niyalmai gisun, suweni* /2-11/ *cooha aika casi fargame genehe bici* /2-12/ *ekšeme yabuci emu dedun-de nukte-be* /2-13/ *amcanambi, elhei yabuci juwe dedun-de* /2-14/ *urunakū nukte-be gemu bahabi seme* /2-15/ *gisurehe bihe, tere anggala, amba cooha* /3-1/ *Sira Bulak-de isinara onggolo juwe* /3-2/ *inenggi-de bi uthai galai amban-i* /3-3/ *baru, cimari coro nukte-i urse-de* /3-4/ *isinambi, tuwa yaha-be ume deijire,* /3-5/ *elden-be ume sabubure secibe, umai* /3-6/ *mini gisun-be donjirakū an-i tuwa* /3-7/ *yaha-be deijime yabure jakade, ainci* /3-8/ *tuwai elden-be Mamut-i urse-de* /3-9/ *sabubufi ce jailame jabduha dere sembi*

‘The Wise prince [Vice-general Tseren] sent me [Tögsjargal] to catch up with Talmashan, Commandant of the Vanguard Division, on Junaury 1, [1734]. Hence, I reached the commandant's division and guided the army to Shar Bulag. Upon arrival, [Tögsjargal] observed that Mamut's people had time to move. When investigating the trail, it was new, hence, I spoke to Talmashan, Commandant of the Vanguard Division, if the commandant sent soldiers ungently to pursue, [the soldiers] would go no more than one night and surely catch them by the day after tomorrow. The commandant didn't listen to my word, retreated the army from Shar Bulag and sent 200 soldiers to spy, then, people in spy captured three individuals. In the words of a captured person, if your army had been further

pursued and rashly, they would have been caught within a day and if calm, confidently in two days. Moreover, two days ago when the army reached Shar Bulag, I immediately [spoke] to the commandant that [we] would reach locals tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, don't burn charcoal and don't show the lights. [He] didn't listen to my word at all, and when [he] burned charcoal as usual, apparently the firelight was shown to Mamut's people and they had time to escape.'⁶¹

On the other road of Khüreet, Khalkha Duke Gempil has advanced the army of 3500 soldiers⁶². Upon arrival at Haba River⁶³ on January 23, he collected information from a division with 200 soldiers sent in advance to reconnaissance about the Dzüüngarian people's disappearance from their settlement, and their old track led into Tsagaan Khuji⁶⁴ through Kenger,⁶⁵ Uliyatai, and Öden River by the Sari Mountain⁶⁶. Hence, he sent a division led by Khalkha Sub-Duke Bitskhan (Man. *Bicigan*) with 200 soldiers to chase after them. To protect the division from his rear, Gempil also provided 200 soldiers to Khalkha Sub-Duke Rinjan (Man. *Rinjan*), plus 500 soldiers to Lieutenant-General Biramönkh (Man. *Biramungku*) to watch over Rinjan's division. In the evening of the day, when the main force crossed the Irtysh River through a raft in the Haba River, Khalkha Sub-Duke Bitskhan returned with three Dzüüngarian households captured at the Kenger. According to those war prisoners, Dörvöd nobleman

⁶¹ Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 142–143. The report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery, on March 6, 1734.

⁶² The following content, Khalkha Duke Gempil's military operation, is based on the report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery, on February 17, 1734, cf. Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 91–94.

⁶³ Mon. *Qaba yool*; Man. *Haba bira*; Chin. *Ha ba he* 哈巴河 is located in Habahe County, Altay Prefecture.

⁶⁴ Mon. *Čayan qujir* 'white saline'; Man. *Cagan hūjar*; Chin. *cha han hu ji er*'s 察罕呼济尔 location is unclear, yet, based on the '*Imperially Endorsed Illustrated Treatise on the Imperial Western Territories*', it is apparently near the Tarbagatay Mountain in Emin Country, Tacheng Prefecture, Xingjiang, cf. Figure 4.

⁶⁵ The location of Man. *Kengger* is unclear. Based on '*Imperially Endorsed Illustrated Treatise on the Imperial Western Territories*', Volume 25: *Keng ge er bulake, zai e lun nao'er shsngliu dong sanshi li. Yuan chu Tianshan bei lu, dong you yi quan, he er bei liu liushi li, zhi dou er bo lei jin cheng nan* 铿格尔布拉克, 在鄂伦淖尔上流东三十里。源出天山北麓, 东又一泉, 合而北流六十里, 至都尔伯勒津城南。' *Kengger Bulak* is located 30 li east of the upper reaches of Olon Nuur [Lake]. It originates from the northern foot of Tianshan Mountain, and flows northward for 60 li to the south of Dörböljin City'. Dörböljin is located in Fuhai County, Altay Prefecture.

⁶⁶ Man. *Sari alin*, cf., Chin. *sa li* 萨里, the location is unclear; however, based on *Imperially Endorsed Illustrated Treatise on the Imperial Western Territories*, it seems the mountain between Hoboksar Mongol Autonomous County and Jeminay County, Altay Prefecture, cf. Figure 4.

Dalai Taish, their commander, received information from Galdantseren Khan in January 1734 about the Qing army deployment in the Khovd region and ordered them to retreat inside. At the same time, as a result of Khalkha Dupe Gempil having cleared the snow around 300 li (150 km) in Khüreet Mountain, Vice-general Tseren dispatched⁶⁷ Khalkha Sub-Duke Lubsandash (Man. *Lub-zangdasi*) with 200 soldiers to protect Gempil's division's rear to investigate Haduli Mountain⁶⁸ and Arkyt.⁶⁹ The division discovered the old trail in Haduli Mountain, whereas the recent trail of five people with horses appeared in Arkyt. Following the trail, they encountered approximately 200 Dzüüngarian soldiers when they arrived there on January 25. During the battle, they killed five enemies, two of their soldiers died, and three were injured. The Manchu archive document further states that two divisions, Gempil and Talmashan, withdrew as the Dzüüngarian people had managed to escape the attack and shelter inside.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* reveals the intricate relationship between historical narrative and the primary archive documents in Qing historiography. As an official record, the text functions as a strategic military document and an ideological tool, shaping historical memory to justify political legitimacy. The study of the 1734 sudden attack underscores the complexities of Qing-Dzüüngar military engagements and the challenges of interpreting historical events through official narratives. According to the Manchu archive document, the attack was divided into two directions: Manchu commandant Talmashan led 10 thousand (or at least 3500) soldiers through the Bulgan Road, whereas Khalkha Duke Gempil led 3500 soldiers on Khüreet Road. During the operation, the Talmashan division (from January 8 to 28) captured three individuals, and Gempil (from December 30, 1733, to January 28) overtook three households of around 15 people. On the other hand, the Dzüüngarian commanders had already received information about the Qing army deployed in the Khovd region from a Qing guardsman secretly captured by the Dzüüngarian reconnaissance before October 1733. Nevertheless, they were convinced that the Qing army could not enter through the snow surrounding the Altai Mountains in the cold weather. The Dzüüngarian people, unprepared to move, rashly

⁶⁷ The content, Vice-general Tseren's dispatched division to Arkut, is based on the report of Fupeng, the Grand General for Pacifying the Frontiers, Prince of the Pacified Commandery, on February 17, 1734, cf. Wu Yuanfeng ed. 2012, Vol. 3: 97–98.

⁶⁸ Man. *Haduli dabagan*, the location is unclear.

⁶⁹ Man. *Arküt*, cf., Rus. *Архут пекa*. It seems to be located in Altai Republic, Russia

fled their settlement around January 11, 1734, due to the unexpected situation when the Qing army launched its attack. Unquestionably, the attack posed a significant challenge for the Qing army in coping with the harsh conditions of snow and cold weather from the outset. Because the Dzüüngarian locals' retreat was unexpected, the initial plan to replenish military strength through booty captured from the enemies ultimately failed, leading to the withdrawal of the Qing army. In addition, the Manchu archive document revealed why Grand General Fupeng had accused Talmashan of being a failure: he sent the Dzüüngarian refugee Tögsjargal, who had recently submitted to the Qing Dynasty, who was acquainted with the area, to assist the army by guiding them on the appropriate roads and providing accurate information about the surrounding territory. The fact was that Talmashan ignored his words and burned charcoal during the journey; the Dzüüngarian people were able to notice the approaching army and escape in time.

The records of the 1734 attack in *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* briefly indicate that the Manchu commandant Talmashan was accused of a lack of leadership ability and of failing to pursue the enemy, while Khalkha Duke Gempil was commended for his bravery in clearing over 50 km (as mentioned in the Manchu archive document, 150 km) of snow-covered terrain and successfully raiding enemy territory. In other words, *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* edited the information in the primary source by concealing the details of the military operation and focusing solely on the outcome that the Qing army successfully attacked the Dzüüngarian territory under such harsh conditions. Furthermore, it was a perfect case to illustrate the Qing Dynasty's generous policy of rewarding or punishing individuals based on their service to the government, regardless of ethnic background.

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- Figure 1. Manchu version of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* (from the State Museum in Berlin). <https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/suche?queryString=Jun%20gar-i%20ba-be%20necihiyeme%20toktobuha%20bodogon-i%20bithe&fulltext=&junction=> (Last accessed: 16.10.2025) In the public domain.
- Figure 2. Chinese version of *Jun gar-i bodogon-i bithe* (from the Palace Museum in Beijing) <https://www.dpm.org.cn/ancient/hall/163984.html> (Last accessed: 16.10.2025) In the public domain.
- Figure 3. The locations of the two divisions traversed areas. Original source is GoogleEarth.
- Figure 4. ‘Imperially Endorsed Illustrated Treatise on the Imperial Western Territories’. Original source: <https://www.kanripo.org/text/KR2k0039/> (Last accessed: 16.10.2025). In the public domain. Modified by the author based on study results.

MARIANNA LÁZÁR

(Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary)

Animating the Cosmos: The Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior in Han Tomb Art and Thought

Abstract

This article explores the artistic development and cosmological significance of the Four Cardinal Deities—the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior—in Han dynasty funerary art. Drawing from a rich corpus of archaeological materials, including mural paintings, engraved bricks, and stone reliefs, as well as classical texts and scholarly literature, the study traces the deities’ evolution from pre-Han to Han periods.

Originally rooted in early totemic symbols and astral beliefs, these figures became increasingly codified within the cosmological frameworks of *yin-yang* and Five Phases theory during the Western Han. The analysis highlights how these deities were integrated into elite tombs to convey notions of cosmic order, celestial harmony, protection, guidance, and immortality, reflecting broader shifts in religious thought and funerary practice by the Eastern Han period.

In the Han belief system, the tomb was a microcosm of the universe: the directional arrangement of the deities reflected both the soul’s place at the cosmic centre and its journey through the afterlife. Through case studies of major tomb sites and artifacts, the article shows how the deities’ iconography evolved from static symbols of time and place (directions) to dynamic figures deeply embedded in complex narrative compositions. The study also explores their spatial arrangement, symbolic attributes, and the interaction between the cardinal deities and other cosmological and mythical figures—such as Fuxi, Nüwa, and the sun and moon—as part of a comprehensive visual language of transcendence. Special attention is given to regional and temporal variations in their depiction and placement. Ultimately, the article argues that these deities were active symbols of cosmological ideology, ritual authority, and spiritual aspiration in Han burial culture.

Keywords: Four Cardinal Deities, Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, Dark Warrior, Han dynasty, Han murals, decorated tombs, funerary art, pictorial brick, ancient Chinese cosmology, ancient China

Introduction

Tomb decorations are artistic legacies from the ancient world. They not only preserve rich historical information but also reflect the prevailing aesthetics and cultural traditions of their time. China has the largest number of decorated tomb sites (especially tomb mural sites) in the world.¹ Over a span of 70 years (1949–2019), 1,495 mural tomb sites were excavated in the country, revealing a wide range of artistic techniques used to richly decorate royal tombs.² These included the embellishment of tomb gates, passageways, brick chamber and stone chamber walls and ceilings, as well as burial goods and interior furnishings. Numerous tombs depicting the Four Cardinal Deities have been discovered from the Han 漢 202 BCE – 9 CE; 25–220 CE) to the Khitan-led Liao 遼 dynasties (916–1125). These findings have brought renewed scholarly attention to the iconography of the guardian beasts across East Asia, as well as to broader questions concerning ancient cultural exchange within the region. In an effort to clarify the iconographic genealogy of the Four Cardinal Deities, extensive research has been undertaken mostly by Chinese and Japanese scholars. Prior studies have approached the subject from diverse disciplinary perspectives—including art history, archaeology, intellectual history, and conservation science.

This article offers a comparative study of the Four Cardinal Deities as they appear in pre-Han and Han period tombs. Drawing on the author's doctoral research³ conducted between 2012 and 2016 in Japan, the study examines visual representations of these deities in ancient China. It considers a range of material, including murals, reliefs, and engraved designs, with particular attention to their artistic and symbolic roles in elite burial practices. The article focuses on how the depictions of the Four Cardinal Deities evolved.⁴ Over time, how they were integrated into mural and relief compositions, and how their iconographic features developed in different regions. By analyzing both archaeological and written historical evidence, it views the decorations from a multi-dimensional perspective in conjunction with relevant historical records,⁵ and explore the preserved artistic ideas and cultural beliefs of the Han people. To be more specific, it traces the transformations of the four guardian figures, highlighting the cultural influences that shaped their form and meaning before and during the Han period. It also highlights their role in conveying concepts of protection, harmony, and

¹ Decorated tombs belonged to wealthy officials, generals, and other members (lords) of Chinese society highly ranked on the social scale.

² Shi and Wang 2023: 166.

³ Lázár 2018.

⁴ The study does not seek to explore the regional totemic origins of the independent dragon, bird, tiger, turtle, and snake spirits.

⁵ In this study, all translations are the author's own.

the cosmic order. This investigation is limited to representations of the cardinal deities within the context of Chinese funerary traditions and does not address their appearance in other settings. Although several Chinese scholarly works, image catalogues, and classical texts were consulted, the study equally draws on Japanese secondary sources authored by researchers who participated in fieldwork in China and published their findings as part of Sino-Japanese collaborative research projects.

Recent scholarship on Han-period Chinese decorated tombs and funerary concepts has seen significant contributions from both Eastern and Western academics, employing interdisciplinary methods to deepen our understanding of these ancient artworks. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it is worth mentioning Yang Hong's and Huang Peixian's detailed works that offer a comprehensive study of Han mural tombs, systematically collecting, categorizing, and analyzing numerous mural tombs unearthed from various regions, focusing on developments from the Western Han to the Eastern Han periods. In her 2011 study, Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik explores how mural paintings in Han dynasty tombs embody ancient Chinese cosmological concepts. Cheng Wanli's and Wang Xiaodun's monographs delve into the origins and systematization of the cardinal deities in Chinese cosmology and art, examining archaeological findings, such as tomb murals and artifacts, illustrating the deities' significance in Han dynasty funerary practices and their role in expressing cosmological beliefs. Another publication of Wang Xiaodun from 2008 utilizes a wealth of archaeological and ethnographic imagery, combined with classical texts, to explore the origins and development of the deities in ancient Chinese thought. It examines the significance of animal worship and totemic beliefs in early Chinese culture and how these elements contributed to the formation of a symbolic system centred around the beasts. Among the most prominent Japanese-language contributions is the work of Hayashi Minao, whose analysis of pictorial stones offers valuable insights into ancient Chinese cosmology and the iconographic lineage of spiritual birds and dragons up to the Han period. Further comparative research has been carried out by Donohashi Akio, who has examined religious mural art across East Asia, with a particular focus on the imagery of the cardinal deities in Chinese and Japanese contexts. Notable studies by Nagahiro Toshio and Ōgata Tōru have also shed light on the symbolic and stylistic characteristics of the period. Lastly, it should also be mentioned that in her doctoral dissertation, the author examined the artistic and cultural-historical representations of the Four Cardinal Deities in China, Korea, and Japan from antiquity to modern times, presenting and analyzing their distinct developmental trajectories within the religious, artistic, and cultural histories of each area.

The Four Deities in Pre-Han Representations

The Four Cardinal Deities (*sishen* 四神)—also known as the ‘Four Spirits’ (*siling* 四灵), ‘Four Directions’ (*siwei* 四维), or ‘Four Images’ (*sixiang* 四象)—refer to the four auspicious beasts: the Azure Dragon (*Qinlong* 青龍)⁶ of the East, White Tiger (*Baihu* 白虎) of the West, Vermilion Bird (*Zhuque* 朱雀) of the South, and Dark Warrior (*Xuanwu* 玄武, a turtle and snake intertwined) of the North.



Figure 1. Motifs of Han tiles emblematically representing the cardinal directions⁷

In order to understand the origins of the widespread appearance of the Four Deities in Han dynasty tombs, we must begin by examining their pre-Han representations and conceptual foundations. These figures originated from ancient Chinese totemic worship, astral beliefs, and divinatory systems, and they are imbued with rich mythological significance. Based on archaeological evidence, understanding the early conceptualization of the deities requires a departure from simplistic or static interpretations. This section, by drawing on relevant material and textual sources, aims to trace the ideological roots and developmental trajectory of the Four Cardinal Deities prior to the Han dynasty.

Presumably, from the Zhou dynasty (11th century BCE – 3rd century BCE), the Four Cardinal Deities were regarded as mythical spirits who ruled the segments of the sky. At the Xishui 西水坡 site (Puyang City, Henan Province), associated primarily with the Yangshao Culture (c. 5000–3000 BCE), several Neolithic burials were discovered, including a few from the Longshan Culture and Eastern Zhou period (c. 771 – 256 BCE). Tomb M45 yielded white clam-shell figures of a dragon and tiger, dating to roughly 6400 years ago. The dragon and tiger figures flank the buried body, a tall adult male, while three child skeletons are laid nearby. Based on the positioning of the dragon and tiger figures, which correspond to the (later) traditional stellar locations of the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, some researchers propose that this may constitute an early

⁶ In early sources, the Azure Dragon is also known as Canglong 蒼龍.

⁷ Digital lineart made by the author based on the original outlines of decorated tiles from Chang'an.

depiction of two of the Four Cardinal Deities.⁸ As shown in Figure 2, the tiger is placed protectively behind the deceased, suggesting a guardianship role. While it cannot be definitively stated that the Xishuiipo dragon and tiger are the direct origin of the cardinal deities, there is little doubt that the pairing of dragon and tiger dates back to a very early stage in Chinese cultural history.



Figure 2. Dragon and tiger figures of Tomb M45 at Xishuiipo site⁹

In early (and not complete) examples of the Four Cardinal Deities imagery from the Warring States period, we typically find only the Azure Dragon and White Tiger represented as a pair in the burial. The earliest confirmed depiction of the deities is found on a lacquered garment box (height: 40.5 cm; width: 47 cm; length: 71 cm) from the 5th century tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng 曾侯乙墓 in Suizhou, Hubei province (Figure 3). The box's interior, painted red, represents a living space, with its floor symbolizing the earth. The lid's centre features the Big Dipper, encircled by all twenty-eight lunar mansions 二十八宿,¹⁰ along with the Azure Dragon on the right and the White Tiger on the left. This suggests that although a full cosmological scheme of the cardinal deities and the twenty-eight lunar mansions was not yet in place, astronomical concepts involving two of the deities were beginning to emerge around the 5th century BCE in Hubei province.

⁸ Nán 2012: 112–115.

⁹ Digital lineart made by the author based on page Nán 2012: 113 (Fig. 92).

¹⁰ The twenty-eight mansions correspond to constellations along the celestial equator and are divided into four groups of seven. Initially, the Four Cardinal Deities functioned as symbolic representations of the constellations in the four quadrants or palaces of heaven.



Figure 3. Tiger and dragon depiction on a box (E66) from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng¹¹

Presumably, by the end of the Warring States period, only the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, and Vermilion Bird were fully conceptualized as heavenly guardians; the cardinal deity of the north had not yet taken definitive shape. One of the first classical sources that explicitly links the northern lunar mansions of the 28 constellations with the Dark Warrior is the following:

Correct Interpretation of The Documents,¹² Chapter 2:

Among the stars in heaven are figures of a dragon, tiger, bird, and tortoise; each of the four directions contains seven constellations that form one of these images. The east forms a dragon, the west a tiger, both facing south with tails to the north; the south forms a bird, the north a tortoise, both facing west with tails to the east.¹³

尚書正義, 卷二 堯典第一

是天星有龍虎鳥龜之形也。四方皆有七宿, 各成一形。東方成龍形, 西方成虎形, 皆南首而北尾。南方成鳥形, 北方成龜形, 皆西首而東尾。¹⁴

¹¹ Digital lineart made by the author based on a figure on page 171 of Wang (2008a).

¹² The *Book of Documents* 尚書 is one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature. It is a collection of rhetorical prose attributed to figures of ancient China. The complete original collection likely reached its final form during the Late Zhou or Han dynasty. There are different versions of the text. *Shangshu Zhengyi* 尚書正義 was published in 653 and made the official interpretation of the *Book of Documents* by imperial decree.

¹³ Translation mine. For published translations, see Legge, James. 1865. *The Chinese Classics, volume III: the Shoo King or the Book of Historical Documents*. London: Trubner; rpt. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960.

¹⁴ *Shangshu Zhengyi* 尚書正義 [Correct Interpretation of The Documents]. Chinese Text Project <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=127873>

Various animal motifs appeared on pre-Han bronze mirrors excavated from tombs, including those depicting the Four Cardinal Deities.¹⁵ In most cases, the Dark Warrior is absent, and hybrid mythical creatures or different animals take its place.¹⁶ For example, bronze mirrors unearthed from the Guo State 虢国 tombs at Shangcunling 上村岭 in Henan feature birds, deer, dragons, and tigers arranged in various compositions.¹⁷ The tomb has been identified as dating to the Western Zhou period.



Figure 4. Bronze mirrors from M1052 of the Shangcunling site¹⁸

One of the mirrors is decorated with bird and beast motifs, including a dragon-like creature on the right side of the bird. A dragon and tiger combination, believed to represent the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, is visible on another mirror from the same site. These mirrors from Shangcunling offer valuable evidence of the transitional phase from early ritual symbolism to more structured cosmological systems. The consistent placement of animals at the four cardinal points of a mirror—top, bottom, left, right—suggests that they already had fixed symbolic associations. They may carry different meanings depending on the region or ethnic group. In early periods, different regions of the Central Plains already had distinct ritual systems. As populations expanded and diverse cultures converged, a shared visual language began to form. Yet, at this stage, we still do not find the fully formed set of the Four Cardinal Deities that would become standard in the late Warring States (ca. 475–221 BCE)¹⁹, Qin and Han

¹⁵ In the Western Zhou (西周 c. 1046–771 BCE), mirrors became more refined and stylized, evolving from practical items into symbolic cosmograms.

¹⁶ Before the formalization of the Dark Warrior iconography, northern guardian figures often took the form of hybrid mythological beasts with duck heads, scaled bodies, or fish tails.

¹⁷ Kitamura 2005: 102–104.

¹⁸ Digital lineart made by the author based on figures of Zhongguo 1959: 24–25.

¹⁹ The use of the Four Cardinal Deities as military formation symbols can be traced to the late

period. From the available evidence, the cardinal beasts of the Western Zhou initially functioned as a set of signs, emblematic representations of cardinal directions, seasons, and celestial domains. Later on, this logically structured set started to evolve into a system of conceptual symbols with profound and stable meanings. All four deity figures became part of ritual codes such as the *Zhouli*, *Yili*, and *Liji*, which regulated the use of directional animal imagery in formal rituals. Even then, they were not always depicted as a group of four.

The Four Symbols During the Western Han Dynasty

Sanfu huangtu, Vol. 3.²⁰

The Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior are the Four Celestial Spirits of Heaven, assigned to govern the four cardinal directions.²¹

三輔黃圖 卷之三

蒼龍，白虎，朱雀，玄武，天之四靈，以正四方。²²

The Han dynasty was China's second unifying empire, divided into Western and Eastern periods. Unification involved centralizing governance and promoting standardized cultural values. However, regional cultures persisted; imperial rule integrated rather than erased local distinctions. It was in the early Han period that the mystical traditions of the aristocracy, including the attributes of the Four Cardinal Deities and their cosmological role, were first officially unified.²³ The cosmological theory of *yin-yang* 陰陽²⁴ and the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行)²⁵ had already become systematized as well.

Warring States period, when cosmological principles began to be applied to strategic geography and military deployments, and became systematized later during the Han dynasty.

²⁰ *Sanfu huangtu* ('Yellow [imperial] maps of the three metropolitan areas') is a local geography of the ancient capital region around Chang'an. The book was compiled by an unknown author during the Southern and Northern dynasties period, or probably somewhat earlier.

²¹ Translation mine.

²² *Sanfu huangtu* 三輔黃圖 Chinese Text Project <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&res=596049>

²³ Vampelj S. 2011: 41.

²⁴ *Yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 define the universe as the interaction of polar opposite but complementary forces. Yin is the female, cold, dark, passive power, while yang represents masculinity, light, and warmth. The interplay of the two forces makes up *chi* 氣, the material principle governing the universe (Inada 2003: 42–43).

²⁵ *Wuxing* explains the interactions and relationships created in phenomena that consist of fire, water, wood, metal, and earth, and lead to life, death, change, and rebirth. It was combined with the *yin-yang* theory during the Spring and Autumn period (approx. 770 to 481 BCE) in China and was developed during the Han dynasty into a comprehensive and logical view of

Cardinal Deity	Elements	Colors	Season	Directions	Yin/Yang
Azure Dragon	Wood	Azure	Spring	East	Yang
Vermilion Bird	Fire	Red	Summer	South	Yang
Yellow Dragon	Earth	Yellow	Time between seasons	Central	Yin and Yang
Dark Warrior	Water	Black (Dark)	Winter	North	Yin
White Tiger	Metal	White	Autumn	West	Yin

Table 1. Correspondence with the Five Phases and yin-yang theory²⁶

This cosmological system of rules is detailed in the *Zhoubi Suanjing* 周髀算經²⁷ and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子,²⁸ among other works.²⁹

Master(s) from Huainan, Chapter 3: The Treatise on the Patterns of Heaven

The east corresponds to wood... its deity (spirit) is the Year Star <Jupiter>, and its creature is the Azure Dragon. The south corresponds to fire... its deity is the Shining Mischief Star <Mars>, and its creature is the Vermilion Bird. The centre corresponds to earth... its deity is the Quelling Star <Saturn>, and its creature is the Yellow Dragon. The west corresponds to metal... its deity is the Great White <Venus>, and its creature is the White Tiger. The north corresponds to water... its deity is the Celestial/Time Star <Mercury>, and its creature is the Dark Warrior.³⁰

the cosmos, which could be applied to every field of human society. (Inada 2003: 68–77).

²⁶ Fung 1983: 22–26.

²⁷ The *Zhoubi Suanjing* (*Arithmetical Classic of the Gnomon and the Circular Paths of Heaven*) is a collection of ancient Chinese texts on astronomy and mathematics, probably assembled during the Western Han dynasty in the first century BCE.

²⁸ It is a compilation of 21 loosely connected chapters on metaphysics, cosmology, matters of state, and conduct written in the mid-Western Han period (2nd century BCE) under the patronage of Prince Liu An. Chapter 3 provides a summary of astronomical and astrological knowledge in the early part of the Han period.

²⁹ Major 1993: 38–39.

³⁰ Translation mine. For published (partial) English translation, see Major, John S. 1993. *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi*. New York: State University of New York Press. A notable French translation exists in Le Blanc, C., Lévi, et al. 2003. *Philosophes taoïstes. Tome II: Huainanzi. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (494)*. Paris: Gallimard.

淮南子 卷三 《天文訓》

東方木也...其神為歲星、其獸蒼龍...南方火也...其神為熒惑、
其獸朱鳥...中央土也...其神為鎮星、其獸黃龍...西方金也...其
神為太白、其獸白虎...北方水也...其神為辰星、其獸玄武。³¹

This passage makes clear that by this time, the cardinal deities had been systematically integrated into the framework of Five Phases cosmology. Each of the deities thus acquired symbolic associations with direction, colour, and season, and began to be widely used as decorative motifs in imperial architecture. They became particularly popular in Han funerary traditions as decorations within tomb interiors. Moreover, Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 BCE), in his work *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), *Tian Guanshu* 天官書 (Book of Celestial Offices), articulated a Han cosmology in which the heavens mirrored imperial bureaucracy: the polestar ruled the central palace like the emperor, while the twenty-eight lunar lodges served as officials within the four cardinal palaces (*sigong* 四宮). The cardinal deities were described as their governor, and this concept was also represented in mural tombs.³²

The Western Han (206 BCE – 8 CE) was a period when the burial forms underwent two crucial changes: a change from vertical structure to horizontal structure³³ and a change in building materials from wood to stone or brick. The typical design of tomb chambers, featuring arched ceilings and square-based walls, reflects the *Gaitian* 蓋天 theory³⁴ and the widely held cosmological belief in a round heaven and a square earth. The subjects depicted on tomb decorations included scenes from the daily lives of the Han elite, depictions of historical tales and legends, depictions of animals and geometric patterns, as well as Daoist and cosmological imagery, such as the Queen Mother of the West³⁵ and King

³¹ Huainanzi 淮南子, *Chinese Text Project* <https://ctext.org/huainanzi/zh>.

³² *Shiji*, *Chinese Text Project* <https://ctext.org/shiji/tian-guan-shu/zh>.

³³ The horizontal structure resembles a house, incorporating architectural elements such as doors, walls, and occasionally columns and windows.

³⁴ This theory holds that Heaven is a solid, rotating dome like an inverted bowl covering a flat, square Earth below, with the sun, moon, and stars moving inside this canopy as it turns around the pole star.

³⁵ Xiwangmu 西王母 is one of the oldest deities of Chinese mythology. She has complete control over life, death, creation, and destruction. During the Western Han period, she was further linked with the concept of a western immortal land. She is married to the Jade Emperor and tends to the Peaches of Immortality in their palace gardens. Her image became standard decoration for tombs and funerary shrines.

Father of the East,³⁶ Fuxi and Nüwa,³⁷ the Four Cardinal Deities and celestial motifs.³⁸

Han murals, silk paintings, carvings and reliefs were not merely decorative but served as visual manifestations of correlative cosmology, particularly the principles of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases. These decorations helped to artificially create a cosmic space within the tomb; they reinforced the belief in cosmic harmony and eternal life. According to Chinese ideas of the afterlife, the social status of the deceased person in the realm of the dead corresponds with their life on earth. It was important that the soul of a person of high rank should be protected and should live in harmony in the afterlife, and so the interior of the tomb and its iconographic design were created according to the principles of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases.³⁹

By the Han period, the cardinal deities were considered symbols that could protect and guard the soul, exorcise evil spirits, maintain the cosmic order, and bring good fortune. They often appear within astral representations in tombs depicting individual constellations or the complete system of the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The directional placement of the deities on the ceiling also expressed the centrality of the aristocrat's soul within the cosmos, and a wish for an immortal form of materialization of their existence. Each deity's iconography reflected a connection between heaven and earth, signifying the fulfilment of the nobles' ascent and transcendence. Furthermore, the seasonal symbolism associated with the deities reflected cosmic time; they represented dynamic forces of regeneration that drove the cyclical rhythm of the universe and ensured the continuous renewal of life.

Triangular molded bricks with divine beast imagery (especially in the Eastern Han period in Luoyang) were typically installed at the upper portions of arched tomb entrances or at the upper sections of the rear chambers. Furthermore, the spatial distribution of the Four Cardinal Deities in the tomb gate area exhibits a high degree of typological consistency and regularity. Especially in mural tombs from Shaanxi, the Four Cardinal Deities are commonly depicted on the stone doors. When all four creatures are represented in the tomb gate area, the Azure Dragon appears on the right door leaf, and the White Tiger on the left. When the Dark Warrior is absent and replaced by motifs such as bronze vessels, immortals, sacred herbs, trees, or horses, the Azure Dragon still appears

³⁶ According to Daoist mythology, Dongwanggong 東王公 is the tutelary deity of the Daoist immortals.

³⁷ Fuxi 伏羲 and Nüwa 女媧 are mythological siblings and cultural ancestors in Chinese tradition, credited with creating humanity and establishing fundamental aspects of civilization such as marriage, writing, and cosmic order.

³⁸ Vampelj S. 2011: 23–24.

³⁹ Cheng and Wang 2012: 46–53.

on the right door leaf and the White Tiger on the left, maintaining alignment with the configuration in complete sets of the four beasts. These images form a counterclockwise circular arrangement around the central axis of the spirit road (神道) depicted on the gate, mirroring the directional layout of the cardinal deities atop tomb chambers. Tombs like those at Suide 綏德 or Qingjian 清涧 show excellent preservation of this symbolic system, with variations in detail but strong adherence to directional symbolism. What is particularly noteworthy is that while the central axis of the deities atop tomb chambers is the tomb mound itself, the centre of the circular arrangement in the tomb gate area is the spirit road relief carved at the core.⁴⁰

In the following, I will examine how the four deities were generally depicted in Han dynasty tombs, supplementing the analysis with excerpts from written sources that seek to interpret the variations in their names. The artistic style of the Four Cardinal Deities during the Western Han period favoured minimalism and abstraction, focusing on the static, symbolic significance of the deities.

The Vermilion Bird is frequently depicted with an uplifted head, outstretched wings, curled feet, and a fanned tail, all arranged in a posture of dynamic motion. That being said, out of the four beasts, the depiction of the Vermilion Bird remained somewhat in flux throughout the Han dynasty, exhibiting both regional and temporal variations; no standardized form existed for representing the bird-like figure. The guardian deity of the south is often associated with radiant, splendid imagery, conceptually linking it to other auspicious birds. In classical sources, the term *Zhuque* 朱雀 is sometimes used interchangeably—or even confused—with other solar-associated figures such as *Zhuniaio* 朱鳥 (Vermilion Bird), *Fenghuang* 鳳凰 (Phoenix), *Sanzuwu* 三足鳥 (Three-Legged Crow), *Cuniaio* 踐鳥 (Sun Bird), and *Luanfeng* 鸞鳳 (a phoenix-like bird), leading to a certain degree of terminological ambiguity. These accounts reinforce the phoenix's and crow's deep connection with solar imagery, fire, and auspiciousness—concepts that also overlap with the mythological and astronomical symbolism of the *Zhuque*, further explaining the ongoing fusion of their identities and depiction.

⁴⁰ Only in the exceptional case of the tomb excavated at Suide is the orientation reversed: the Azure Dragon is on the left and the White Tiger on the right. However, this arrangement does not include the Dark Warrior or substitute elements. Cheng and Wang 2012: 184.



Figure 5. Image of the Vermilion Bird on a stone tomb mural from Dongguan, Fangcheng, Henan (河南方城东关画像石墓朱雀图像)⁴¹

Three main morphological types of the Azure Dragon have been identified in Han dynasty tombs and in related archaeological sites: the curved-neck form, the straight-neck form, and the backward-looking form. Among these, the curved-neck type is the most common. Although the body of the beast commonly appears as a dragon, it is also occasionally depicted in the form of a hybrid bull, horse, lizard, or serpent-like beast.

⁴¹ Digital lineart made by the author based on the figure of Wang 2008a: 34



Figure 6. The Azure Dragon depicted in a Han pictorial stone tomb from Sichuan
(四川郫县东汉砖墓石棺画像)⁴²

Dragons frequently appeared as the symbolic or mythological ‘vehicles’ facilitating transcendence and thus became more prominent in funerary art. Han dynasty pictorial stones and bricks (produced in both rectangular and triangular forms) depicting ascension scenes often feature images such as feathered beings playing with dragons or immortals riding mythical beasts such as the Azure Dragon.

The White Tiger of the West is usually portrayed as a leaping tiger with bared fangs and claws, four limbs, five claws, a short-eared head, and a long, swaying tail, poised as if galloping through clouds. Before the first century CE, the deity of the West was occasionally replaced by a horse, a *qilin*, or another type of one-horned beast. In Han dynasty pictorial stone carvings, depictions of the White Tiger and the Azure Dragon of the following type are quite common:

⁴² The author took this photo at the exhibition ‘Heavenly Land of Abundance — Rubbings from Han Dynasty Pictorial Art of Sichuan’ (*Tianfu Letu — Sichuan handai huaxiang yishu tuopian zhan* 天府乐土—四川汉代画像艺术拓片展) of the China Cultural Center in Budapest, Hungary, June 2025.



Figure 7. Stone carving from an Eastern Han pictorial stone tomb
in Hejiang county, Luzhou, Sichuan
(四川合江石室墓石刻)⁴³

What is especially noteworthy is that while images of divine turtles and serpents (in an independent form), birds, dragons, and tigers appeared prior to the Western Han, representations of the Dark Warrior (a tortoise intertwined with a snake) as the fourth cardinal deity do not emerge fully until the early Western Han period. The intersection of the turtle and snake represents the union of opposing genders, the union of *yin* and *yang*, and the concept of endless life or transcendence. Moreover, in ancient Chinese tradition, both the tortoise and the serpent are associated with longevity and thus symbolize the long life of the sovereign. By the end of the Han period, the composite image of the Dark Warrior ultimately became dominant; however, it was rarely replaced by a range of alternative figures during the Han period, including the *fangxiangshi* 方相氏,⁴⁴ a steed, a fish-like woman, a yellow snake, the Vermilion Bird, a simple turtle or snake, a constellation, a *qilin* or a unicorn, reflecting regional and temporal variations in cosmological representation.⁴⁵ This suggests that the cardinal deities were not the result of an organic, spontaneous development in the early Han period, but were rather deliberately constructed in concert with the formation of the cosmological framework of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases, and the unification of the religious, astrological traditions and folk beliefs of the aristocracy.

⁴³ Digital lineart made by the author based on the figure of Wang 2008a: 17.

⁴⁴ The *fangxiangshi*, or 'the one who sees in all directions', was a ritual exorcist or sorcerer. In funerary contexts, he is believed to lead the funeral procession to exorcize corpse-consuming spirits from the burial chamber.

⁴⁵ Zhang 2000: 109–119.



Figure 8. Pictorial brick of the Dark Warrior from the Mausoleum site of Emperor Wu of Han⁴⁶

In the following, I provide a short list of major Western Han dynasty decorated tombs in which representations of the Four Cardinal Deities appear and explore these significant depictions in great detail.

Numerous carved and/or painted hollow bricks 空心磚 and pictorial stone slabs 畫像石 depicting the cardinal beasts have been discovered as part of Han tomb decoration. A representative example from the Western Han dynasty is the set of richly decorated bricks unearthed at the ancestral temple ruins of the Deyang Palace (also referred to as the Luoqing Stone site 羅經石遺址, 153–126 BCE), part of the Han Yangling 漢陽陵 Mausoleum complex in Xianyang, Shaanxi.⁴⁷ As the most important ceremonial structure within the tomb precinct, its layout consists of two concentric squares. Surrounding the base is a corridor paved with bricks and a drainage area, with fourteen wall columns and three gates on each of the four sides. This architectural layout and the structural organization appear to have been strongly influenced by the cosmological system of the Five Phases. The stairways at the gates are paved with hollow bricks featuring the motifs of the Four Cardinal Deities. It appears that several types of bricks were made with multiple images to suit different placements. The bricks, walls, and roof of each side were dyed in four distinct colours—blue, red, white, and black—corresponding to the four cardinal directions and presumably representing elements and seasons within the Five Phases. It is possible that each

⁴⁶ Digital lineart made by the author based on the figure of Wang 2008a: 159.

⁴⁷ Yangling is the mausoleum complex in which Emperor Jing 景帝 (r. 157–141 BCE) and Empress Wang 王皇后 were interred together; however, their burial chambers were constructed separately.

brick bearing the image of a directional beast was laid on the staircase facing the direction it was meant to guard. The Azure Dragon brick (66 cm long, 37 cm high) presents a dynamic, curved-neck type dragon figure, with forelegs shown on either side of the body. It is rendered in a C-shaped posture, with a wide-open mouth, slender neck, sharp claws, and coiled tail. To the dragon's left, an object resembling a sacred pearl appears. The body is rendered with a scaly texture, and dotted patterns mark the limbs, exhibiting fine detailing. Surrounding the dragon are swirling, dynamic cloud motifs that enhance its mysterious and majestic appearance. Notably, unlike the later representations from the Western Jin period, which often depict the beasts with wings, these dragon-tiger versions from the Western Han period appear to be wingless.



Figure 9. Azure Dragon brick from the Luojing Stone site, Yangling complex, Shaanxi⁴⁸

The Vermilion Bird brick (37.2 cm high, 50 cm long, 7.5–9.6 cm wide) features four tail feathers resembling those of a peacock and two ornamental feathers atop its head. The depiction shows it with a slender, pointed beak, hooked talons, and outstretched wings—imbuing it with an aura of elegance and transcendence. One of the Dark Warrior bricks likely measured over one meter in length and displays a finely detailed tortoise shell with pronounced patterns.⁴⁹ A snake circles around the large shell but does not entwine the short-legged tortoise; instead, it loops along the surface of the shell, curving its tail in an S-shape and bending its head down near the tortoise's front. On another brick, the tortoise's shell is rendered with a variety of patterns, and the legs are unusually long. The style is consistent with the above-mentioned Azure Dragon brick. The

⁴⁸ Digital lineart made by the author based on Wang 2006: 63.

⁴⁹ Its left edge lacks a vertical border, suggesting the original piece may have been even longer.

snake passes under the shell and reemerges behind the tortoise's neck.⁵⁰ One of the many White Tiger bricks shows two tigers facing each other, both raising their front paws. The side of the brick also portrays the tigers in confrontation, separated by a circular motif resembling a *bi* 璧 disc.⁵¹ They are depicted with the head, body, and limbs outlined in flowing lines of varying curvature. Short, V-shaped strokes create both tigers' fur patterns, lending them a fierce and imposing presence, befitting their sacred and inviolable nature. Another type of White Tiger brick is about the same height as the adjacent Black Tortoise brick, though roughly half its length. The tiger's face appears to be smiling, but its claws are sharply rendered. Additionally, a jade door fitting carved with the four deities motif was discovered on the eastern side of the Mao Mausoleum. Measuring 36.5 cm in width, the artifact is greyish-green in colour and features a prominent central knob at the bottom. Each of the four corners is engraved with one of the sacred beasts.⁵²

In the enormous ceiling mural unearthed from the tomb of King Gong of Liang (?–137 BCE) at the Shiyuan site in Yongcheng, Henan Province, an elaborate image (*sishen yunqi-tu* 四神雲氣圖 from the early Western Han reveals fascinating compositional details. Measuring approximately 5.14 meters in length and 3.27 meters in width, it stands as one of China's earliest and most complete large-scale murals, predating the renowned Dunhuang murals by over six centuries. Although the Dark Warrior is not identifiable, the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, and Vermilion Bird are vividly illustrated amidst stylized clouds. A prominent S-shaped dragon occupies the centre, its body covered in scales, wings extended, and tongue entwined with a mythical creature resembling a duck-billed, fish-bodied beast. This aquatic creature may have functioned as a substitute for the Dark Warrior. Positioned below, the White Tiger is shown climbing a celestial mountain, holding a flowering branch in its mouth, and presumably reaching for a *lingzhi* mushroom of immortality. Above, the vermilion bird is depicted pecking at one of the Azure Dragon's horns, its long tail feathers elegantly trailing. Surrounding these central figures are motifs of auspicious clouds, mushrooms, exotic flowers, and other symbols associated with immortality and the celestial realm.

⁵⁰ Fragmentary dimensions: 52 cm in length, 34 cm in height, 10 cm in width.

⁵¹ A *bi* disc is a type of ancient Chinese jade artifact, typically a flat, circular disc with a central perforation. Emerging as early as the Neolithic period, they were often buried in elite tombs and associated with ritual practices. In early Chinese cosmology, the disc is commonly interpreted as a symbol of heaven or the celestial order, complementing the square *cong* 琮, which represented earth.

⁵² Wang 2008a: 14.; Wang 2008b: 917–918.

Classical texts such as *Lingxian* 靈憲⁵³ and the *Huainanzi* (chapters three and seven) articulate the cosmological relationship between *yin-yang*, the Five Phases, the cardinal deities, and Fuxi-Nüwa.⁵⁴ Within tombs, the imagery of Fuxi and Nüwa alongside the Four Deities was thus composed to visually transform the tomb's interior into a microcosm of the heavenly palaces and the universe. These pictorial schemes were cosmologically significant, symbolizing the tomb as a celestial domain. The oldest known example of the paired image of Fuxi and Nüwa and the Four Cardinal Deities dates to the late Western Han and appears in Bu Qianqiu's 卜千秋 tomb in Luoyang (ca. 94 BCE – 48 BCE).

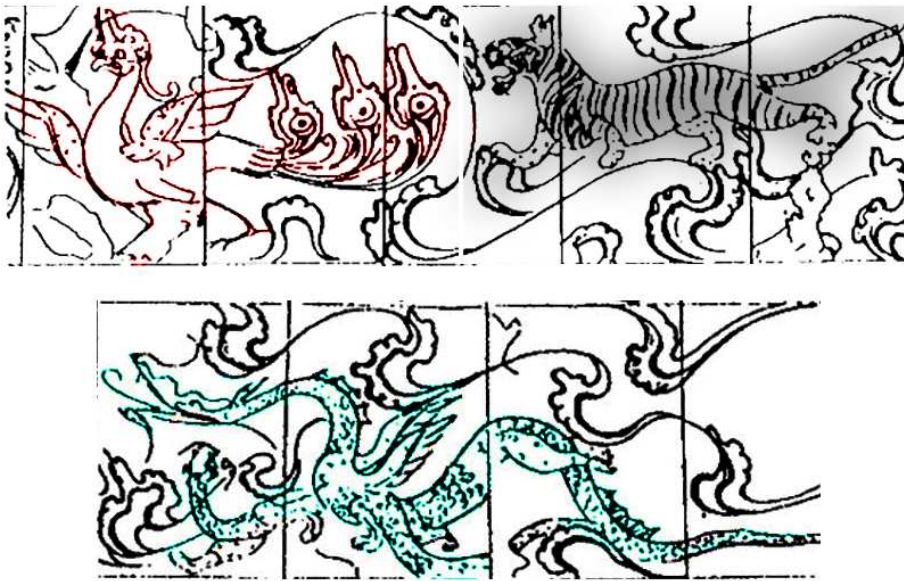


Figure 10. Images of the Vermilion Bird, White Tiger, and Azure Dragon murals from the tomb of Bu Qianqiu⁵⁵

On the long, narrow spine of the main chamber's ceiling, twenty specially shaped bricks are laid horizontally, with images of a leftward-moving procession painted on them. The composition begins with depictions of Fuxi and the

⁵³ The *Lingxian*, written around 120 CE by the polymath Zhang Heng, is an astronomical treatise. It addresses a wide range of topics, including the origin of heaven and earth, the evolution of the cosmos, the structure of the universe, and the nature and movements of the sun, moon, and stars.

⁵⁴ Nüwa occupies the *yin* realm with the moon and symbolizes *yin*, hence often pictured with the White Tiger or the Dark Warrior. Conversely, Fuxi, like the Azure Dragon and Vermilion Bird, is situated in the *yang* realm with the sun and represents *yang*.

⁵⁵ Digital lineart made by the author based on figure 5-19 of Wang 2008b: 562.

sun and concludes with Nüwa and the moon. Following Fuxi, the female tomb occupant is portrayed riding a three-headed bird, while the male tomb occupant rides a serpent. Guided by the cardinal deities (which were apparently not yet standardized in this area) and other creatures, the couple journeys toward the realm of the immortals.⁵⁶ The cardinal emblems sent from above are escorting the deceased to heaven. This configuration of the cardinal deities, Fuxi and Nüwa, is also seen in other Western Han funerary contexts, such as the stone ceiling mural of the Qianjingtou 浅井頭 mural tomb in Luoyang, Henan.

Another noteworthy example from the late Western Han is the medium-sized, decorated brick chamber tomb Xi'an Jiaotong daxue 西安交通大学, excavated in Shaanxi. Here, the tomb ceiling was constructed using rectangular and wedge-shaped bricks to form an arched vault, at the centre of which a double-ringed circle (a star map) was painted. Within the inner circle are representations of the sun—depicted as a red disc with a three-legged black bird inside—and the moon—shown with a rabbit and a toad, accompanied by auspicious clouds and cranes. The annular space between the circles contains depictions of the Four Cardinal Deities and the twenty-eight lunar mansions. The link between astronomical and mythological traditions is notable, as it associates specific constellations with particular figures or animals that are symbolically related to them. For instance, a degree of fusion is evident between the cardinal deities and the lodges. For example, the first six mansions of the Azure Dragon (Jiao, Kang, Di, Fang, Xin, and Wei) are collectively rendered as a single dragon figure, which also includes star diagrams. Only the final mansion, Ji, is represented separately as a figure holding a star-formed winnowing basket. Similar compositional strategies are applied to the White Tiger and Vermilion Bird, though fewer mansions are combined. In total, approximately 18 identifiable star groups remain visible (some are damaged), and their order corresponds precisely to the traditional arrangement of the deities and the lunar mansions, allowing for systematic interpretation with the aid of the accompanying imagery.⁵⁷

Further examples of decorated hollow bricks with four deities imagery were excavated near the tomb of Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) of the Western Han, at the site known as Maoling Mausoleum 茂陵 in Shaanxi. The pictorial bricks were used in the base platform known as the White Crane Pavilion. Among them, the Dark Warrior brick is of particular interest (see Figure 8). The composition is symmetrical, with a vine-like plant rising vertically at the centre. On either side, two turtles face inward toward the central motif, their heads raised. Entwined with each turtle is a snake, one lifting its head dramatically, facing its turtle counterpart. One of the turtles is shown gripping aquatic vegetation in its mouth—a detail that is both distinctive and suggestive of symbolic meaning.

⁵⁶ Kominami 2010: 32–33.

⁵⁷ Kitamura 2005: 81–82.

An important example is a set of pictorial bricks excavated from a tomb group in Yinqueshan 银雀山, Linyi City, Shandong Province. The rectangular bricks are greyish-blue and depict each creature with lively realism. The Azure Dragon curves its neck and opens its mouth to bare sharp teeth. Its body crouches low, and its left foreleg is lifted upward. The Vermilion Bird is shown holding grass in its beak, wings outstretched in flight. The White Tiger turns its head back, roaring with an open mouth and glaring eyes. The Dark Warrior is represented by a turtle pulling its head in as it advances, while a snake wraps around its shell, lifting its head upward in a dynamic pose.

The Four Cardinal Deities imagery during the Xin (9–23 AD) and Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 AD)

The depiction of the Four Cardinal Deities underwent notable transformations between the Western Han and Eastern Han dynasties, reflecting shifts in artistic conventions, religious beliefs, and funerary practices.

During the Eastern Han period, the predominant burial types were cliff tombs and brick or stone chamber tombs, designed to resemble domestic dwellings and typically covered by burial mounds. Chamber tombs were constructed entirely of brick, entirely of stone, or with a combination of both materials, though their overall architectural layouts remained largely consistent. These tombs commonly featured burial chambers equipped with walls, doors, ceilings, and occasionally columns. In mixed-material constructions, large stone slabs were typically employed for door panels and walls, while bricks were used to form barrel-vaulted ceilings.⁵⁸ The increased number of reliefs and tomb frescoes was created in different, more complex compositions. As a symbol of the *yin-yang* energies and the circle of the Five Phases, the ceiling of Eastern Han tombs continued to be decorated with spiritual beings (e.g., the Four Cardinal Deities), pairs of gods or culture heroes, and magical celestial motifs, representing the eternal movement of the dual celestial world. In the case of the Four Cardinal Deities murals, it can be observed that there was a shift towards more narrative-driven depictions with dynamic poses. Moreover, they were moved from the high plane of the ceiling to the lower plane or to the upper plane of the side walls.⁵⁹ As for tomb reliefs decorated with the guardian figures, we can occasionally observe a rectangular panel layout, with multiple horizontally divided registers (see Figure 10).

⁵⁸ Xuan Chen 2014: 4.

⁵⁹ E.g., the Binwang 邠王 tomb and the Qianyangxian 千陽縣 tomb in Shaanxi.



Figure 11. A Han dynasty tile emblematically representing the five cardinal directions⁶⁰

This change can be attributed to the new concept that, in the Daoist cosmic worldview, the deities were no longer just static symbols or cardinal directions and guardians of Heaven, but their role was transformed to serve as a kind of guidance deity for the aristocrats. They also seem to take on roles as bearers of auspicious meaning.

⁶⁰ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Five_cardinal_directions,_a_pottery_tile_of_the_Han_Dynasty,_Cernuschi_Museum,_2006-08-12.jpg

We can find evidence of the new, enhanced roles of the beasts as guiding spirits on inscriptions of grave goods and in certain liturgical works of Chinese poetry, such as the *Xi shi* 惜誓 poem of the *Chu Ci* 楚辭 poetry collection.⁶¹

Songs of Chu, Sorrow for the Troth Betrayed:
The Vermilion Bird soared forth as celestial herald,
guiding the divine chariot of Taiyi.⁶²
Azure Dragon coils as the left-hand steed,
while the White Tiger raced ahead as the right-hand charger.⁶³

楚辭:惜誓
飛朱鳥使先驅兮,
駕太一之象輿。
蒼龍蚺虯於左驂兮,
白虎騁而為右馱。⁶⁴

A TLV bronze mirror (*fangge gui* 方格規矩四神鏡)⁶⁵ from the Xin Mang period (9–23 CE), now housed in the National Museum of China, bears a particularly intriguing inscription:

During the reign of the Xin dynasty, the best copper is produced in Danyang; the copper makes a pure and bright [mirror] when mixed with silver-coloured tin. Dragon on the left, Tiger on the right—they govern the four quarters. Vermilion Bird and Dark Warrior follow the harmony of *yin* and *yang*. Eight sons and nine grandsons rule the centre. With the engraved square pavilion, misfortune is driven away. Wealth for the household, befitting kings and lords.⁶⁶

⁶¹ The *Chu Ci* is an ancient anthology of Chinese poetry comprising texts traditionally attributed primarily to Qu Yuan and Song Yu of the Warring States period, alongside a substantial corpus of later compositions from the Han dynasty. It derives its imagery from shamanistic ritual.

⁶² Taiyi 太一 is a name of the supreme God of Heaven that had become prominent besides the older ones during the Han dynasty in relation to the figure of the Yellow Emperor.

⁶³ Translation mine. For published English translations, see Williams, Nicholas Morrow 2022. *Elegies of Chu: An Anthology of Early Chinese Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; or Hawkes, David Chapter 5 in Minford and Lau 2000. *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations*, Vol. I: From Antiquity to the Tang Dynasty. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁶⁴ *Chu Ci* <https://ctext.org/chu-ci/xi-shi/zh>.

⁶⁵ The TLV mirror is a Han dynasty mirror characterized by a central knob, a square inner border, and symmetrical T, L, and V-shaped patterns arranged around it. Its design is widely interpreted as a cosmological diagram, symbolizing the structure of the universe, the cardinal directions (and their deities), and the harmony between Heaven and Earth. These mirrors, which depict the guardians rendered in fine linework within a square-gridded frame, were widely produced through the Eastern Han period. Many were transmitted via the Korean Peninsula to the Japanese archipelago.

⁶⁶ Translation mine.

新有善銅出丹陽、和以銀錫清且明、左龍右虎掌四彭、朱雀玄武順陰陽、
八子九孫治中央、刻婁博局去不羊、家常大富宜君王。⁶⁷

Another Eastern Han mirror (*shangfang qiru sishenjing* 尚方七乳四神鏡) bears an inscription with similar thematic content:

Dragon on the left, Tiger on the right⁶⁸—they repel misfortune. Vermilion Bird and Dark Warrior follow the *yin* and *yang* order. Long life, like metal and stone, brings unending joy. May wealth and nobility be preserved for both parents. May sons and grandsons thrive in the central domain. Daughters become noble wives, sons become honored ministers.⁶⁹

左龍右虎辟不祥，朱鳥玄武順陰陽，子孫備具居中央，長保二親樂富昌。
子孫備居中央、女為夫人男為卿。

The following section will highlight a few representative examples from the Eastern Han period, without claiming to be exhaustive.

Incidentally, the practice of depicting the Four Cardinal Deities, in combination with Fuxi and Nüwa, within the interior of tomb chambers became widespread during the Later Han period in the Central Plains region, especially in the capital area. These images often appear on tomb ceilings, showing the beasts, and Fuxi and Nüwa raising the sun and moon (disc) above their heads. They are frequently integrated into broader and complex compositions that include constellations, guardians, deities, spirits of elements, and celestial bodies such as the Five Planets or large diagrams of the sun and the moon—all elements associated with the cosmos. In connection with this, it is necessary to mention a Xin brick-chambered tomb from Luoyang: the Jingyuan 金谷園 tomb. The tomb is composed of a passageway, corridor, front chamber, rear chamber, eastern side chamber, and a corridor-side chamber. Mural paintings are found in both the front and rear chambers. In the rear chamber, on the ceiling and on the upper parts of the eastern, western, and northern walls are depicted the

⁶⁷ Kitamura 2005: 107.

⁶⁸ The first part (左龍右虎辟不祥) is a protective formula in traditional Chinese thought, especially in Daoist cosmology and feng shui principles. It expresses the idea that placing the dragon on the left and the tiger on the right creates a powerful alignment that wards off evil and misfortune. Dragon (yang, benevolent, expansive force) and Tiger (yin, fierce, contracting force) are paired as balancing cosmic forces. Similar inscriptions are frequently found on bronze mirrors from the Han dynasty to the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). Furthermore, the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, in the ‘Qu Li’ chapter, states that in military formations the proper orientation is ‘Vermilion Bird in front, Black Tortoise behind, Azure Dragon on the left, and White Tiger on the right.’ These four military banners symbolize the cosmic power of the Four Cardinal Deities, enabling one to command the four directions and to ward off inauspicious influences.

⁶⁹ Translation mine.



Figure 12. TLV bronze mirror with Four Cardinal Deities imagery (1st century CE)
(Sakurai City, Nara, Japan)⁷⁰

cardinal deities, large diagrams of the sun and moon, and the divine assistants of all five palaces of Heaven (Houtu, Jumang, Zhurong, Rushou, and Xuanming). Accompanying these are depictions such as immortals riding tigers, immortals commanding dragons, and immortals playing with celestial horses, symbolizing ascension to immortality and auspicious omens. All the scenes are interwoven with flowing patterns of red clouds. The visual system is highly complete and clear, vividly and distinctly reflecting the concepts popular in the Han dynasty, including *yin-yang* and the Five Elements, the resonance between Heaven and humanity, and the belief in the soul's ascent to the heavens. Similarly, the Cijian 磁涧 tomb in Luoyang is also famous for its ridge-shaped painted ceiling with

⁷⁰ Photograph taken by the author on April 27, 2013, at the Tokyo National Museum (Tokyo, Japan).

the above-mentioned cosmological and mythological themes. The compositions are beginning to exhibit greater complexity and colorfulness compared to Western Han depictions, and they also spread to more remote provincial regions.

The pictorial stone tomb in Beizhai Village 北寨村, Yinan County, Shandong, is constructed from 280 stone blocks, of which 42 are pictorial stones bearing 72 engraved scenes, distributed across lintels, walls, beams, pillars, coffered ceilings, and partition walls. The pictorial carvings depict a wide range of themes, including mythological figures (such as the four guardians), exotic animals, beast-head motifs, immortals, sacrificial rituals, travel, banquets, music and dance, cloud motifs, battles, and historical narratives. The Four Deities in the front chamber are not isolated images; they are interwoven into narrative and cosmological frameworks and characterized by their exquisite craftsmanship and fluid, refined line work.⁷¹

As this study draws to a close, it is also worthwhile to briefly discuss one more category of finds that can be encountered in Han tombs: decorated sarcophagi. Stone sarcophagi first emerged in southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu in China around the second and first centuries BCE, and were resurrected in the Sichuan area in the second century CE. Reliefs on the exterior of Han sarcophagi have various themes, including cosmological and mythical figures that transform the stone box into a microcosm of the universe or a heavenly realm. The stone coffin⁷² of Wang Hui⁷³ 王暉 was found in Lushan, Jiangxi, and features exquisite carvings of the deities of the east, west, and north, each occupying a side of the coffin to represent their respective directions. The right side features the Azure Dragon, while the left side depicts the White Tiger; both high reliefs are incredibly vivid. Their bodies and tails are both elongated and winding. The dragon is characterized by prominent fins extending from its body, elongated tendrils or feelers surrounding its mouth, and distinct horn-like projections on its head. Both mythical creature has wings. Their gestures suggest that these two deities are escorting and protecting the master's soul to ascend to heaven. The bottom right corner shows a snake entwined with a turtle (Dark Warrior). The deity of the south is not depicted; instead, the front depicts double doors, a *taotie* motif, and an immortal, making the sarcophagus look like the deceased Wang Hui's postmortem house. The craftsmanship reflects the high

⁷¹ Wang 2008a: 24; Hayashi 1974: 226.

⁷² The stone sarcophagus is grand in scale, with both the sarcophagus and its lid carved from single blocks of red sandstone. The total dimensions are 2.5 meters in length, 1.01 meters in width, and 0.83 meters in height.

⁷³ Wang Hui served as a *shangjishi* 上计史 in Hanjia Prefecture (modern-day Lushan County, Ya'an). His role was to report annually to the court on the prefecture's fiscal revenues and expenditures, population, cultivated land, and public order, etc.

artistic standards of the period, with detailed attention to the anatomical features and symbolic attributes of each deity.⁷⁴

Textual sources also document the depiction of the cardinal deities on Han period coffins. For instance, Chapter 93 *Ning Xing Zhuan* 佞倖傳 (*Biographies of Favourites*) of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (*Book of Han*) records:

Upon the death of Emperor Ai, [...] Xian committed suicide. His father, Gong, and others showed no remorse. Consequently, they once again used sand to paint the coffin in the colours of the four seasons: the Azure Dragon on the left, the White Tiger on the right, and adorned the top with gold and silver representations of the sun and moon, along with jade garments, pearls, and jades to decorate the coffin—nothing more could be added, even for the most exalted.⁷⁵

哀帝崩 (...) 賢自殺，父恭等不悔過，乃復以沙畫棺，四時之色，左蒼龍，右白虎，上著金銀日月玉衣珠璧以棺，至尊無以加。⁷⁶

Summary

This study has traced the iconographic evolution and cultural significance of the Four Cardinal Deities—the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, and Dark Warrior—within Han dynasty tomb art and cosmological thought. Drawing from a broad range of written sources and archaeological materials, including simple or complex murals, reliefs, and engraved bricks, the analysis reveals that these mythological figures played a central role in shaping the visual and spiritual landscape of elite burial practices in ancient China. Emerging gradually from earlier totemic and astral beliefs, the guardian beasts became fully conceptualized and integrated into the cosmological framework of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases during the Western Han. Until then, depictions of the beasts in a funerary context appear either in singular form or without the Vermilion Bird

⁷⁴ Chen 2014: 192.

⁷⁵ Translation mine. There is no complete English translation of the *Han Shu*, but several notable partial translations exist. The following overview, without claiming to be exhaustive, presents notable translations: Dubs, H. 1938-55. *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*, 3 vols. Baltimore: Waverly; Hulsewe, A.F.P. and Loewe, M.A.N. 197. *China in Central Asia; the Early Stage: 125 BC - AD 23: An Annotated Translation of Chapters 61 and 96 of the History of the Former Han Dynasty*. Leiden: Brill; Owen, S. 1997. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911*. New York: W.W. Norton. 215–218; Watson, B. 1974. *Courtier and Commoner in Ancient China. Selections from the History of the Former Han*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁷⁶ 漢書 [Book of Han], Chinese Text Project <https://ctext.org/han-shu/ning-xing-zhuan/zh>.

and Dark Warrior, typically showing only the Azure Dragon and White Tiger inside tomb chambers.

From the Han period, their standardized directional, seasonal, and elemental associations not only reflected but actively reinforced contemporary religious and philosophical systems. The rise of Daoist immortality beliefs and ascension ideology gave rise to their imagery. The deities' representations in tombs—positioned to guard the soul, create a cosmic microcosm, and signal the deceased's elevated status—illustrate a sophisticated understanding of life, death, and the universe. Variations in their depiction across time and region underscore both the flexibility of their symbolic meanings and the localized nature of Han funerary traditions. The transition from the Western to the Eastern Han dynasty saw the cardinal deities evolve from primitive symbols to dynamic figures embedded within narrative frameworks (with other mythical figures and symbols). While the Western Han emphasized the deities' cosmological roles through simple symbolic representation, the Eastern Han highlighted their didactic significance through narrative art forms.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates how these symbols, often paired with cosmological figures like Fuxi and Nüwa, or the sun and the moon motifs, served not merely as protective emblems but also as guides in the soul's journey toward transcendence. Ultimately, the Four Cardinal Deities were not static motifs, but dynamic carriers of folk belief, shaped by evolving intersections of ritual, art, and ideology in early imperial China. After the Han dynasty, the imagery of the Four Cardinal Deities continued to play a vital role in Chinese funerary art, but their visual forms, symbolic functions, and cosmological integration evolved significantly. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (220–589 CE), and especially in the Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang periods, their representations became increasingly standardized, richly embellished, and often embedded within more complex religious and narrative frameworks.

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MAGDALENA VASSILEVA

(Veliko Tarnovo University, Bulgaria)

Tradition and Modernity: The Father Figure in Yamada Yōji's *Tokyo Family* and Shifting Masculinities in Contemporary Japan

Abstract

This study examines how Yamada Yōji constructs the father figure in the film *Tokyo Family* (*Tōkyō Kazoku* 東京家族, 2013), situating it within the context of contemporary Japan and government policies regarding fatherhood and men's roles within the family. The analysis engages with two primary perspectives: (1) Yamada's portrayal of the father character, encompassing both his self-perception and how he is viewed by his family; and (2) Yamada's broader depiction of the character in relation to other male figures in the film, alongside its resonance with the socio-cultural realities of modern Japanese society.

The analysis reveals that the father, Shūkichi, is portrayed as an ageing man reflecting on his relationship with his children and his place within a transforming family structure. Initially presented as a traditional patriarch, Shūkichi gradually contends with evolving notions of masculinity. Ultimately, he comes to recognise and accept the modern male identity embodied by his youngest son, Shōji, reaching a form of reconciliation that is mediated indirectly through his wife, Tomiko, and Shōji's partner, Noriko.

Film critics and scholars frequently note that Yamada Yōji's *Tokyo Family* distinguishes itself from his mentor Ozu Yasujiro's *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari* 東京物語, 1953) primarily through its contemporary Japanese setting and the character of Noriko. Yamada also incorporates references to the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and weaves in brief episodes inspired by traditional Japanese theatre. However, this study argues that the more significant differences lie in the development of Shūkichi's character, especially in contrast to the film's other male figures—Kōichi, Kurazō and Shōji. Viewed through the lens of Japan's evolving male identities, these characters represent distinct stages along a timeline of shifting masculinities, progressing from the traditional archetype embodied by Shūkichi to the more contemporary model represented by Shōji. Although this framework does not encompass the full spectrum of male identity in contemporary Japanese society, it nevertheless reflects Yamada's intention to align with that shift, deploying his characteristic narrative style—deeply resonant and emotionally attuned to his audience.

Keywords: Yamada Yōji, Japanese film, father, male identity, family, Japanese society

Introduction

Tokyo Family (*Tōkyō Kazoku* 東京家族, 2013) by Yamada Yōji¹ is often regarded as a remake, tribute or homage to the legendary film *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari* 東京物語, 1953) by the master filmmaker Ozu Yasujirō. Interestingly, both films were produced by the same company, *Shochiku*. However, creating a remake is no simple feat; it demands deep thought, insight and a delicate balance to honour the original while offering a fresh perspective. This challenge of Yamada has led to polarising opinions among film critics and a noticeable hesitance among researchers to delve deeply into this particular film.

Critics have expressed sharply divided opinions on *Tokyo Family*. Some dismiss it as a movie that ‘vexes Ozu devotees and bores mainstream auds’,² featuring ‘some of the performances verging on caricatures’³ and one that is ‘bound to disturb any self-respecting cinephile’⁴. Researchers, however, tend to avoid engaging with the film entirely, preferring the safer terrain of Yamada’s original works, such as the long-running series *It’s Hard to Be a Man* (*Otoko wa Tsurai yo* 男はつらいよ, 1969–1995) or his celebrated *Samurai Trilogy* (*The Twilight Samurai*, *Tasogare Seibei* たそがれ清兵衛 2002; *The Hidden Blade*, *Kakushi Ken Oni no Tsume* 隠し剣 鬼の爪, 2004 and *Love and Honour*, *Bushi no Ichibun* 武士の一分, 2006). Scholars would rather examine themes such as alienation, the generation gap and family relationships within the broader context of Yamada’s body of work, while deliberately refraining from placing particular focus on *Tokyo Family*.

We chose *Tokyo Family* as our case study for three reasons, which form the framework of our discussion. First, the movie was made nearly 60 years after the original, positioning it closer to modern times on the temporal axis. This proximity suggests that the film might more sharply and sensitively reflect the socio-cultural changes in contemporary Japan and their impact on the Japanese family.

Alternatively, it is also possible that the film demonstrates the opposite tendency—where Yamada distances himself from the modern portrayal of the family and, despite the passage of time, remains committed to the concept of the traditional family as depicted in the original work of his mentor, Ozu Yasujirō.

¹ In accordance with Japanese naming conventions, whereby the family name precedes the given name, this practice is maintained throughout the manuscript.

² Lee 2013.

³ Fainrau 2013.

⁴ Ibid. 2.

The third possibility is that there may be a distinctly Yamada Yōji approach of portraying people—one that focuses on being ‘interested in people, their existence, how they live’, and reflecting on ‘what it means to be human’.⁵

To investigate this, we opted to explore the figure of the father in *Tokyo Family*, a theme that has received relatively little attention. This study is not a comparative one and does not claim to be exhaustive on the aforementioned subject. It examines how Yamada has constructed the father figure in *Tokyo Family* within the context of modern Japan and the government’s policies on fatherhood and the role of men in the family. The analysis incorporates two perspectives: (1) Yamada’s approach to portraying the father character, which includes both the father’s self-perception and how his family members perceive him; and (2) Yamada’s broader perspective on the character in contrast to other male characters in the film, as well as its resonance with the socio-cultural realities of contemporary Japan. Based on this framework, we address the following research questions (RQs):

- What is Yamada Yōji’s perspective on portraying the father character (RQ1)?
- How is the father depicted within the family and within the macro-setting of a changing Japan (RQ2)?
- How is the father perceived by family members and people close to the Hirayama family (RQ3)?
- How does the character relate to other male characters in the film and to the evolving male identities in modern Japan (RQ4)?

Literature Review: The Portrayal of the Father in Japanese Films

The Father Figure in Japanese Films

The portrayal of the father as an independent subject in Japanese cinema remains overlooked. It is typically analysed within the broader contexts of family dynamics, shifts in masculinity or the *salaryman* サラリーマン (‘office worker’) stereotype, which have garnered more attention from researchers and film critics.

A substantial amount of research on fatherhood in Japanese films explores intricate themes such as the absence of parental love and care, as well as the presence of violence and resentment in family relationships.⁶ Other studies examine

⁵ Yamada 2023, quoted in [Associated Press, The] 2023.

⁶ Przybyło 2015: 95.

evolving male identities, reimagine family structures within this context,⁷ or highlight the destructive role of the father.⁸

To shed light on the post-bubble transformations of father and husband figures, Dasgupta⁹ examines two Japanese films—*Tokyo Sonata* (*Tōkyō Sonata* 東京ソナタ, 2008) by Kurosawa Kiyoshi and the comedy *Hush!* (*Hasshu* ハッシュュ! 2002) by Hashiguchi Ryōsuke. Both films explore the complexity and diversity of contemporary reality. *Tokyo Sonata* poignantly and mercifully portrays the painful process of its protagonist, Ryūhei, coming to terms with change and embracing a new identity. His journey unfolds as he transitions from the traditional role of the *daikokubashira* 大黒柱 patriarch (lit. ‘central pillar’) to a father and husband with a diminished status within the family and society. Meanwhile, *Hush!* reconsiders the role of the stepfather in same-sex relationships.

Iles¹⁰ examines the evolution of the Japanese family, particularly the role of the father, by comparing two films—*The Family Game* (*Kazoku Gēmu* 家族ゲーム, 1983) by Morita Yoshimitsu and *Visitor Q* (*Bijitā Q* ビジターQ, 2001) by Miike Takashi. His analysis places these films within the broader context of post-war Japanese cinema, particularly the works of Kurosawa Akira, Mizoguchi Kenji and Ozu Yasujirō, where fathers were traditionally depicted as moral guides and pillars of family stability. In contrast, contemporary films portray the father as absent, ineffectual or even destructive.

Park’s¹¹ perspective on the family and ageism is particularly compelling. The researcher compares Ozu Yasujirō’s *Tokyo Story* with Yamada Yōji’s remake, *Tokyo Family*. While the primary focus is on ageism, the researcher’s analysis also reveals aspects of the father figure, suggesting that his role in *Tokyo Family* is somewhat neglected by his children. Though he remains a strong and stable presence, social changes have reshaped the dynamics between him and his family, creating a different model of relationships.

Yamada Yōji’s Character Portrayal

Yamada Yōji is one of Japan’s most prolific and still-active film directors often being referred to as ‘Japan’s national treasure’.¹² A highly skilled filmmaker, he had the rare opportunity to learn directly from Ozu Yasujirō. He is also a

⁷ Dasgupta 2015: 14–20.

⁸ Iles 2008: 189–206.

⁹ Dasgupta 2015: 14–16.

¹⁰ Iles 2008: 189–206.

¹¹ Park 朴蕙彬 2018: 21.

¹² Wang 2022: 223.

talented screenwriter, known for his delicate sense of humour and his intricate portrayals of the human soul. However, as many researchers and film critics point out, Yamada remains underappreciated and relatively unknown outside Japan, with a few exceptions—most notably the renowned *Tora-san* series and the *Samurai Trilogy*.¹³ As Noletti observes, Yamada has received ‘surprisingly little critical attention in the West’.¹⁴

Susanne Schremann notes that while Yamada Yōji holds a significant place in Japanese cinema history, his work has not been thoroughly examined. She observes that even the widely popular *Tora-san* series have been largely overlooked in scholarly studies, possibly due to its comedic nature and mass appeal. To address this gap, Schremann turns her focus to one of Yamada’s early films, *The Sunshine Girl* (*Shitamachi no Taiyou* 下町の太陽, 1963), aiming to shed light on its artistic and cultural significance.¹⁵

Chan Yan Chuen also writes that Yamada is notably absent from the works of prominent film scholars, including David Bordwell, David Desser, Noël Burch, Donald Richie, Keiko McDonald, Abe Mark Nornes and Aaron Gerow. The researcher remarks:

[...] Bordwell had his book *Ozu and the Poetics of Japanese Cinema* published firstly in 1988; Richie writes several books about Kurosawa Akira (Richie, 1996) and one on Ozu (Richie, 1974); Desser has an edited book on Ozu (Desser, 1997) and another on Kurosawa (Desser, 1983); Gerow also contributes a book on Kitano Takeshi (Gerow, 2007). In *Reading a Japanese Film*, McDonald (2006) selects 16 films that were made between 1936 and 1997 to analyze which included two films of Kurosawa and Ozu’s *Floating Weeds* (1959). Yamada Yōji was found totally absent from these scholarly works.¹⁶

Regarding Yamada’s portrayal of characters, Chuen observes that the director adopts a realistic approach with a social purpose—offering hope and uplifting the audience. This explains Yamada’s tendency to infuse humour into his characters, even in moments of sadness or hardship.

[...] if one goes further to understand the hidden sadness and troubles behind the smiling face of the protagonists, it is not difficult to uncover the inner loneliness and

¹³ Chuen 2014, Leblanc 2021, Schremann 2020, Leblanc 2023, Leblanc 2024.

¹⁴ Noletti 1985: 5.

¹⁵ Schremann 2020: 47.

¹⁶ Chuen 2014: 5.

sorrow of each of them. If we try to understand the protagonists, this complexity of human nature is not difficult to be discovered on silver screen as well.¹⁷

Schermann provides further insight into Yamada's approach to character portrayal, emphasising the director's nuanced depiction of female agency and empowerment in *The Sunshine Girl*. She highlights how Yamada subtly challenges traditional norms through his storytelling. Additionally, Schermann examines his directorial techniques, particularly his use of realistic settings and meticulous attention to everyday details. She argues that these elements foster an immersive experience, enabling audiences to engage deeply with the characters' lives.¹⁸

Building characters around internal contradictions is a hallmark of Yamada's style. This is evident in *The Twilight Samurai*, where Seibei prioritises his daughters and mother over loyalty to his master. As Robin Syversen notes, Seibei's sense of honour is deeply personal, rooted in love and responsibility rather than blind adherence to tradition.¹⁹ Unlike conventional samurai, who place duty to their master above all else, Seibei devotes himself to his late wife's memory and his children's well-being. His sacrifices redefine honour as selflessness and familial devotion rather than rigid duty.

Qin Wang also explores Yamada Yōji's filmmaking style, focusing on how his stories and characters evolve. The author highlights three key aspects: first, Yamada's openings are typically slow, simple and understated, providing audiences with a perspective rooted in ordinary life and setting the stage for nuanced character portrayals. Second, while conflict runs through the narrative, it is primarily conveyed through concern and sympathy for the characters' fates. Finally, influenced by Ozu Yasujirō, Yamada skilfully integrates humour and pays particular attention to marginalized individuals and lower social groups, making his films deeply connected to the everyday joys and sorrows of ordinary people.²⁰

'Valuing feelings' is another fundamental element of Yamada Yōji's approach to explore characters' natures. In the *Samurai Trilogy*, this form of 'affection' prioritises familial and romantic bonds over the otherworldly ideals of *bushidō*. The female characters subtly express their emotions, reflecting the director's deep understanding of and special attention to the concept of a 'happy life'. Additionally, viewers may notice certain 'habitual' details that contribute to the depiction of ordinary people's resilience and perseverance. 'Without shouting,

¹⁷ Yamada, 1978: 95-8, quoted in Chuen 2014: 130.

¹⁸ Schermann 2020: 53-54.

¹⁹ Syversen 2023, *JCA*.

²⁰ Wang 2022: 223-224.

screaming or stealing the spotlight, these scenes are meticulous and moving, like still water running deep'.²¹

The reviewed scholarly works suggest that Yamada adopts a simple, modest, and realistic approach to storytelling. His emphasis on authenticity and empathy shapes his portrayals, highlighting people's emotions in everyday life. This allows the audience to intimately experience his characters' contradictions, dilemmas and quiet moments. An understated sense of humour is also central to his approach, adding depth to their inner worlds and infusing difficult situations with warmth and hope. Yamada's protagonists may seem ordinary, but as they evolve, their depth and complexity gradually unfold for the viewer.

Yamada Yōji's Approach to Depicting the Father Figure in *Tokyo Family*

Light, Silence, Framing

The audience is introduced to Shūkichi Hirayama, a retired teacher, as he stands on the arrival platform of *Shinagawa Station* alongside his wife, Tomiko. They wait for their youngest son, Shōji, to pick them up. From the outset, the couple is *framed* within the sleek, modern environment of the JR station and the bustling, overcrowded metropolis—Yamada's way of symbolising the technological progress from the 1950s to contemporary Japan. However, the viewer's attention is drawn to the couple's spatial positioning: the father stands above the mother, who is seated on the suitcases. This composition subtly suggests the traditional hierarchical structure of the family, evoking the Confucian representation of the father figure as the protector, breadwinner and holder of the highest position within the household.

There are several other scenes where the couple is *framed* on a macro level. Immediately after the JR episode, we see the couple with a taxi driver, highlighting the convenience of the car's navigation system—another symbol of progress. Through the taxi windows, the well-maintained infrastructure and neatly arranged mansions of Tokyo come into view. These two scenes are intriguing because of the father's expression, which is less radiant and warm-hearted than in Ozu's original. In both moments, despite his serious demeanour for most of the time, a delicate smile appears on his face, as if mocking on his wife's thoughtlessness and backwardness regarding innovations. In the first scene, Shūkichi takes the initiative in a Confucian manner, deciding that they should

²¹ Zhao–Ding 2017: 355–356.

not wait for Shōji and instead go alone to their eldest son's house, remarking with an elusive smile:

I can't wait that long... Let's go on our own... [そんな待てるか...、
わしらで行こう...]

In the second scene, the father uses gestures to point out to his wife that the taxi is equipped with a GPS system, emphasising with a barely noticeable smile that there is no need to meticulously provide instructions to the driver.

Macro-level framing is likewise employed during the couple's tour of Tokyo on a double-decker bus. Together with Shōji, they ride through architectural and technological marvels such as the *Tokyo Skytree* and the vibrant, electric district of *Akihabara*. The couple displays a sense of curiosity and subtle surprise at the cosmopolitan nature of Tokyo, despite the episode containing little dialogue. Instead, the director relies on the couple's expressions and their contrast with Shōji, who appears either bored or tired, napping throughout the scene. While the mother occasionally lets slip a faint, almost imperceptible smile, Shūkichi remains serious, leaving it unclear whether he genuinely enjoys the experience or merely endures it out of obligation.

Perhaps the most striking example of this approach is the couple's reluctant retreat to the highly modern hotel in *Yokohama*—a luxurious gift and a manifestation of the so-called *oyakōkō* 親孝行 ('filial piety') of the children toward their parents. The scene begins with the dizzying motion of a rollercoaster spinning wildly among towering skyscrapers. Despite being filmed in the open air, there is an absence of vitality. The stark whiteness of the high-rise buildings nearly overflows under the daylight, creating a sense of sterile emptiness. Notably, all the aforementioned scenes begin with an intense interplay of light—whether it's the harsh artificial glow of *Shinagawa Station* or the blinding whiteness of the rising buildings in *Yokohama* merging with the daylight.

And then follows a scene featuring a *micro-framing*—a confined space in which the characters are alone, either silently contemplating or exchanging few words. We see the couple sitting alone in the intrusive whiteness of the hotel room, gazing through the window at the overwhelming whiteness of the rollercoasters and Ferris wheel—a view that, according to the standards of modern Japanese society, should be enviable. Silence prevails and the faces of Shūkichi and Tomiko remain expressionless. Tomiko attempts to soften the atmosphere by suggesting that Shūkichi change into a more relaxed garment, a 'nemaki' 寝巻 ('pyjamas'), to feel more comfortable. However, he flatly refuses, his face remaining unchanged. He continues to reject other soothing suggestions from his caring wife, such as taking sleeping pills or ordering some 'osake' お酒

(lit. 'alcohol') in the hotel's restaurant to help him relax. The white set, harsh lighting, lack of conversation and their expressionless faces, along with the father's abrupt refusals—all contribute to a palpable sense of tension. It is amidst the whiteness of the surrounding high-rise buildings that Tomiko experiences a brief seizure of dizziness later in the episode. This finally brings a trace of concern to Shūkichi's otherwise stern face.

In keeping with the Japanese tradition of women caring for men, Tomiko discerns what is troubling her husband and gently proposes that they shorten their stay in Tokyo and return home. This time he accepts the proposal without hesitation, as though it were a simple solution. True to the tradition of men leading the way, he stands up among the whiteness of the modern hotel area in *Yokohama* and moves ahead—the scene suggests that the source of his distress has been resolved.

It is worth noting that, the whiteness of the setting, often merging with daylight, is a typical cinematographic method used by Yamada to imply that something unpleasant or foreboding is about to happen or that an uncomfortable conversation will take place. For instance, after the couple returns from *Yokohama* to Kōichi's house in Tokyo, and shortly before Tomiko faints, the father is shown silently sitting on the sofa, visibly exhausted from a sleepless night spent drinking with an old friend. Despite his weariness, his face retains its usual stern expression, an unyielding mask even in moments of quiet. The sunlight mercilessly floods the living room and with this harsh light pouring in, the bad news arrives as well. The youngest grandson steps in hesitantly, his words faltering as he begins to speak, trailing off before finishing his thought:

It's granny... [おばあちゃんがね...]

It is important to clarify that, unlike in many Western cultures where black symbolises mourning, in Japan, *white* is also closely associated with death and mourning. In this context, the merciful *whiteness* serves as a striking symbol of inevitability and foreboding, particularly evident in the hospital scene following Tomiko's faint. She lies motionless beneath the crisp *white* sheets, while Shūkichi sits beside her, his expression fixed and unreadable, his silence heavy. Words come slowly and with difficulty as Fumiko, Kōichi's wife, politely informs him about the arrangements his children are making to visit their mother. The final hospital scene lingers on the edge of the *white* sheet covering the lifeless body of Tomiko before Yamada transitions to the blinding *whiteness* of the ferry carrying Shūkichi, Shōji and Shōji's girlfriend, Noriko, across the Inland Sea to the old couple's home. Shūkichi, cradling Tomiko's urn wrapped in clean *white* fabric, naps quietly. Surprisingly, the *whiteness* here holds none of the tension or

sterility of the city. Instead, a calmness prevails, even as Shūkichi steps forward to meet his countryside neighbours with quiet dignity. Yet another surprise follows. Instead of turning to his neighbours, Shūkichi turns to his former student—a young girl, smiles and briefly gestures toward the urn, saying:

Yuki...look what's happened to granny/her... [ゆきちゃん、これ...おばあちゃん、こんなになってしまった...]

In this scene, the viewer might be struck by the unexpected smile of Shūkichi, who has maintained his usual mask of stern, expressionless resolve until now. This moment can be interpreted as a deliberate choice by the director, subtly suggesting that even the father, who has long worn this gloomy emotional mask, is capable of letting it slip, revealing a softer, more vulnerable side. On the other hand, for those unfamiliar with Japanese culture, it should be noted that a smile is often used to convey bad news or say something unpleasant to the listener. It is believed that this helps lessen the emotional burden and soften the atmosphere. At funerals, it is common for the relatives of the deceased to greet the attendants with a gentle smile, regardless of what they may be feeling inside at that moment.

The viewer may notice that Yamada often employs long silences as a preferred technique in scenes focusing on the old couple, adding a sense of introspection and emotional weight. Similarly, his subtle manipulation of light plays a crucial role in shaping these moments. For instance, in the scene where Shūkichi and Tomiko go upstairs at Kōichi's house to spend their first night in Tokyo, the sequence begins with the shadowy interior of the upstairs corridor, creating a subdued and contemplative atmosphere. As the light is turned on, the room where the couple is to stay is revealed, gradually drawing the viewer's attention. The focus tightens even further when the *fusuma* 襖 (the sliding door characteristic of a Japanese-style room), is closed, leaving Shūkichi and Tomiko enclosed within their intimate, private space. This careful orchestration of *silence*, *light* and *micro-framing* encapsulates Yamada's delicate storytelling approach. Similar *micro-framing* is observed in the episode where the couple stays at their daughter Shigeko's house. The scene opens with rain pouring outside, its sound accentuating the stillness, as the couple sits in silence within a dimly shadowed tatami room. The father sits with his usual serious expression; his eyes fixed on the television. Shigeko's husband attempts to start a conversation with him, but he receives only a terse one-word response. The father then turns off the TV and opens a newspaper, subtly signalling that he does not wish to be disturbed. This interaction heightens the sombre atmosphere and adds an

emotional weight to the father's character, further emphasising his reserved and distant demeanour.

Whenever Shūkichi and Tomiko are depicted on their own within the *micro-framing* of the family setting, the lighting is softened, often leaning toward darker tones, reflecting a sense of intimacy and quiet introspection. In contrast, when they are shown outside the family, set against the backdrop of the modern world and its marvels, the lighting becomes intensified and sometimes distinctly artificial, mirroring the stark and impersonal nature of this new environment.

Yamada Yōji masterfully portrays the father figure with a nuanced and multi-layered approach, emphasising his reserved demeanour, internal struggles and the generational dissonance he experiences. Through a combination of subtle techniques, such as *silence*, *micro-* and *macro-framing* and *light*, Yamada brings depth to the father's character, making him both relatable and poignant.

The Perspectives of the Family Members Toward the Father

Yamada Yōji astutely conveys the varying perspectives of family members toward the father, highlighting a complex blend of respect, distance and quiet frustration. The father, with his reserved demeanour and stern disposition, commands a sense of authority within the family, but his emotional restraint often creates a barrier that others struggle to cross. This is exemplified in the scene where Shigeko's husband attempts to start a conversation with Shūkichi. The episode prior to the old couple's stay at Shigeko's house also features a conversation between Shigeko and her husband Kurazō about the characters of Shūkichi and Tomiko. Kurazō is candid and straightforward in his criticism of Shūkichi, openly expressing his dissatisfaction with the father's personality. He bluntly states:

Kurazō: Your mother is fine, but your father is a bit hard to get along...

[お母さんはいい人なんだけど...お父さんはちょっと苦手なんだなあ...]

Shigeko: Why? [どうして?]

Kurazō: He was a schoolteacher, wasn't he... The conversation is too intellectual... It's a pain in the neck... [学校の先生だったんだろう。理屈ばいんだよ、話が...面倒くさいんだよ...]

Shigeko: He is an old man... [もうおじいちゃんよ...]

This line of concern continues when Shigeko and Shōji speak on the phone, further discussing Shūkichi. Their conversation echoes Kurazō's sentiments,

reinforcing the negative perception of the father figure within the family. Shōji is hesitant about showing his parents around Tokyo because he senses the emotional distance from his father and fears that Shūkichi will neither understand nor be satisfied with his life choices. His words come naturally:

Mom alone would be fine, but not dad... He doesn't want me around, I think... [お袋一人なら、いいんだけど、親父がいるんだろう... 親父だと、俺の顔なんか見たくないんじゃないか...]

Later, the discontent with Shūkichi escalates into outright criticism when Shigeko talks on the phone with Fumiko—the wife of the eldest son in the Hirayama family—as she speaks disparagingly of her father's past drinking habits and contrasts them with her mother's quiet endurance and stoicism. She remarks that the tension reached its peak during a stormy confrontation with her father, ultimately leading to Shūkichi's abrupt departure from her house.

The older son is probably the only one of the Hirayama children who doesn't openly express a negative opinion toward his father. He tends to agree, sometimes silently and other times with just a few words, with what his sister and brother-in-law think about Shūkichi. However, as a doctor, he is genuinely concerned about his father's health issues related to alcohol, reflecting a more subtle but still significant worry for Shūkichi's well-being. We may also infer that the older son feels some discomfort, as, being the eldest, he has deviated from the traditional role of staying with his parents and caring for them. Instead, he left the family home and found fulfilment in Tokyo as a doctor. This shift could contribute to a sense of guilt or unease, as he navigates the expectations of his role within the family while pursuing his own path.

And finally, through the conversations with Shōji and his girlfriend the viewer is introduced to Tomiko's perspective on Shūkichi. One might expect her to be the only family member to speak positively about him. When asked by Shōji about the good aspects of his father and her decision to accept Shūkichi's proposal, Tomiko is remarkably succinct, simply stating:

Your father was a good-looking man...That's all. [お父さん...ええ男 じゃったんよ...それだけ。]

The viewer is left in dismay by her simple, brief and measured response. Even the completely darkened night room—a technique Yamada employs to highlight moments of deep reflection and hidden emotions—fails to draw out a more expressive account of her husband. And yet, despite her restraint, her words carry a profound emotional weight. Tomiko also allows herself to briefly com-

ment on Shūkichi's nature while speaking with Shōji's girlfriend. She expresses eagerness to meet her again, but this time in the presence of Shōji's 'not very nice father'.

How can we explain Tomiko's conciseness in this pivotal episode? It may reflect Yamada's distinct approach, where silence and darkness convey emotions more powerfully than words. Tomiko's restraint speaks volumes, subtly revealing her true feelings about Shūkichi. The dimly lit setting highlights that what remains unsaid, carries as much weight as what is expressed.

At the same time cultural influences shape her response. The Japanese tendency toward moderation and self-effacement, especially within the *uchi* 内 ('inside, inner circle') group of people,²² discourages overt praise or criticism of close family members. Tomiko may also embody the traditional value of *gaman* 我慢 ('endurance'), choosing to suppress her personal opinions and emotions, especially in the presence of others.

The family's perspective on Shūkichi aligns with the traditional image of the silent, strict and distant father figure in the Japanese family. His emotional detachment, coupled with a lack of open communication, reflects the role of the father as an authoritative yet somewhat aloof figure. This conforms to the cultural expectation that the father should remain reserved and commanding, leaving emotional matters and familial dynamics largely unspoken. The family's view of him, shaped by this traditional model, underscores the complexities and tensions within their relationships.

But is Shūkichi truly as detached and emotionless as he seems? And how does he view himself? What do his own remarks and jokes reveal about his personality?

Shūkichi's Self-Perception: Disclosing Hidden Emotions

As discussed in the previous subsection, Shūkichi is viewed by both family members and outsiders as a stern, distant figure devoid of emotion. However, Yamada appears to offer a different directorial perspective, showcasing his cinematic range and revealing a more complex side to the character. This is especially evident in the father's occasional offhand comments and even humorous phrases, which subtly slip from his tongue, adding depth to his seemingly rigid persona.

The scene, where the entire family gathers to welcome the elderly couple at Kōichi's house, is warm and heartfelt. The presence of three generations

²² Individuals from one's inner circle—such as family members, close friends and colleagues.

enhances the nostalgic atmosphere. This moment also marks a rare instance of Shūkichi joking with his daughter, who playfully remarks that he has consumed enough alcohol in the past to last a lifetime. His subtle sense of humour sparks shared laughter, adding to the familial warmth. But no sooner does he resume his stern expression. Even when the youngest son finally arrives to meet the Hirayama family, the father seems indifferent, remaining silent and barely acknowledging him. The only words he utters are to ask what Shōji is doing for a living now.

And yet, as if Yamada fears that the father's static and monotonous demeanour might bore the audience, another joke is woven into the family conversation. This time, it playfully touches on a gloomy theme – who among the two spouses, Shūkichi or Tomiko, will die first.

Shigeko: Dad, take care of mom. [お母さん、大事にするのよ。]

Shūkichi: Don't worry... You could keep beating her, but she wouldn't die. [大丈夫...この人、しばいても死にはせん。]

Shigeko: What are you saying...?! [そんなこと言って...]

Shūkichi: I wouldn't mind dying first. It would make me happy. [死ぬのは、わしが先、それが幸せ。]

In contrast to other moments where Shūkichi permits himself only a fleeting smile, here, he not only cracks a joke but also laughs openly, his voice distinctly heard. On the rainy day when the elderly couple stays at Shigeko's house, with little to do, the viewer is entertained by another of Shūkichi's jokes. He and Shigeko's husband decide to visit the nearby public *onsen* 温泉 ('hot spring'), which is described as *tengoku* 天国 ('paradise'). As they leave the house, Shūkichi casually remarks that he's ready to go to *tengoku*, a clever play on words that carries a metaphorical meaning of death.

An emotional episode unfolds as Shūkichi, Tomiko, and Shōji dine together in a traditional Japanese restaurant. In this scene, the father directly confronts his youngest son, expressing his dissatisfaction with Shōji's decision to pursue a career as a stage designer rather than seeking a more stable job. Through his pointed questions regarding Shōji's salary and the long-term prospects of his career, it becomes apparent that Shūkichi is not only concerned about his son's future but also frustrated by Shōji's apparent lack of foresight and commitment to a more secure path. The viewer witnesses his parental frustration grow, evident in the intensity of his words:

How can you live in such a careless and chaotic manner? [そんな行き当たりばったりの生き方か...?]

Yet, in a striking shift, when Shōji steps outside to take a phone call, Shūkichi subtly softens his approach. His suggestion to Tomiko to share half of his meal with Shōji offers a tender, almost paternal gesture that contrasts sharply with the previous tension. This brief moment speaks unequivocally to Shūkichi's character. While his words reveal frustration, his actions suggest an enduring, unconditional love for his son. It is a poignant reminder that the complexities of parental relationships are not defined by single, isolated moments but by the broader, sometimes conflicting, emotional currents that run beneath them. In this fleeting exchange, Shūkichi's warmth and care for Shōji shine through, despite the earlier criticism. It suggests that, underneath his stern exterior, the father is not only concerned for his son's well-being but is also driven by a deep sense of familial duty and affection, even if it is sometimes expressed in a more indirect or harsh manner. This duality enriches the portrayal of Shūkichi as a character who embodies both the frustrations and the love inherent in parental responsibility.

The moments in which Shūkichi reveals a softer, more caring side within the family context are limited, especially when contrasted with the way he opens up to his old friend. Within the family, Shūkichi is often stern and reserved, expressing frustration with his children's choices. However, in a more intimate setting, such as the scene in which he drinks with an old friend in a dimly lit pub, Shūkichi dares to express his vulnerabilities, sharing his doubts and concerns about his children. This shift in his demeanour shows the contrast between the traditional father figure he upholds within the family and the more open, introspective side he reveals in private conversations with a peer who seems to share similar concerns and experiences. His vulnerability is evident as he expresses dissatisfaction with his eldest son, Kōichi, for deciding to move to Tokyo. Shūkichi's discontent stems from Kōichi's decision to establish a clinic in the bustling city, a choice he perceives as a deviation from the expected path. In Shūkichi's view, the eldest son, as per traditional expectations, should have stayed closer to home and, alongside his medical practice, cared for his aging parents. This moment underscores the generational tension between Shūkichi's traditional values and the individual aspirations of his children. It also offers a rare glimpse of Shūkichi's internal conflict, as he balances his desires for his children's success with his deep-rooted sense of familial duty and responsibility.

The atmosphere of emotional intensity and the subtle revelation of the father's inner world are further enhanced through the use of *lighting* and *spatial arrangement*. The pub is softly lit, with the customers seated near one another, creating a sense of intimacy and connection. This closeness extends to the relationship with the bartender, Kayo-chan, who is also situated near the two old friends. The entire conversation between Shūkichi and his friend is observed by

a nearby group of company workers, as well as by Kayo-chan, whose expressive eyes convey a mixture of annoyance and empathy. This emotional nuance in her gaze contributes to the overall mood, enhancing the reflective and intimate tone of the scene.

A particularly striking and poignant moment occurs in the conversation between Shūkichi and Shōji on the hospital's open roof, following Tomiko's death. The moment is remarkable for its fleeting nature, capturing a raw, emotionally charged exchange between father and son. The setting, the open roof, the day light adds to the sense of loneliness and vulnerability, highlighting the transient nature of their conversation as they process their grief in their own ways. This scene serves as a powerful, yet understated, expression of their complex relationship, marked by unspoken emotions and a shared sense of loss. As if Shūkichi is attempting to come to terms with Tomiko's absence, he quietly utters:

Shōji, your mom is dead... [...母さん、死んだぞ...]

The moment underscores Shūkichi's sudden and overwhelming sense of loneliness. In the quiet declaration of Tomiko's death, he is confronted not only with the loss of his wife but also with the traditional values a wife in the family carries. He utters the words in a calm and peaceful tone, devoid of visible emotion, which paradoxically heightens the emotional intensity of the moment. The scene carries a sense of emotional distance despite their shared loss, emphasising the unspoken grief between father and son. Shūkichi's words can be interpreted as an attempt to ensure that Shōji fully grasps the gravity of the situation or as a reflection of his own internal realisation. Probably unwilling to reveal his vulnerability to Shōji, he quietly leaves the rooftop, leaving his son behind in tears.

We will focus on one final scene that offers significant insight into Shūkichi's character in Yamada's adaptation. In this closing moment, Shōji and his girlfriend, Noriko, depart from the island – the Hirayama family's ancestral home – and Noriko bids farewell to Shūkichi. Strangely, the unaccustomed viewer witnesses a rare moment in which Shūkichi initiates a conversation with Noriko, someone he has scarcely seemed to notice until now. For the first time in the film, he even offers a compliment and struggles to maintain an undetectable smile. The conversation deepens as he sincerely thanks Noriko for accepting his ill-tempered nature without complaint and for continuing to care for him with unwavering devotion. The emotional climax arrives as the two sit alone in the quiet intimacy of the tatami room, where Shūkichi presents her with Tomiko's beloved watch as a *katami* 形見 ('keepsake'). In this moment, he reveals a hidden depth of care and sensitivity, disclosing his apprehension about Shōji's future. In a profound gesture, he bows deeply as he asks Noriko to marry his son.

This act carries great significance in the context of Japanese culture, where respect for elders is deeply ingrained. Traditionally, younger individuals are expected to bow to their seniors as a sign of deference, gratitude or apology, while elders rarely bow in return, especially not deeply. Here, however, the hierarchy is reversed: Shūkichi humbles himself before Noriko, acknowledging her kindness and making a sincere plea. His bow is not just a request but a profound expression of gratitude and recognition, signalling how much he values her presence in their family. The scene's quiet setting – just the two of them in the tatami room – adds to its poignancy. Removed from the presence of others, Shūkichi feels free to disclose emotions he has long kept hidden. The stillness of the space, with its understated simplicity, amplifies the weight of his words and actions.

This moment serves as the final, masterfully executed revelation of the father's long-concealed feelings and concerns, maintaining a quiet and intimate atmosphere without unnecessary sensory details. We cannot help but note how Yamada once again skilfully employs the wide shot and lighting, *framing* Shūkichi and Noriko within the natural borders of the *shōji* 障子 (sliding doors in a Japanese house). The contrast between the soft, soothing daylight that envelops them and the surrounding darkness of the frame is striking, enhancing the emotional depth of the scene. This final scene flows with the quiet, indirect reconciliation between father and son. Rather, it signifies Shukichi's silent acceptance of his son's life choices, gently drifting with the tide of time.

Thoughts on Shūkichi and the Shifting Notions of Fatherhood in Modern Japan

If we consider the socio-political climate in Japan at the time *Tokyo Family* was made, several key issues stand out. In 2013, when the film was released, Japan was facing a rapidly aging population and a declining birth rate. The country was also grappling with prolonged deflation and a public debt exceeding 200% of GDP. Additionally, there was a noticeable shift in gender roles and family dynamics. In 2010, the Japanese government introduced the so-called *Ikumen Project*²³ to encourage fathers to take a more active role in child-rearing, aiming to redefine traditional gender expectations. These factors contributed to a complex social environment, where enduring traditions coexisted with emerging societal shifts.

²³ ikumen-project.mhlw.go.jp 2010.

Regarding family structure and the role of the father, Japan has experienced dynamic changes throughout history. Vera Mackie describes three decades of social dynamics that have influenced family composition. In the 1980s, the typical model was the 'full-time salaried husband' and a wife who primarily managed domestic work, sometimes holding a part-time job. In the 1990s, following the recession in the Japanese economy, the so-called 'lost generation' emerged, bringing shifts in attitudes toward work, marriage and family. Finally, in the 21st century, transnational family structures and their variations have become more prevalent.²⁴

In contemporary Japan, a dramatic surge in public attention, accompanied by a substantial body of research, has been sparked around the evolving identities of fathers. New terms and concepts have emerged in response. For instance, the expression *ikumen*, a blend of *ikuji* 育児 ('childcare') and *men*, refers to fathers who actively engage in child-rearing,²⁵ or *sōshoku-kei danshi* 草食系男子 (herbivore men/boys or herbivore masculinities) – a term coined by Maki Fukasawa in 2006 to define a new type of men with more gentle nature.²⁶ This neologism has also been adopted by other scholars to characterise emerging forms of masculinity.²⁷ As Japanese society changes, the role and identity of Japanese fathers are shifting dramatically from being work-oriented to more family-oriented, driven by a growing desire to spend more time with their families.²⁸ As Saladin²⁹ concludes, '...the position of men within Japan's society, which used to be strongly linked to the breadwinner role of the family, began to waver'. Research³⁰ indicates that Japanese fathers are now more engaged in their children's education, participating in school events, picking up and dropping off their children and assisting with homework. Although there is clear evidence that Japanese men are becoming more willing to help with household chores, workplace culture and social expectations continue to pose significant challenges.

As noted earlier, present-day Japanese society has also seen the emergence of sharply defined categories of masculinity, such as *sōshoku-kei danshi* (herbivore men or herbivore masculinities). This term refers to young Japanese men who reject traditional masculinity, which is typically defined by ambition, dominance and financial success. Instead, they embrace a softer, more passive

²⁴ Mackie 2015: 150–153.

²⁵ Mizukoshi et al. 2015: 2.

²⁶ Fukasawa 2007.

²⁷ Deacon 2013, Morioka 2013, Charlebois 2013.

²⁸ Farrer 2017.

²⁹ Saladin 2017.

³⁰ Ibid. 28, 29.

and emotionally expressive identity, challenging conventional gender roles in Japan.³¹

In light of the aforementioned socio-political changes and the emergence of new terms redefining masculinity in Japan, it is worth reflecting on Yamada Yōji's depiction of the father figure in *Tokyo Family* in relation to family dynamics. His portrayal of Shūkichi contrasts with contemporary expectations of paternal involvement, such as the *ikumen* ideal, highlighting the tension between traditional fatherhood and evolving societal norms. Yamada's films, particularly *It's Tough Being a Man* (*Otoko wa Tsurai yo* 男はつらいよ, 1969–1995), also known as the *Tora-san* series, along with works like *The Yellow Handkerchief* (*Koufuku no Kiiroi Hankachi* 幸福の黄色いハンカチ, 1977) and *The Twilight Samurai* (*Tasogare Seibei* たそがれ清兵衛, 2002), are unified by the traditional notion of a patriarchal family structure. However, Yamada's storytelling soon introduces emotional contradictions that reveal the complex inner worlds of the characters.

The father figures are typically portrayed as hardworking yet emotionally restrained men who struggle to express their affections openly. In *Tokyo Family*, Shūkichi's past before retirement remains largely unknown, yet his reserved and emotionally restrained demeanour suggests that he was likely the same guarded, emotion-concealing figure throughout his life. From the very beginning of the film, it is evident that the setting is modern Japan and that the central subject is a seemingly traditional Japanese family. The theme of family is both essential and beloved by Yamada,³² as he frequently emphasises in interviews.³³ However, the key phrase here is *seemingly traditional*. While Yamada portrays the everyday lives of ordinary people, the families depicted in his films are not entirely conventional, as becomes clear as the story unfolds.

For instance, in the *Tora-san* series, Yamada himself acknowledges that the family is 'collapsed' – Tora-san, the supposed successor of the family, has left home and is missing, while Sakura's parents passed away at an early age.³⁴ Inuhiko Yomota describes the main character as *ijin* 異人 ('stranger').³⁵ Furthermore, Tora-san and Sakura are half-siblings with different mothers and their parents are absent. In *The Twilight Samurai* Seibei Iguchi is a nurturing, emotionally vulnerable and devoted single father – traits that defy the typical samurai ideal of stoic masculinity. Unlike the traditional, duty-bound and emotionally restrained samurai father, Seibei prioritises his children's well-being

³¹ Deacon 2013: 133–136.

³² 'The Modern-Day Family...' 2014.

³³ Schilling 2008.

³⁴ Yamada 2014.

³⁵ Yomota 2007: 109.

and emotional needs over his own professional obligations and social expectations. In *A Distant Cry from Spring* (*Harukanaru Yama no Yobigoe* 遥かなる山の呼び声, 1980), the viewer encounters two families that, at first glance, seem ‘ordinary’ but are far from it. Tamiko, fragile yet strong, is both a farmer and the breadwinner of her family, while Kōsaku, a mysterious stranger on the run from the police, no longer has a family. Similarly, *The Yellow Handkerchief* (*Kōfuku no Kiroi Hankachi* 幸福の黄色いハンカチ, 1977) weaves together three deeply human stories, each revolving around unconventional and fractured families.

In *Tokyo Family*, we are introduced to an elderly couple, led by the subdued presence of Shūkichi, whose reserved manner initially appears emotionally distant and withdrawn. This portrayal aligns closely with the Confucian ideal of the traditional father – an authoritative figure who prioritises duty over emotional expression and maintains emotional restraint. Since *Tokyo Family* was released in the same year the Japanese government introduced the *Ikumen* policy, which encourages fathers to take an active role in childcare, one might anticipate a reflection of this shift in the film’s depiction of fatherhood. However, rather than adapting to these contemporary changes, Yamada’s portrayal of Shūkichi remains firmly entrenched in traditional patriarchal norms. In fact, Shūkichi’s emotional restraint is even more pronounced than the father figure in Ozu’s *Tokyo Story*.

This stark contrast between Yamada’s depiction of fatherhood and the evolving paternal role in modern Japan highlights a palpable sense of disconnection for viewers. Instead of bridging the gap between traditional expectations of fatherhood and the contemporary ideals of emotional engagement and involvement in family life, *Tokyo Family* accentuates this divide. Yamada’s decision to present Shūkichi as more stern and emotionally distant than his predecessor in Ozu’s work suggests a deliberate choice to emphasise the generational and societal tensions between traditional paternal authority and the emerging ideals of fatherhood in postmodern Japan. This serves to reinforce the complexities surrounding male identity in contemporary Japanese society, where shifts in gender roles and family dynamics often clash with deeply ingrained cultural values. In this way, Yamada’s portrayal of Shūkichi both acknowledges and resists the changing landscape of fatherhood, capturing the struggle of a generation that finds itself at odds with the evolving expectations of masculinity in Japan.

Ultimately, Shūkichi and Tomiko embody the conventional Japanese family, with Yamada’s Shūkichi reflecting the traditional father figure. This adherence is essential to maintaining fidelity to Ozu’s original narrative. However, if *Tokyo Family* presents an overtly traditional father, making the gap between him and contemporary society feel even wider, two questions arise: Where do we find the

distinctive qualities that make the character uniquely Yamada-like? And isn't there at least a subtle trace of the shifting notions of masculinity within the film?

There must be something more – delicate complexities and nuanced shifts that distinguish Yamada's portrayal of the father figure from a mere replication of tradition. And indeed, as the story progresses, hidden qualities of Shūkichi emerge, revealing not only a deeply vulnerable side to him but also his ability to smile and his subtle sense of humour. At times, Shūkichi's character becomes more introspective, displaying a softer and less authoritative demeanour.

Yamada Yōji is known for seamlessly embedding humour, including elements of black humour, into his films. His mastery lies in delicately weaving comedy into even the most sombre narratives or melancholic characters, creating a poignant balance between laughter and sorrow. Mark Schilling admires Yamada's ability to evoke both joy and tears, drawing parallels between his storytelling and the golden age of Japanese cinema, alongside legendary directors such as Kurosawa, Ozu, Mizoguchi and Naruse. Schilling also recalls Yamada's own comparison of his filmmaking to that of 'a soba-noodle chef, continuously serving bowl after bowl' of what he hoped would be satisfying cinematic experiences.³⁶ French journalist Claude Leblanc shares a similar appreciation, recounting his first encounter with Yamada's work. Despite not understanding much of the dialogue in Japanese,³⁷ he was deeply moved by the humour and genuine emotions on screen. He highlights that Yamada's comedy is rooted in everyday life and authentic human interactions, making it both relatable and touching. Furthermore, Leblanc observes that Yamada's humour transcends cultural barriers, resonating with international audiences through its universal themes and character-driven storytelling.³⁸

Similarly, Shūkichi in *Tokyo Story* unexpectedly jokes with himself, making the character more sympathetic and engaging for viewers. His subtle humour, paired with his restrained emotions, adds depth to his character and sparks curiosity about his inner world. With great dexterity, he makes jest of life and death, his old age and his eventual departure to 'heaven', offering a nuanced perspective on the passage of time.

This traditional image is subtly refined through the character's development and the evolving notions of masculinity in modern Japanese society, which the film conveys in an indirect and veiled manner. This nuance is not immediately apparent to the viewer, much like in some of Yamada's more recent scrip works, such as *Wagaya wa Tanoshi* わが家は楽し (2025).³⁹ For instance, Shūkichi's

³⁶ Schilling 2008.

³⁷ Leblanc could not speak Japanese at the time.

³⁸ Leblanc 2023.

³⁹ TBS (<https://www.tbs.co.jp/wagayawatanoshi/>). As the film is newly released, a standardized English translation of the title has not yet been established.

demeanor contrasts with that of the other male characters, subtly highlighting this shift. As Wang observes, ‘the films directed by Yamada Yōji are not only influenced by his own values and professionalism but also by the social environment’.⁴⁰ Thus, the film not only reflects Japan’s technological advancements but also explores the transformation of male identities through characters like Kōichi, Kurazō and Shōji. This contrast is likely Yamada’s way of presenting a more contemporary vision of men’s roles within the family, reflecting the evolving social dynamics of modern Japan. It also serves to make the tension between tradition (the image of Shūkichi) and modernity (the other male characters) more tangible.

Kōichi, the elder son, embodies the traditional role of a father and husband, fully dedicated to his work as a doctor, leaving little time for his wife and children. The only modern aspect of his character is his decision to leave his home and establish a practice in Tokyo. In contrast, Shigeko’s husband, Kurazō, aligns more closely with the shifting male identities in modern Japan. His character is portrayed comically, emphasising his awkwardness and dependence on his wife. The viewer clearly perceives his supportive, rather than leading, role in the family business, which is dominated by his strong-willed wife. Finally, the youngest son, Shōji, represents the most contemporary male image in the ongoing evolution of male identity (see Figure 1). His character embodies self-expression and flexibility, prioritising personal life over work – a choice that draws criticism from his father.

Two additional special positionings are crucial to understanding Shūkichi’s character. These involve the triangular relationships between Shūkichi, Shōji and Tomiko, as well as Shūkichi, Shōji and Noriko (see Figure 2). The communication between father and son is strained due to their differing perspectives on family and life. Positioned at opposite ends of the timeline, this distance shapes their contrasting views. By the end of the film, viewers witness Shūkichi’s silent acceptance of his son’s perspective. The key to this shift seems to lie in the mediating role and nature of the female characters – Tomiko and Noriko. Acting as *catalysts* or the most important *piece of the puzzle*, they help unlock the stern father’s change of mind, bringing him close to accepting his son’s philosophy of living.

Conclusion

Film critics and researchers often suggest that regarding *Tokyo Family* Yamada’s primary distinction from his master Ozu and Ozus’s *Tokyo Story* lies in the contemporary Japanese setting and the character of Noriko, the youngest son’s

⁴⁰ Wang 2022: 225.

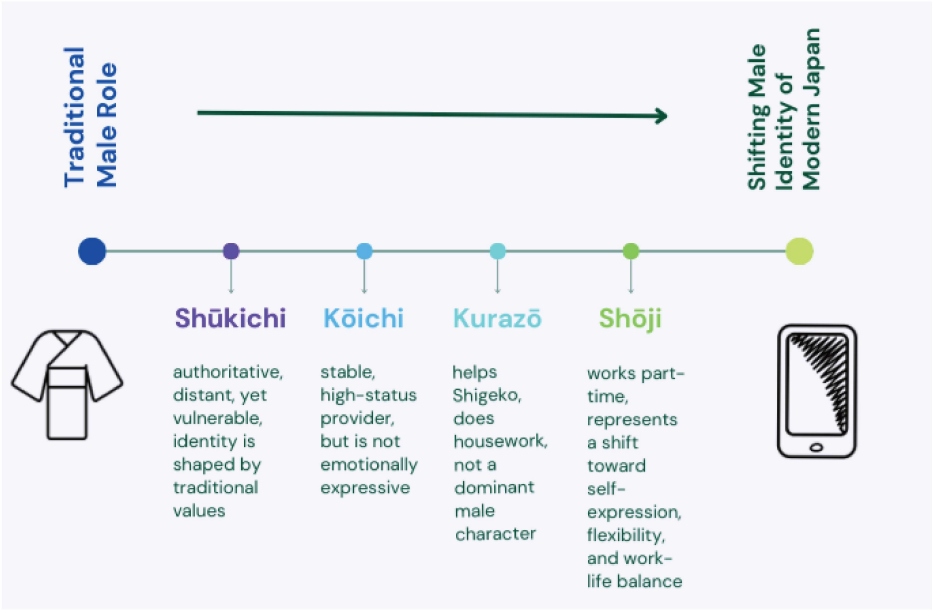


Figure 1. *Tokyo Family*: Male Identity Shift

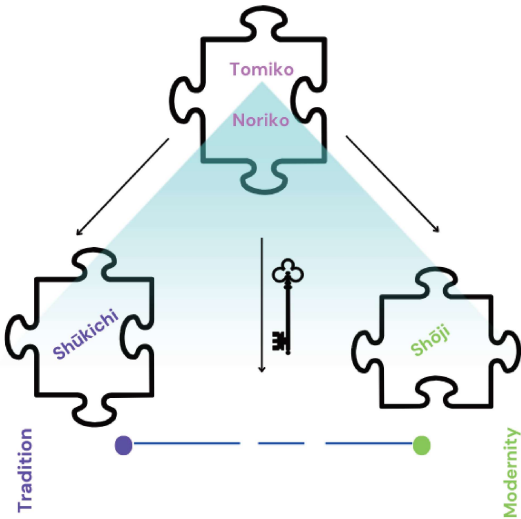


Figure 2. Father-Son Relationship

girlfriend. He also referenced the devastating aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and incorporated short episodes inspired by traditional Japanese theatre. However, we argue that there are more significant differences, particularly in the way Shūkichi's character unfolds in contrast to Kōichi, Kurazō and Shōji. When situating the shifting representations of masculinity in Japan along a chronological timeline, a clear distinction emerges between the male characters in the film, each embodying a different stage in the evolving constructions of male identity in modern Japan (see Figure 1). This progression moves from the traditional male image embodied by Shūkichi to the modern portrayal seen in Shōji. While this may not fully capture the entire range of contemporary male identity shifts in society, it remains unmistakably Yamada-like – a storytelling style that strikes a deep chord with the audience.

Ultimately, the father figure in *Tokyo Family* is portrayed as an aging man reflecting on his relationship with his children and his role within a changing family dynamic. Initially, viewers see him as a traditional patriarch, but as the story unfolds, Shūkichi grapples with modern concepts of masculinity. He eventually comes to recognise and accept the contemporary male image embodied by Shōji, finding a form of reconciliation with him indirectly through Noriko and Tomiko.

Through a masterful blend of humour and poignancy, Yamada takes viewers on a journey through life's complexities. His approach captivates audiences, eliciting both laughter and tears as he seamlessly navigates moments of lightness and sorrow. This rare ability to forge deep connections with his characters while evoking a rich spectrum of emotions is what truly distinguishes his works.

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Sources of illustrations

Figure 1. *Tokyo Family*: Male Identity Shift. Illustration by the author.

Figure 2. Father–Son Relationship. Illustration by the author.

ZSÓFIA KELLER

(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

Ainu Representation in the World of Japanese Comics: Witnessing Indigenous Rights Violations in Japanese Graphic Life Narratives

Abstract

Chiri Yukie and the Ainu (*Chiri Yukie to Ainu* 知里幸恵とアイヌ, 2018) and *Song of the Kamuy* (*Kamuy no Uta* カムイのうた, 2023) are both Japanese comics that fictionalize the life of Chiri Yukie (1903–1922), an Ainu poet whose first and only published work titled *Collection of Ainu Chants of Spiritual Beings* (*Ainu Shinyōshū* アイヌ神謡集, 1923) was one of the earliest efforts for the transmission of a living Ainu identity. This paper analyses the content of the above-mentioned manga by employing Olga Micheal’s methodology. In her book titled *Human Rights in Graphic Life Narratives* (2023), Michael theorizes that graphic life narratives—including Western comic books—have the potential to highlight or obscure the connection between the colonial history of the Global South and the current human rights violations committed against its inhabitants. Reformulating her theory to fit the Japanese context, this paper seeks to find out how the above-mentioned manga portray the interrelatedness of Hokkaidō’s status as a settler colony and the violation of the Ainu people’s indigenous rights during Yukie’s lifetime, when special primary schools were set up to mould Ainu children into dutiful Japanese citizens, and Ainu cemeteries were routinely robbed to satisfy the scientific curiosity of Wajin anthropologists. To different degrees, the above-mentioned manga both gloss over the role colonialism played in these injustices, just as they leave out that Yukie could be seen as a victim of the colonial power imbalance between her and Kindaichi Kyōsuke (1882–1971), the Wajin professor she worked with. Even though the ambiguity inherent in both stories’ portrayal of real-life events and sentiments is antithetical to the spirit of *historical truthfulness*, as advocated for by Tessa-Morris Suzuki (2005), they can be seen as something more than casual entertainment. In addition to transforming their readers into *secondary witnesses*, *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* and *Song of the Kamuy* are both *places of memory*, as originally defined by Pierre Nora (2009). While the former is elevated to this status by virtue of being an educational *gakushū manga*, the latter is transformed by the activist stance taken by its creators against Ainu discrimination.

Keywords: Ainu orature, Chiri Yukie, historical truthfulness, indigenous rights, Kindaichi Kyōsuke, manga, places of memory, settler colony, secondary witness, systemic discrimination

Introduction

After long decades of assimilationist policies, the culture of the Ainu people, who are widely regarded as the indigenous minority of Northern Japan, now enjoys the official support of the Japanese government. The first legal expression of this governmental endorsement was the Ainu Cultural Promotion Act (CPA) of 1997. To oversee the implementation of the CPA, the Foundation for Research and Promotion of Ainu Culture—later renamed the Foundation for Ainu Culture (Foundation)—was created. In 2008, the lower and upper houses of the Japanese Diet jointly declared the Ainu to be an indigenous group, which resulted in the CPA giving way to the Ainu Policy Promotion Act (PPA) 11 years later. The PPA redefines Ainu culture as a matter of the national agenda by mandating all prefectures to develop their own strategies ensuring its promotion on the local level, and by requiring the government to create the Ainu Policy Promotion Headquarters to oversee the implementation of a national Ainu policy.

Although the CPA signified a seemingly progressive turn in Japan's treatment of the Ainu, it drew the criticism of scholars, as summarized by Eléonore Komai. First, Ainu lands were conceived of as an inherent part of Japan's territory during the CPA's inception, leaving their colonial legacy unaddressed. Second, the law's sole focus was on the promotion and dissemination of Ainu culture, granting no political or economic rights to the Ainu. Third, the CPA narrowly defined Ainu culture as an archaic and unchanging composite of traditional dance, music, handicraft and the Ainu language, without any political dimension. Finally, the Foundation's activities were designed by Wajin 和人¹ bureaucrats without any

¹ The relevant literature supplies interested researchers with several ethnonyms denoting the dominant ethnic group of Japan, which are compiled by David L. Howell. Yamato 大和 was once a popular choice that fell out of favour because of its close association with prewar Japanese nationalism. Samo サモ is a possible alternative originating in the Ainu language: it is derived from the word *sisam* シサム (meaning 'neighbour') and it has been commonly used by the Ainu themselves to refer to their southern neighbours since 1467, at least. This term has a slightly derogatory undertone, making it comparable in Howell's opinion to the Hawai'ian *haole*—a dismissive exonym for white people. Wajin is usually the default term of choice for scholars today. It was widely used in the Hokkaidō of the late 19th and mid-20th centuries, with the first documented instance of it dating back to 1799 (Howell 2014: 109). While the negative connotations of Yamato and Samo make the author of this article cautious about adopting them into the paper's terminology, it is important to acknowledge that defaulting to Wajin is also a problematic choice, as pointed out by Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt in a private conversation during the 2025 NAJS Conference, which took place in Reykjavik on 22 and 23 May. According to Iwata-Weickgenannt, the word Wajin may potentially function as a barrier between contemporary members of the Japanese majority and the darker aspects of Ainu-Wajin shared history, allowing them to disassociate themselves from the past. Since they presumably identify as Nihonjin 日本人, the past atrocities committed against the Ainu by Wajin may seem unrelated to them, the Nihonjin of today. This line of inquiry deserves further exploration.

Ainu involvement. Based on these characteristics, Komai interprets the CPA as an attempt to reframe the previously prominent *dying race* (*horobiyuku minzoku* 滅びゆく民族) discourse.² According to this updated narrative, it is no longer the Ainu people who need the government's help, but their *dying culture*.³

The PPA now treats Ainu culture as an object of national concern. However, indigenous land rights and other related political rights are still not being implemented. Their absence prompts Komai to question if such a law could effectively facilitate the reinvigoration of Ainu culture. Nevertheless, this may not be a shortcoming, but simply a reflection of the lawmakers' true intentions, which are supposedly more focused on the utilization of Ainu culture as a tourist attraction to stimulate the economy of rural Hokkaidō and the cosmetic enhancement of Japan's international standing regarding indigenous matters. The former objective has prominently taken shape in the National Ainu Museum and Park, nicknamed Upopoy ウポポイ (lit. 'many people singing together') in the Ainu language.⁴

The criticism of the current Ainu policy is approached from a different angle by ann-elise lewallen.⁵ She observes that the Foundation—and through it the Japanese government—has been vested with the power to define and shape Ainu culture since the enactment of the CPA and the PPA. The Foundation's authority is legitimated by the economic power it wields, as it only funds those Ainu organizations that conform to its notions of Ainu tradition.⁶ However, long before the Wajin authorities decided to meddle in the cultural affairs of the Ainu, the preservation of these practices was solely the domain of Ainu women. Their role as keepers of the home (*cisekor katkemat* チセコロ カツケマツ)⁷ partially shielded them from the pressures of the new Hokkaidō government's assimilationist agenda during the Meiji period (1868–1912). While Ainu men, who mainly worked outside the home, were forced to abandon their ethnic identity, Ainu women were enabled by the relative privacy of the domestic sphere to

² After the ideas of social Darwinism were adopted by Japanese intellectuals and the wider public alike in the Meiji period (1868–1912), the Ainu gradually came to be seen as members of an inferior race, which was destined to die out because of its inherent inability to survive in the modernizing world. For a brief overview on the evolution of this negative stereotype, see Siddle 2011: 105–131.

³ Komai 2022: 153–154.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 158–159.

⁵ To honour her preferences, ann-elise lewallen's name is written without using capital letters in the main text, the footnotes and the reference list of this article.

⁶ lewallen 2016: 82.

⁷ Ainu words are romanized in the style of the *Akor Itak* アコロ イタク Ainu language textbook. For further information about this romanization system, see Hokkaidō Utari Kyōkai (2002: 4–6).

become keepers of all Ainu cultural knowledge,⁸ taking over functions that were originally reserved for men in the process.⁹

Based on a description by Sarah M. Strong, Monasnouk モナシノウク (1848–1931), a Hokkaidō Ainu woman and a well-known reciter of Ainu oral literature (orature),¹⁰ can be highlighted as a shining example of the female Ainu culture bearer, since she was a keeper of both feminine and masculine traditions. On the one hand, she was a typical female storyteller in the sense that she was regarded as a shamaness¹¹ by her community. On the other hand, her vast repertoire also included pieces of epic poetry called *yukar* ユカラ, which were originally only narrated by men.¹²

Strong further posits that Monasnouk was the source of the traditional Ainu tales contained in the *Ainu Shinyōshū* アイヌ神謡集 (*Collection of Ainu Chants of Spiritual Beings*, 1923), which is a small collection of 13 *kamuy yukar* カムイ ユカラ. These are chants of spirits that are theorized to have originated from the utterances of female shamans under possession. Monasnouk is credited as a likely source because the book was authored¹³ by her granddaughter and protegee, Chiri Yukie (1903–1922).¹⁴

⁸ Before the end of the 18th century, traditional Ainu society was structured along the lines of male and female gender roles. Men prepared and executed religious ceremonies, hunted game in the forests, fished in the rivers, and carved wood into tools. Women gathered food and gardened during the warmer months, produced clothes and various utensils, and generally took care of their families (Keira–Keira 1999: 234–235).

⁹ Iewallen 2016: 16–18.

¹⁰ The texts of oral literature are traditionally transmitted through oral performance and its aural reception. This is where orature most prominently differs from written literature. For a brief overview regarding the various other differences between oral and written forms of literature, see Wallner (2017: 72–84).

¹¹ Among the Hokkaidō Ainu, engaging in shamanic practices was a vocation primarily followed by women. These female shamans were called *tusukur* トウスクル, and they served as passive mediums in the sense that they traditionally required the help of a male elder to open themselves up to spirit possession (Wada 1996: 305–306).

¹² Strong 2011: 2, 22.

¹³ Strong writes that Yukie's role in the creation of the *Ainu Shinyōshū* was to 'transcribe, translate and arrange' the *kamuy yukar* chants for publication (*ibid.*, 3), insinuating that only the Japanese translation is the result of Yukie's own creative work. However, Kitamichi Kunihiro 北道邦彦 and Tsuboi Hideto 坪井秀人 effectively argue against this position by asserting that Yukie is also the author—not simply the translator—of the Ainu-language texts, as each instance of retelling a piece of oral literature is a spontaneous act of creating the storyteller's own version of it (Tsuboi 2007: 85). A possible reason for the continued denial of Yukie's authorship since her work was first published is theorized by Tsuboi. By writing down the Ainu-language texts utilizing the Latin alphabet and translating them to Japanese, these chants were appropriated in the context of Japanese colonialism as a simple tool to aid Kindaichi's investigation into the phonetics of the Ainu language (*ibid.*, 102, 115). That is to say, only Yukie's Japanese translation was allowed to have any literary merit, while her Ainu texts had to serve the practical purposes of a Wajin researcher.

¹⁴ Strong 2011: 3, 7.

Yukie was born and raised in the small township of Horobetsu 幌別—known today as the city of Noboribetsu 登別—until the age of six, when she was relocated to Asahikawa 旭川 and entrusted to the care of her maternal aunt, Kannari Matsu 金成マツ (1875–1961). Matsu was an accomplished epic poet in her own right, and she took care of her niece with the help of her mother, Monasnouk. Growing up in such a home environment gave Yukie a deep attachment to Ainu culture and an unusual fluency in both the Japanese and the Ainu language. After a fateful meeting in her mid-teens with the famed Wajin linguist Kindaichi Kyōsuke 金田一京助 (1882–1971), Yukie was inspired to record her oral heritage. She subsequently followed Kindaichi to Tōkyō, where she became a member of his household to support his research and get the *Ainu Shinyōshū* ready for publication. She successfully completed the last round of revisions on her manuscript but suffered a fatal heart attack on the very same day. She was just 19 years old at the time of her death.¹⁵

Her life may have been short, but her spirit clearly lives on in her work. In the foreword of the *Ainu Shinyōshū*, Yukie writes about her hope for a future where the Ainu are strong enough to survive in an increasingly volatile world.¹⁶ As noted by Emori Susumu 得森進, this makes her book markedly different from other similar ones compiled by Wajin researchers, whose only interest lied in the documentation of Ainu culture before it would purportedly follow the Ainu people to their waiting grave. Furthermore, Emori interprets Yukie's intention in writing her book as an early effort to transmit a living Ainu identity through the vehicle of the Ainu words and traditional stories contained within it. He refers to this identity as the 'hearth of the [Ainu] people' (*minzoku no kokoro* アイヌ民族の心).¹⁷ Yukie's personal approach is essentially antithetical to the Foundation's current agenda, where Ainu traditions are seen as valuable artifacts that belong in the display cases of Upopoy. By taking a small, early step towards the living preservation of Ainu culture, she silently defied the dying race narrative of the past and the dying culture rhetoric of the present.

Chiri Yukie and the Ainu (*Chiri Yukie to Ainu* 知里幸恵とアイヌ, 2018) and *Song of the Kamuy* (*Kamuy no Uta* カムイのうた, 2023) are both Japanese comics that fictionalize the life of Yukie and the creation process of the *Ainu Shinyōshū*. Serving as a continuation of a previous article titled *Ainu Representation in the World of Japanese Comics: Shumari and Golden Kamuy Take on the Ruling Narratives of Hokkaidō History* (2025), this paper builds on the ideas of its predecessor by arguing that the above-mentioned biographical manga not only become *places of memory* (*lieux de mémoire*) but also function as places where

¹⁵ Nakagawa (ed.) 2023: 203–206.

¹⁶ Chiri 2023: 4.

¹⁷ Emori 2015: 464–465.

readers can bear witness to and therefore empathize with the suffering of others. By focusing specifically on the violations committed against the Ainu people's indigenous rights during Yukie's lifetime, such places additionally possess the potential to highlight the interrelatedness of these infringements and Japanese colonialism. Although the emotionally charged depictions of the assimilationist education forced on Ainu primary schoolers and the defilement of Ainu burial grounds by Wajin researchers are bound to arouse the sympathy of the readership for Yukie and her people, these Japanese comics still fall short of their potential to effectively contend with Northern Japan's colonial legacy. The various factors that contribute to this failure will be investigated in the following sections.

To unpack this line of argument, the paper first demonstrates how the concept of the *secondary witness* fits with and expands on the framework already established by the previous article. This is followed by the introduction of the concept of indigenous rights and a short description of the origins of the Ainu people's ongoing fight to secure them, highlighting the influence Yukie and the *Ainu Shinyōshū* had on the movement. The paper then turns to the main point of analysis: the issue of special Ainu schools and their representation in both manga is investigated, followed by the examination of the depiction of scientific grave robbery in *Song of the Kamuy*. Lastly, the portrayal of Kindaichi Kyōsuke—one of the main supporting characters—and the depiction of the nature of his relationship to Yukie on the pages of the manga in question are subjected to careful scrutiny.

Manga as a place of witnessing

This paper analyses the content of the above-mentioned biographical manga by employing Olga Michael's methodology.¹⁸ In her book titled *Human Rights in Graphic Life Narratives*, Michael theorizes that so-called *graphic life narratives*¹⁹—including works in the Western comic book format—have the potential

¹⁸ Olga Micheal is a researcher associated with the University of Cyprus. Her expertise is in the field of life narratives, autobiographical memory, narrative analysis and visual culture. Her other published work consists of several chapters in collected volumes and various journal articles. For instance, she most recently contributed a chapter titled 'Spatiotemporal Palimpsests, Remembered Times, and Hybrid Temporalities in Narrative Fiction on Europe's "Refugee Crisis"' to *Temporalities and Subjectivities in Migration Literature in Europe* (2024), while her latest journal article titled 'Decolonial chronotopes and palimpsestic heterotopias in Safdar Ahmed's *Still Alive*' was published in 2025, in the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (Micheal n.d.).

¹⁹ Life narrative is a generic term that encompasses all acts of self-representation, regardless of the type of media that the self is represented in (Smith–Watson 2015: 3–4). Michael broadens this category by including life stories that are narrated by someone other than the author or artist behind the work, referring to these bibliographical stories as a segment of contemporary

to highlight or to obscure the connection between the colonial history of the Global South and the current human rights violations committed against its inhabitants.²⁰ Michael argues for the potential of these hybrid texts to transform ordinary readers into *secondary witnesses*,²¹ who get confronted by the suffering of marginalized people in a specific manner. This manner of confrontation supposedly promotes an empathetic reaction without permitting the readers' focus to circle back to their own emotional reaction, keeping them engaged with other people's experiences. Additionally, the act of witnessing is purported to have the political power to heighten readers' awareness concerning the depicted issues and to challenge their previously held notions on history. In this context, the act of witnessing stands for reading something in an intelligent, informed and empathetic manner.²² Reformulating Michael's theory to fit the Japanese circumstances, this paper seeks to find out how the manga in question portray the interrelatedness of Hokkaidō's status as a settler colony and the violations of the Ainu people's indigenous rights during Yukie's lifetime, when special primary schools were set up to mould Ainu children into dutiful Japanese citizens, and Ainu cemeteries were routinely robbed to satisfy the scientific curiosity of Wajin anthropologist.²³

heterobiography (Michael 2023: 3). Thomas Couser and Philippe Lejeune define biography/heterobiography as a life story, 'in which the writer and narrator are one person while the subject is someone else' (Crouser 2004: 35). Additionally, Michael examines a diverse set of genres that all contain a graphic component of some kind (Michael 2023: 11–20). The manga about Yukie's life fit in well with these works in the sense that they are life narratives in the biographic vein. In other words, they are also narrated from a third person perspective, although there is no narrator character per se. The stylistic approach is where they most prominently differ from the comics investigated by Michael, since they follow the conventions of the Japanese comic book tradition.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1, 11.

²¹ A secondary witness can be defined as someone who did not bear witness firsthand to an event and relies on the testimony or mediation of others to gain an understanding of it (Jones 2019: 269–270). In the case of the manga being investigated here, the meaning of the word *secondary* is admittedly stretched to its limits, since the creators of the manga introducing Yukie's life to readers are presumably only tertiary witnesses themselves, one additional step removed from the original event. By contrast, the narrator characters Michael examines are all self-inserts of mediators who are secondary witnesses. However, Michael also interprets her own scholarly reading of these works as a mode of secondary witnessing, somewhat expanding on its definition (Michael 2023: 4).

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Michele M. Mason argues that Hokkaidō is Japan's 'only successful settler colony' (Mason 2012: 7) and 'the incubator of ideology and empire' (*ibid.*, 4), effectively defining the land of the Ainu as the unofficial birthplace of the modern Japanese state. She discusses Japanese imperialism and colonialism in detail, addressing most of the aspects that constitute these systems, as defined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. According to her, imperialism and colonialism are interconnected concepts, with the latter being an expression of the former. With

The concept of the secondary witness shares two important commonalities with Pierre Nora's places of memory, which are a core component of this paper's framework that was previously established in *Shumari and Golden Kamuy Take on the Ruling Narratives of Hokkaidō History*. Historical manga were defined there as potential places of memory.²⁴ This means that a biographical account of a person's life in manga form may be a place of memory and a *place of witnessing* at the same time. Based on the concept of the secondary witness, this paper defines places of witnessing as historical manga which invite the reader to bear witness to other people's suffering from a safe literary distance. Being a place of memory and a place of witnessing is not always mutually exclusive, as the latter requires the historical tale to be based on someone's biography.

The first of the commonalities between the two concepts is tied to human emotion: just as engaging with places of memory may elicit an emotional response,²⁵ reading about the trials and tribulations of marginalized people often

time, the meaning of imperialism became more and more layered. In the early 20th century, it was understood as 'a system of control which secured the markets and capital investments'. This economy of expansion was facilitated by colonialism (Smith 2012: 22). Accordingly, Hokkaidō quickly developed into a stronghold of Japanese capitalism during the Meiji period. The government swiftly extracted the island's resources, using their new-found wealth to finance Japan's transformation into a major power. In the 1880s, state-run industries on the island—sulphur, shipping and coal the most important among them—were privatized, giving birth to the *zaibatsu* 財閥 (financial cliques) system, which later came to facilitate the extraction of resources from all over the empire (Mason 2012: 114–115). The control that colonialism exerts over the local people to secure their resources necessarily leads to their subjugation, which may serve as another focal point in discussions of imperialism (Smith 2012: 22–23). In Hokkaidō's case, the economic exploitation of the Ainu began long before the island was incorporated into the empire in 1869, and it was compounded by the Wajin's complete disregard for their customary land-use rights during the Meiji period. Additionally, they became second class citizens as former natives (*kyūdojin* 旧土人), whose native culture was systematically being eradicated through assimilationist policies—the system of special Ainu schools among them—and the forced relocation of their communities. The apparent misery that resulted from these measures was attributed to the Ainu's inherent inferiority in Japanese popular and scholarly discourse (Mason 2012: 7–9). Imperialism also has an ideological dimension: in the context of the Enlightenment, imperialism is seen as a prerequisite for the existence of a modern state, of modern sciences or even of modern personhood (Smith 2012: 23). In a similar vein, Japan successfully redefined itself as an advanced civilization—with a continuous history, rich cultural heritage, and a unified citizenry—while appropriating the Ainu homeland (Mason 2012: 5). The other notable topic of analysis in this paper—namely the desecration of Ainu graveyards by physical anthropologists—is also connected to Japanese imperialism, since all early practitioners of anthropology, archaeology and linguistics earned their spurs by studying colonized populations, who were easily accessible to them (Siddle 1999: 77).

²⁴ Keller 2025: 151–154.

²⁵ Nora 2009: 19.

prompts emotional investment in their stories.²⁶ Tessa-Morris Suzuki suggests that once people form an emotional attachment to the past, they are likely to reevaluate their personal identity,²⁷ which implies an additional reassessment of their views on history. Emotion as a driving force behind rethinking the past relates to another similarity between how places of witnessing and places of memory operate: both are emotionally charged mediums that impact the historical understanding of those who engage with them. According to Nora, there are two primary ways places of memory may influence readers' perspectives on the past: they either explicitly challenge readers' historical knowledge, or they function as a tool for the dissemination of canonized historical information.²⁸

Each manga to be analysed in this paper embodies one of the above-mentioned approaches. *Song of the Kamuy*—the manga and a live action movie of the same title—was created as a part of an initiative called ALL Hokkaidō ALL 北海道, which is aimed at the transmission of Ainu culture and the cultivation of a symbiotic society. Consequently, the creators openly take an activist approach. In the epilogue, they claim that their manga was created to educate people about the worth of Ainu culture and to highlight the discrimination that Ainu people have faced and currently face.²⁹ Asserting that continuous discrimination against the Ainu exists runs contrary to the current common-sense knowledge about Ainu–Wajin relations, transforming *Song of the Kamuy* into a place of memory.

The existence of discrimination perpetrated against the Ainu has been continuously disputed in Japanese society. In the past, assimilationist policies besieging the traditional Ainu way of life—chief among them the Hokkaidō Former Natives Protection Act (Protection Act) of 1899—were not regarded as discrimination by the majority. Although the Protection Act's main objective was to assimilate the Ainu into Japanese society as farmers, it was heralded by lawmakers as a humanistic measure. They argued that it would prevent the Ainu from falling victim to the law of the survival of the fittest, since the ideology of social Darwinism branded them as an inferior race destined for extinction.³⁰ The continuing pressures of assimilation resulted in the disappearance of the Ainu as a group from the Japanese social and political consciousness in the post-war years, until symbols of Ainu identity became visible once more in the 1990s as a result

²⁶ Michael 2013: 4.

²⁷ Morris-Suzuki 2005: 22.

²⁸ Nora 2009: 29–30.

²⁹ Nakahara–Sugawara 2018:150–151.

³⁰ Emori 2015: 440–441.

of the Ainu people's decades long involvement in the international indigenous movement and their campaign for recognition as an indigenous group at home.³¹

However, Kitahara Mokottunas 北原モコットウナシ draws attention to the fact that there are still people who deny the indigenous minority's very existence, because the modern Ainu do not fit their arbitrary definition of Ainuness. This in itself constitutes a form of discrimination.³² Additionally, a 2023 government survey shows that around one third of respondents (28.7%) were sceptical about the existence of discrimination currently perpetrated against the Ainu, mainly because they either have yet to see it or hear about it themselves (67.4%), or believe that the modern Ainu have no lifestyle-related differences (51.1%) or legal limitations (41.5%) that could become the basis for claims of discrimination.³³ According to Kitahara, such excessive inclusion is as discriminatory as the exclusionist accentuation of the Ainu people's differences. Nowadays, this latter form of discrimination takes shape in *microassaults* (i.e. directly showing contempt for or excluding someone), *microinsults* (i.e. making rude or stereotypical comments about someone), and *microinvalidations* (not considering the other person's experiences and feelings).³⁴

While *Song of the Kamuy* was thusly created to actively challenge readers' perception of history, the creators of *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* chose to take the other route prescribed by Nora. Their creation functions as a vessel for dispensing information, similarly to an illustrated textbook. This makes it an educational or *gakushū* 学習 manga, and it was indeed published as an addition to the well-known Gakushū Manga Jinbutsukan 学習まんが人物館 (Educational Manga Museum of Notable People) series. This subgenre is otherwise known as *kyōyō* 教養 manga. Itō Kinko 伊藤琴子 traces the emergence of the subgenre to the 1970s, when it first appeared in general magazines that were geared towards a readership of Japanese businessmen. Ishinomori Shōtarō 石ノ森章太郎 is credited with the creation of the first book-length *gakushū* manga entitled *Manga Nihon Keizai Nyūmon* マンガ日本経済入門 (*Japan Inc.: An Introduction to Japanese Economics*). It still serves as an accessible introduction to the workings of Japan's economy at the time. *Japan Inc.* became a bestseller after its publication in multiple languages during the second half of the 1980s. It paved the way for the birth of other kinds of *kyōyō* manga, some of which dramatize the life of important historical figures and past events of historical significance.³⁵

³¹ Siddle 1996: 156, 186.

³² Kitahara 2023: 102.

³³ Cabinet Secretariat 2023: 3, 11.

³⁴ Kitahara 2023: 72, 81–83.

³⁵ Ito 2008: 42–43.

By disseminating knowledge about the life of Yukie and her creation of the *Ainu Shinyōshū*, which is deemed suitable for a presumably young audience of readers, *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* becomes a place of memory.

As will become apparent during the following analysis, the different approaches taken by the creators heavily influenced the tone and plot of each manga. Reminiscent of a history textbook, the tone of *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* is kept fairly neutral, and its plot unfolds while following the events of Yukie's life quite truthfully, at least in the sense that there are no important elements of the story that are completely fictional. On the contrary, *Song of the Kamuy* moves Yukie and her story fully into the realm of fiction by embellishing it with devastatingly tragic story beats for dramatic effect. This change is signified by the renaming of important-people-turned-key-characters in Yukie's life. For instance, the main character based on Yukie is named Teru テル, and Kindaichi Kyōsuke is transformed into Professor Kaneda 兼田. The additional layers of tragedy were presumably woven into the plot to tug at the heartstrings of readers, thereby gaining their support for the causes championed by the All Hokkaidō initiative.

Another characteristic of the above-mentioned biographical manga that will emerge through analysis is a tension between the previously established potential for radically altering readers' opinion on history that is inherent in places of memory and places of witnessing, and the way this potential remains unfulfilled by the creators of both *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* and *Song of the Kamuy*. This tension may originate in the hybrid nature of these places. Nora originally draws a clear line when differentiating between places of memory that were created by the victors and the losers of a certain conflict.³⁶ In the case of Ainu-Wajin shared history, the colonizing Wajin are readily identifiable as the victorious party, while the colonized Ainu are positioned as the defeated one. The biographical manga in question are—similarly to *Shumari* and *Golden Kamuy*, as previously argued—hybrid monuments: they are 'reassessments of colonized Ainu history, authored by the descendants of the very people who colonized them'.³⁷ If one exercises their empathy to put themselves on the opposing side of a historical divide, the results are bound to be filled by the tension born from the different factors that shaped and continue to shape the experiences of the affected parties.

³⁶ Nora 2009: 32.

³⁷ Keller 2025: 174.

Indigenous rights and Ainu activism

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz highlights the existence of a long and mutually beneficial relationship between the world's indigenous populations and international law: while indigenous peoples³⁸ have been invoking international law since the 1920s to lend some legitimacy to their claims of self-determination, cultural and land rights, their engagement with it also contributes to its enrichment. Tauli-Corpuz presents the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as an example of indigenous peoples' contributions to the law of nations. She credits the UNDRIP with greatly furthering the international human rights discourse, describing its metaphorical godparent—the United Nations (UN) system—as 'the most important space' for indigenous participation in international legal mechanisms.³⁹

The UNDRIP is a document that lists the various rights of indigenous peoples. For the purposes of this paper, Article 12 and Article 14 of the UNDRIP are of particular importance, as these are the ones that concern the violations of the Ainu people's indigenous rights during Yukie's lifetime. The existence of special primary schools retroactively violates Article 14 which states that indigenous people should create and oversee their own 'educational systems and institutions', where they receive an 'education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning'. This article also stipulates that Indigenous children deserve the same educational opportunities as their non-indigenous peers.⁴⁰ The issue of assimilationist education is touched upon in both *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* and *Song of the Kamuy*, with the latter manga having an additional focus on the irreverent collection of Ainu remains. The scientific desecration of Ainu graveyards is a retroactive violation of Article 12 which states that indigenous people are entitled to 'maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites', and to 'the use and control of their ceremonial objects'. This article also prescribes

³⁸ Smith describes the origins and usage of the term *indigenous peoples* as follows. It originated in the struggles of the American Indian Movement and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood during the 1970s. Its usage may be seen as problematic when it is interpreted as a careless generalization of diverse groups, but its collective nature also possesses positive connotations. First, the term enables the collective mobilization of indigenous groups in the international arena. Second, it fosters feelings of camaraderie among them that fuels their collective struggle for self-determination. Additionally, the final *s* in peoples is meant to signify the diverse plurality that can be found among indigenous groups. Indigenous activists argued quite vehemently for its inclusion, which lends some symbolic weight to its usage. By using *peoples* instead of *people*, one acknowledges indigenous peoples' right to self-determination (Smith 2012: 6–7).

³⁹ Tauli-Corpuz 2008: 83–84, 88.

⁴⁰ United Nations General Assembly 2007: 7.

the repatriation of human remains.⁴¹ To explore the current discourse around repatriation with the nuance it requires would alone constitute a whole separate paper. Therefore, it should suffice to say here that this issue is far from settled. There are still Ainu remains in the custody of Upopoy, which the museum's website claims could not have been directly returned to the Ainu people.⁴²

Given the biographical nature of the Japanese comics in question, it is unsurprising that the above-mentioned injustices are primarily dramatized from the standpoint of Yukie/Teru and her Ainu family and friends. In other words, from the standpoint of the very people who were adversely affected by these developments in real life. Morris-Suzuki observes that the angle from which the past is shown in historical manga is of great significance, as the manga artist has the ability to foster allegiances between the reader and certain characters by depicting the story from the latter's point of view. Furthermore, a certain quality that historical comics allegedly share with woodblock prints, propaganda materials, and political comics is theorized to add another layer to readers' identification with the past: once they have seen a comic-book style depiction of a past event, their mind's eye is likely to return to that specific illustration every time they recall that specific incident, effectively taken captive by the crisp linework and exaggerated features that characterize the comic-book aesthetic.⁴³

It was argued in *Shumari and Golden Kamuy Take on the Ruling Narratives of Hokkaidō History* that Tezuka Osamu 手塚治虫 and Noda Satoru 野田サトル used the aforementioned qualities of comics to position their readership on the same side as their Ainu characters, potentially making them see centuries of real-life conflict and coexistence between the Wajin and their Northern neighbours in a new light. This, in turn, may lead conscientious readers to re-evaluate the position they currently inhabit in Japanese society, in the spirit of what Morris-Suzuki calls *historical truthfulness*.⁴⁴ When one looks at the present through the lens of historical truthfulness, it quickly becomes apparent that the current world came to be as a direct result of all the different actions taken by previous generations, and that one may be an unaware beneficiary of the transgressions committed by their ancestors.⁴⁵ Today's Wajin are by no means responsible for the assimilationist schools and desecrated graveyards of the past, but they may very well be reaping the benefits of Japan's forceful incorporation of Hokkaidō's territory and resources into their country. A metaphorical visit to

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴² Minzoku Kyōsei Shōchō Kūkan n.d.

⁴³ Morris-Suzuki 2005: 182–184.

⁴⁴ Keller 2025: 174.

⁴⁵ Morris-Suzuki 2005: 25–27.

a place of memory and/or witnessing could serve as a potential first step towards this realization for many readers.

The above-described introspective potential that is inherent in places of memory and places of witnessing is complimented by the impact Yukie's life and work had on Ainu activism before and after World War II. To begin with, her book was a source of inspiration for one of the prominent activists in the pre-war era. Although Richard Siddle highlights Kannari Tarō 金成太郎 (1866–1897)⁴⁶ as the earliest known Ainu activist, he traces the actual origins of an Ainu movement to the Taishō period (1912–1926).⁴⁷ David L. Howell describes the ideological landscape in Japan around this time as highly contradictory, since the ideology of a homogenous Japanese nation-state under the rule of the emperor was developing in tandem with the country's acquisition of a multiethnic colonial empire, which fuelled a booming discourse about ethnic and cultural diversity among contemporary ideologues. They argued that the empire's multiethnic population paralleled the diverse roots of the Wajin, and reconceptualized colonial expansion as the reincorporation of people into the nation who were supposedly under Japanese rule in the ancient past. For all the discussion on multiethnicity, the practical goal of the state was always the assimilation of these colonial subjects, the Ainu among them, as the emperor system was not compatible with the presence of non-Japanese identities.⁴⁸ The pro-assimilationist strategies early Ainu activists pursued are a reflection of their time: they defined themselves as proud citizens of Imperial Japan, who also took pride in their ethnic heritage.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Interestingly, he was Yukie's first cousin once removed, and the first Ainu person baptized by John Batchelor (1855–1944), an Anglican English missionary and the most well-respected Western expert on the Ainu at the time. Fujimoto Hideo 藤本英夫, one of Yukie's biographers, speculates that Tarō's mastery of the English and the Ainu language was probably a crucial support for Batchelor's linguistic work and the creation of his Ainu-language Bible and hymns, although Batchelor never gave Tarō any credit for his help (Fujimoto 2002: 48).

⁴⁷ Siddle 1999: 115, 123.

⁴⁸ A possible reason why the *mixed nation theory* of the multiethnic Japanese Empire was not compatible with the actual diversity of its growing population is suggested by Oguma Eiji 小熊英二. He asserts that the pre-war mixed nation theory and the *myth of ethnic homogeneity* generally accepted after World War II are two sides of the same coin, since both are deeply rooted in the idea that lineage with its imagined blood ties is the dominant factor when determining one's nationality. The fact that one-third of the empire's population consisted of non-Japanese subjects did not permit this preoccupation with blood relations to grow into a mainstream ideology focused on the pure and homogenous origins of the Japanese nation until the loss of most colonies. Until then, the importance of lineage was signified by the reconceptualization of newly incorporated nations as long-lost relatives of the Japanese people, who were always meant to rejoin the emperor's family as foster children (Oguma 2002: Chapter 18, para. 1–13).

⁴⁹ Howell 2004: 5–6.

One such early activists was a young poet named Iboshi Hokuto 遼星北斗 (1901–1929), who reportedly entered the world of advocacy after reading the *Ainu Shinyōshū*. Listing what he accomplished before his untimely death from tuberculosis, Siddle mentions the publication of the first and only issue of a magazine entitled *Kotan* コタン (lit. village in the Ainu language). This inaugural issue of *Kotan*, published two years before his death, contained many of Iboshi's poems and essays.⁵⁰ In Howell's interpretation, the dedication on the frontispiece of the magazine—'for good Japanese'—speaks volumes about Iboshi's views on his own Ainuness: in contrast to popular ideologues of his time, he believed in the possibility of an Ainu-Wajin dual identity.⁵¹ Describing his views on Ainu issues, Siddle refers to Iboshi as 'an angry young man', whose poems and essays served as a conduit for his intense scrutiny of the structures of Japanese imperialism and colonialism without criticizing the Japanese state itself. Additionally, Siddle credits him with clearly anticipating the notion of the Ainu as an indigenous people in his writings.⁵²

In the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of anti-assimilationist Ainu activist appeared, who borrowed their tactics from domestic movements, in particularly from those of the burakumin 部落民⁵³ and left-wing activists. They also formed strong connections to and gained additional inspiration from the international network of indigenous peoples. These new connections irreversibly altered the state of Ainu affairs in Japan.⁵⁴ The changing climate eventually led to the reinterpretation of the *Ainu Shinyōshū*'s chants in the 1990s, as noted by Siddle. For instance, a character from the most well-known chant of the collection is reinterpreted as a stand-in for the Ainu people in their entirety. The aforementioned chant is titled 'The Chant the Owl Spirit Himself Sang' (in Ainu: Kamuycikap Kamuy Yayeyukar カムイチカプ カムイ ヤイエユカラ, in Japanese: Fukurō no Kami no Mizukara Utatta Utai 梟の神の自ら歌った謡). It tells the story of a boy of noble character, whose originally wealthy family has come upon hard times. After his fine qualities are recognized by the Owl Spirit, it rewards him with the restoration of the wealth and social standing of his family. In this new

⁵⁰ Siddle 1999: 128–129.

⁵¹ Howell 2004: 21.

⁵² Siddle 1999: 128–131.

⁵³ The burakumin are a Japanese minority group that is theorized to descend from the outcast communities of the Edo period (1600–1867). Although their social limitations were officially lifted in 1871, they have suffered the consequences of continued stigmatization. Their circumstances improved markedly during the 20th century, partly due to the rising tide of activism that swept through their ranks. Some observers credit these significant improvements with ending discrimination against the burakumin, while others reason that it did not disappear but instead transformed into a more sophisticated form (Neary 2008: 59–60).

⁵⁴ Siddle 1999: 176, 192.

interpretation, the boy's meagre circumstances are equated with the dispossession of the Ainu, while his salvation by the Owl Spirit is seen as analogous to real-life spiritual resistance.⁵⁵

Up to this point, it was established that Yukie's life and work have an inspiring air of quiet resistance about them for a variety of reasons. First, she wrote the *Ainu Shinyōshū* to defy the dying race narrative of her present, and in doing so, she pre-emptively rejected the dying culture rhetoric allegedly employed by the National Ainu Museum and Park. Second, her book was a leading inspiration for Iboshi Hokuto, one of the more prominent activists of the early pre-war Ainu movement. Third, her chants came to be reinterpreted as an allegory for the dispossession and spiritual resistance of the Ainu. These factors make her biography an ideal topic to be dramatized as a literary place of memory and witnessing, opening the possibility for *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* and *Song of the Kamuy* to become historical comics that radically subvert readers' common-sense knowledge about Ainu-Wajin relations. However, as it will be discussed below, the manga in question both gloss over the role Japanese imperialism and colonialism played in the depicted injustices, just as they leave out that Yukie could be considered a victim of the colonial power imbalance between herself and Kindaichi Kyōsuke.

The issue of the special Ainu schools

Ogawa Masahito 小川正仁 refers to the separate educational system that was established by the previously mentioned Protection Act of 1899 and the Regulation about the Education of Former Native Children (Regulation) of 1901 as the early modern Ainu school system (*kindai ainu kyōiku seido* 近代アイヌ教育制度). In accordance with these regulations, so-called primary schools for former natives (*kyūdojin shōgakkō* 旧土人小学校)—or with Ogawa's terminology, special Ainu schools (*tokusetsu ainu gakkō* 特設アイヌ学校)—were established around Hokkaidō. The early modern Ainu school system remained in operation until the Regulation and the relevant article of the Protection Act were repelled in 1922 and 1937, respectively.⁵⁶

Emori regards the early modern Ainu school system as one of the two load-bearing pillars of the Protection Act, with the other being the provision of small patches of land to interested Ainu families to encourage the adoption of agriculture as a main source of livelihood.⁵⁷ He criticizes special Ainu schools as

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁶ Ogawa 1999: 7, 10–11.

⁵⁷ Emori 2015: 441–442.

instruments of a discriminatory and assimilationist education system for two reasons. First, Ainu students were expected to abandon their mother tongue⁵⁸ and native traditions for the Japanese language and customs, while receiving a patriotic education that was aimed at transforming them into dutiful subjects of the Japanese emperor. Second, students' adult relatives were required to attend all ceremonies and various lectures at these schools, which were meant to instil so-called Japanese values in them. The subpar quality of education Ainu children received in these institutions invites further criticism from Emori. In accordance with the Regulation, only six subjects with a limited curriculum—ethics, Japanese language, mathematics, physical education, needlework for girls, and agriculture for boys—were taught to students, who did not receive any instruction in history, geography or cooking. Following a 1916 amendment, Ainu children were required to start school a year later and leave it two years earlier than their Wajin peers. They started first grade at the age of seven and completed compulsory education in just four years.⁵⁹

These differences in educational requirements are explained by the widespread ideal of separate education. According to Ogawa, the idea that Ainu children needed to be educated separately was universally accepted as true at this time and was a core ideological component of both the Protection Act and the Regulation. Although the true objective of the separate Ainu school system was the erasure of Ainu children's cultural and linguistic roots, it was frequently framed as an act of kindness. Proponents argued that it would be cruel to educate Ainu and Wajin children together, since the former were allegedly not intelligent enough to keep up with the latter, and would therefore suffer greatly if forced to compete with them in the same classroom.⁶⁰ It is quite astonishing then, that the same line of reasoning is used to justify the existence of special Ainu schools to the readership of *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu*: 'The Meiji government came to the conclusion that it would be difficult for the Japanese and Ainu children to learn together'.⁶¹ Conversely, *Song of the Kamuy* emphasizes the assimilationist nature of the school through the irate monologue of a teacher, rudely instructing his pupils on writing Japanese characters: 'You lot suck at this! If you can't

⁵⁸ It was acknowledged by teachers at the time that some Ainu proficiency was required to instruct Ainu children in the classroom. This was the only instance when the Ainu language was allowed to be used. Ogawa quotes a teacher from Nibutani 二風谷, who advocated for this restricted use of the pupils' mother tongue up until the beginning of the third grade, from which point forward it was to be strictly prohibited (Ogawa 1999: 146).

⁵⁹ Emori 2015: 444–447.

⁶⁰ Ogawa 1999: 139–140.

⁶¹ Hikono–Sanjo 2018: 31.

「明治政府はアイヌと日本人の子どもがともに学ぶことは困難だと判断しました。」

write well, you won't become Japanese! I'm trying to make Japanese people out of you natives! Be grateful!'⁶²

After spending a short time in an institution where Ainu and Wajin children were educated together, young Yukie continued her schooling in one of these special Ainu schools, namely the Kamikawa Fifth Elementary School in the heart of Chikabumi 近文, an Ainu settlement located in Asahikawa.⁶³ She witnessed here an unfortunate incident, during which a frustrated teacher resorted to excessive physical violence to discipline one of Yukie's schoolmates called Michi ミチ. Fujimoto Hideo 藤本英夫 describes this incident as follows: Michi returned late to class after taking her lunch break at home, because the clock there did not show the correct time. To make matters worse, she could not excuse herself properly in Japanese. Her transgression of the school's rules angered the teacher so much that he slapped the trembling child without asking any questions. Michi fell over from the force of the blow, so terrified that she lost control of her bladder in front of her classmates. She was then helped by Yukie, who escorted her to the corridor and cleaned her up. As a physical reminder of this incident, Michi lost her hearing in one ear because of a ruptured eardrum.⁶⁴

The previously introduced approaches taken by the creators of the examined manga influence the way this incident is adapted into comic-book format. The scene in *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* follows the outlines of the bibliographical account quite closely. The most prominent difference between the real-life incident and its depiction lies in the moment when Michi—the character—hurriedly bursts into the classroom while apologizing in perfect Japanese. From the description given by Fujimoto, it is not entirely clear if the teacher was provoked by Michi's tardiness or her inability to apologize in the mandated language. This interpretation clearly attributes his reaction to the former reason. While threateningly towering over the crying girl, the teacher character balls his hand into a fist and yells: 'You have some nerve being late! I'll beat the laziness out of you!'⁶⁵ This small change moves the emphasis from the problematic nature of special Ainu schools to the personal prejudices and unsuitable conduct of a single individual. This impression is strengthened by a remark of the omniscient narrator: 'In that moment, Yukie understood that the severe corporal punishment was not for the sake of instruction, but was born out of the teacher's disdain for

⁶² Nakahara–Sugawara 2023: 39.

「この下手くそが!上手に書けんと日本人になれんぞ!おまえら土人を日本人にしてやろうというんだ!ありがたく思え!!」

⁶³ Fujimoto 2002: 70, 92.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

⁶⁵ Hikono–Sanjo 2018: 31.

「遅刻とはいい度胸だ!たるんだ精神を叩き直してやる!!」

the Ainu'.⁶⁶ The seriousness of the actual incident is belied by the fact that this fictional version of Michi does not suffer any lasting physical consequences. The weight of the scene is further negated by the children's eventual return to the normalcy of their school life, which is portrayed as idyllic and joyful, after the aggressive teacher leaves.

The assumption that a teacher would have abused his power because of his personal dislike for the Ainu is not unrealistic. According to Ogawa, most teachers who were employed at special Ainu schools probably did not see themselves as educators fulfilling a meaningful vocation. Some of them carried out their responsibilities with complete apathy towards their charges, while others regarded their position as a form of retirement or even demotion. Teachers' negative attitudes could have been fuelled by several factors, including the inferior conditions at special Ainu schools and the contempt Wajin settlers had for their Ainu neighbours.⁶⁷ Ogawa speculates that a common reason why many of them disliked the Ainu is closely related to the Protection Act and the parcels of land that the Ainu were entitled to apply for through it. Disadvantaged Wajin settlers were jealous of the Ainu, because they saw them as the scary, undeserving recipients of the state's generosity, who were too ungrateful and drunk to do anything meaningful with the land they were provided with for free.⁶⁸

The creators of *Song of the Kamuy* do not let their readers' attention linger too long on the racist outburst of a single individual. Their different interpretation of the incident highlights the existence of systemic discrimination that could potentially elude readers' attention in the previously discussed version of the scene. The moment when Moto モト—the character who is partly based on Michi—runs through the classroom door starkly contrasts with *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu*'s depiction. Anxious Moto begins to splutter an apology in Ainu, but is swiftly cut off by an irritated teacher, who then strikes her with his cane while yelling: 'Speak Japanese! How many times do I have to tell you that Ainu is forbidden!'⁶⁹

The assumption that a young child would resort to using its mother tongue if pressed for words in a foreign language is quite believable, and the teacher character's comments highlight the forcibly assimilationist nature of the early modern Ainu school system. There is no attempt to narratively soften the teacher's blow, which leaves Moto deaf in one ear. If possible, the punishment appears

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

「この時、幸恵は先生のひどい体罰は指導のためではなく、アイヌをさげすむ気持ちからきたことを知りました。」

⁶⁷ Ogawa 1999: 251.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁶⁹ Nakahara–Sugawara 2023: 41.

「日本語で話せ! アイヌ語は禁止だと言っているだろうが!!!」

even more unjust in this version of events, given that Moto's reason for going home is to take care of her sick mother. Presumably to further impress upon the reader the injustice of discrimination, this sad episode from Yukie's childhood is transformed into the beginning of Moto's tragic storyline. In a later scene, she does not hear the rumbling of an approaching horse-drawn carriage or her brother's warning cries and gets hit, her limp body falling into a river. She succumbs to her injuries shortly thereafter. The carriage speeds away, carrying the bounty of grave robbers in the employ of Professor Kojima 小嶋, a famed Wajin anthropologist.

When dramatizing Yukie's experiences in a special Ainu school, the focus of *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* remains anchored in the interpersonal conflict between a racist teacher and his student. Quoting the social psychologist Deguchi Makiko 出口真紀子,⁷⁰ Kitahara defines this type of discrimination as direct discrimination (*chokusetsu sabetsu* 直接差別). This is the most easily condemnable and identifiable form of prejudice, since the aggressor directly shows his contempt for his target.⁷¹ To the contrary, *Song of the Kamuy*'s dramatization of the incident focuses on the assimilationist nature of special Ainu schools, underscoring the systemic issues at hand. Based on its systemic nature, Kitahara classifies the early modern Ainu school system as a form of systemic discrimination (*seidōteki sabetsu* 制度の差別), which is a lot harder to detect in day-to-day life. Deguchi defines it as the totality of discriminatory mechanisms woven into the fabric of society, influencing everything from its laws and schools to the economy. In the case of systemic discrimination, it is the system of society itself that is biased against the minority population, who remain disadvantaged regardless of the actions taken by members of the majority on a personal level.⁷²

However, *Song of the Kamuy*'s overreliance on tragic developments to elicit empathy is not without its own limitations. To begin with, the story's emotional impact may be cheapened by the fatigue that readers are likely to experience under the weight of incessant tragedies. Another, much more pressing point is

⁷⁰ The third form of discrimination identified by Deguchi is called cultural discrimination (*bunkateki sabetsu* 文化的差別), which takes the form of common-sense notions that are generally accepted by its members. Here, Kitahara mentions the misconception that Ainu children and young people are simply not suited to enter higher education as one of his examples (Kitahara 2023: 54–55). According to Fujimoto, this sentiment has likely prevented Yukie in continuing her education at a prestigious all-girls school that was mostly attended by students from influential or military families. It was rumoured around town that although she received full marks on her entrance exams, she was still rejected because of the school's unwillingness to let an Ainu girl from a Christian family enter its ranks (Fujimoto 2002: 111). Interestingly, the rumour is treated as somewhat credible in both *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* and *Song of the Kamuy*'s dramatization of Yukie's biography.

⁷¹ Kitahara 2023: 48–49.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 49.

that the narrative's forceful assault on readers' emotions may lead to the depoliticization and dehistoricization of Ainu issues, negating the previously mentioned focus on systemic issues. Michael concedes that not everyone evaluates the affective engagement with distant suffering as favourable as Sarah Jones, her source about secondary witnessing's capacity to foster an other-oriented empathy in readers. Conveying the opinion of several other scholars on refugee narratives, Michael cautions that a systemic issue—such as population displacement for instance—may transform into a matter of personal ethics in the readership's mind, once their empathy is successfully engaged by a narrative. While being preoccupied with questions of hospitality, generosity and empathy on the personal level, readers are unlikely to notice the systems—such as the power imbalance between certain regions of the world or the imperialist history between the home country and the destination of asylum seekers—at the root of the problem.⁷³

It was theorized above that the engagement with a place of memory and/or witnessing could potentially prompt readers to reevaluate their opinions on Ainu-Wajin shared history and their own involvement in it, seeing these issues in a new light of historical truthfulness. However, this process is halted in both analysed manga. In the case of *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu*, the emphasis on direct discrimination is likely to leave readers with the illusion that Ainu issues can be solved by merely being a kind person in their day-to-day life. Although *Song of the Kamuy* portrays special Ainu schools as a systemic problem, the overly tragic plot may hijack readers' attention and lead them to the same mistaken conclusion. The violation of the Ainu's indigenous rights that was the early modern Ainu school system is not connected to Japanese imperialism or colonialism anywhere in the manga narratives: the Japanese words for imperialism (*teikokushugi* 帝國主義) and colonialism (*shokuminchishugi* 植民地主義) do not appear in these texts, not even once. While *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* does not explicitly give a reason for the Wajin presence on the island, *Song of the Kamuy* names the need to ensure Japan's safety as the rationale for Hokkaidō's incorporation into the empire: 'The Sisam [an Ainu synonym for Wajin] came to Hokkaidō because they thought Japan might be attacked by Russia'.⁷⁴

Rather than elucidating that the violations of the Ainu's indigenous rights were intimately connected to Hokkaidō's status as a settler colony, the manga in question continue imperialist narratives about the island's history that originated in the Meiji period. According to Michele M. Mason, Hokkaidō was retroactively naturalized as one of the four main islands of Japan after it came under

⁷³ Michael 2023: 4–5.

⁷⁴ Nakahara-Sugawara 2023: 17.

「シサムたちは日本がロシアから襲われるのではないかと思って北海道に入ってきたの。」

Japanese rule in 1869, which was partly achieved by the government pretending that the Ainu were always Japanese citizens and repopulating their homeland with Wajin settlers from the mainland.⁷⁵ By not mentioning imperialism as the reason of the Wajin presence, *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu* leaves this assertion unchallenged. *Song of the Kamuy*'s focus on the Russian threat is not entirely inaccurate, as the so-called *tondenhei* 屯田兵 soldiers were officially stationed on the northern island for this very reason. In Mason's words, they belonged to 'a Meiji-era farming-militia unique to Hokkaido' and were hailed as patriotic defenders of Japan in the face of imminent Russian aggression at the end of the 19th century.⁷⁶ However, Mason identifies a more prosaic cause for their presence. Early on, the soldiers guarding Japan's first colony were recruited exclusively from the ranks of disgruntled and impoverished former samurai, redirecting their disruptive energies into a new, state approved direction.⁷⁷

The issue of physical anthropology

Unlike the problem of special Ainu schools and their assimilationist curriculum, the defilement of Ainu graves is addressed only in *Song of the Kamuy*, where the storyline of Moto and her brother, Hisashi ヒサシ, exposes the unethical beginnings of physical anthropology in Japan. After his grandfather's bones were stolen by grave robbers, Hisashi tries his best to get them back while protecting other Ainu graves from desecration. Unsuccessful, he enlists the help of Kaneda, who is appalled by the conduct of his fellow scholars. A newspaper article leads him to Kojima's office, where every available inch of space is covered by a display of Ainu skulls and grave goods. During his second visit, Kaneda only succeeds in getting back the remains of Hisashi's grandfather after he emotionally blackmails Kojima, who was travelling on the carriage that killed Moto.

Physical anthropology is one of the earliest subdisciplines of Ainu Studies. As insinuated by the above-mentioned storyline, its early practitioners often conducted their research in an unethical manner, but Morris-Suzuki observes that this was not a phenomenon unique to Japan. For instance, Franz Boas (1858–1942) was pioneering American anthropology in 1888 by journeying to British Columbia, where he collected about 200 ancestral remains that belonged to the local indigenous groups. Moreover, the first people to rob Ainu graves in the name of science were all Westerners, along with the first contributor to the discipline of Ainu Studies. In 1864 and 1865, a small group of foreigners—

⁷⁵ Mason 2012: 8, 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

including the British consul himself—robbed several Ainu cemeteries under the cover of darkness. Their disrespectful actions incited a major diplomatic incident. While his transgression only cost the consul his position, three other participants were sentenced to penal servitude by the British legation in Tōkyō. Three years later, Georg Busk's (1807–1886) paper entitled 'Description of an Aino skull' marked the beginning of Japanese physical anthropology. Despite its controversial and foreign origins, the practice of desecrating Ainu graves for science was continued by Wajin researchers for at least a century thereafter.⁷⁸

Koganei Yoshikiyo 小金井良精 (1859–1944) is a Wajin researcher from this century of controversy who could serve as a likely inspiration behind the character of Kojima. Koganei was the first Professor of Anatomy at Tōkyō University. Siddler describes him as a follower of Erwin von Bälz (1849–1913), who was responsible for the introduction of physical anthropology to Japan. In 1887 and 1888, Koganei undertook two expeditions to Hokkaidō to collect Ainu remains. He argued for the ancient Jōmon 縄文 people to be Ainu based on the bones he collected. His theory was opposed by Tsuboi Shōgorō 坪井正五郎 (1863–1913), who theorized that the tiny Korpokkur コロボックル people of Ainu legend are analogous to the indigenous neolithic population of Hokkaidō. Ultimately, it was Koganei's theory that gained widespread acceptance.⁷⁹

However, it is not his theory about the Jōmon roots of the Ainu that makes Koganei a likely model for Kojima: not unlike his fictional counterpart, Koganei was also infamous for robbing fresh graves to further his research. Reporting on his unethical and disturbing conduct, Ueki Tetsuya 植木哲也 vividly describes the varying degrees of decomposition in which Koganei found and collected his specimen. During his first visit, he admittedly did not shy away from knowingly opening the graves of people who died only three to five years prior. These bodies were still adorned in the clothes they had been buried in, and Koganei had to take them to a nearby river to wash off the remnants of their skin, hair and brain matter before he could get to the bones.⁸⁰ Hisashi's storyline about the remains of his grandfather being stolen by a Wajin scientist is not as outlandish as it may appear in the eyes of the uninitiated reader.

According to Ueki, physical anthropology was still in its infancy during the Meiji and Taishō periods, when Koganei himself was active. Following Edward S. Morse's (1838–1925) discovery of a shell mound from the Jōmon period, Western researchers residing in Japan and Japanese university students alike became increasingly interested in the origins of the Japanese people, which inspired them to embrace the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology, both

⁷⁸ Morris-Suzuki 2014: 3–5.

⁷⁹ Siddler 1999: 81.

⁸⁰ Ueki 2019: 48–49.

previously unknown in Japan. Enthusiastic students—the above-mentioned Tsuboi Shōgorō among them—established the Anthropological Society in 1884, which is described by Ueki as a ‘gathering of hobbyists’ (*shumijin no atsumari* 趣味人の集まり) instead of a ‘group of professional researchers’ (*shokugyōteki kenkyūsha no dantai* 職業的研究者の団体).⁸¹

The wider Japanese academia remained sceptical about the merits of physical anthropology for a long time: its practitioners were regarded as mere enthusiasts, who enjoyed collecting antiques and learning about folk customs while failing to attain the level of rigour that is expected of a modern scientist.⁸² Despite the widespread scepticism, Koganei pursued physical anthropology with unwavering commitment. He reportedly believed that it was his duty as a Japanese scientist to put his country’s name on the radar of the international scientific community, and he came to regard physical anthropology—and specifically the research on Ainu remains—as the ideal avenue through which to make a uniquely Japanese contribution to global science.⁸³

The sentiments described in the paragraph above are echoed by Kojima’s tirade during his confrontation with an appalled Kaneda. One can practically hear ambitious Koganei’s voice, when Kojima defensively yells about how important his research is for mankind: ‘This research could be a major breakthrough for humanity!’⁸⁴ When Kojima justifies his grave robbery by the potential value it could bring to Japan and the Ainu alike—‘All this research is for the sake of our country, and for the Ainu people...’⁸⁵—it reflects Koganei’s theory about the Jōmon and the Ainu people being one and the same and his contemporaries’ search for the origins of the Yamato race. Yet, Kojima simply ends up sounding like a raving madman if the reader does not possess the required background knowledge to interpret him, his portrayal failing to convey that the desecration of Ainu graveyards was more than a strange personal project for a delusional scientist: it was fuelled by the rise of Japanese imperialism. The symbiotic relationship between the development of Japanese anthropology and the expansion of Japan’s empire in the early 20th century is observed by Ueki. Every time a new colony was incorporated into Japan’s territories, researchers were dispatched by their universities to study the local populations, receiving the recognition of wider society for their efforts. Although Ueki does not regard anthropology as a tool of colonial administration, he observes that it began to

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 40–42.

⁸⁴ Nakahara–Sugawara 2023: 130.

「この研究は人類にとって大発見になるかもしれないんだ!」

⁸⁵ Nakahara–Sugawara 2023: 93.

「すべては我が日本国のためアイヌのための研究であり...」

receive unprecedented public attention in the 1930s, coinciding with the Japanese government's heightened interest in colonial policy. This elevated degree of prestige was clearly signalled by the establishment of Japan's first anthropology department at Tōkyō University in 1939.⁸⁶

A linguist and his informant

There is one character in both examined manga that is essentially portrayed the same despite the different approaches taken by both sets of creators to telling their story: Kindaichi Kyōsuke—or his more fictional counterpart, Kaneda—is consistently depicted as an absent-minded but loveable genius, whose infectious enthusiasm inspired Yukie to write the *Ainu Shinyōshū*. According to Fujimoto, the pair first met in 1918, when Kindaichi visited the small church in Chikabumi where Yukie lived with Monasnouk and Matsu, who was also a Christian missionary. Initially, Kindaichi was there to listen to Monasnouk's stories, and he ended up spending the night at the church after missing the last train, engrossed in deep conversation with the three women around the fireplace. As a testament of him also being a somewhat absent-minded character in real life, he mistakenly monopolized the family's only mosquito net during the night, expecting the women to join him under it. While listening to Matsu's motherly boasting about Yukie's grades the following morning, he became aware of her remarkable proficiency in both Japanese and Ainu. This prompted Kindaichi to invite Yukie to study with him in Tōkyō. Although she did not immediately accept the Wajin professor's invitation, his enthusiasm and apparent love for Ainu oral traditions—to which he admiringly referred as a 'treasury of [Ainu] words' (*hōten* 宝典)—inspired Yukie to give her life to the research of the Ainu epics.⁸⁷

This decisive episode in Yukie's life holds a prominent place in both manga narratives, transpiring similarly to the biographical account. Without any background information, these scenes position Yukie/Teru as an unofficial assistant to Kindaichi/Kaneda, while portraying the character based on the Wajin linguist as a goofy lover of Ainu orature, animatedly singing its praises to anyone who is willing to lend him an ear. Although overly positive, his characterization suffers from the same lack of complexity as that of the racist schoolteacher of *Chiri Yukie and the Ainu*: the colonial power relations underlying his relationship to Yukie are obscured by the narratives' persistent emphasis on his personal commitment for his research subject. This is especially true for *Song of the Kamuy*, where Kaneda is depicted as someone who is vehemently opposed to

⁸⁶ Ueki 2019: 79

⁸⁷ Fujimoto 2022: 130–138.

the inhumane practices of physical anthropology. This implies that his commitment includes an interest for the welfare of the Ainu people.

During his confrontation with Kaneda, Kojima appeals to their shared scholarly interest in the Ainu people: ‘If you really are a university professor and a researcher of the Ainu language, you should understand me’.⁸⁸ While the fictional linguist is baffled by Kojima’s attempts to draw a parallel between them, the real Kindaichi’s motivations for studying Ainu orature were surprisingly similar to the rational that led early Wajin anthropologist to commit grave robbery. Just as they sought the biological origins of the Japanese people, Kindaichi’s work with Ainu orature was intended to support his mentor’s search for the origins of the Japanese language.

Yasuda Toshiaki 安田敏朗 introduces Kindaichi’s mentor, Ueda Kazutoshi 上田万年 (1867–1937) as a professor of Tōkyō University, overseeing an ambitious project called Japanese Imperial University Linguistics (Nihon Teikoku Daigaku Gengogaku 日本帝国大学言語学). Ueda’s aim with this project was to elevate Japanese linguistics to a Western scientific standard by applying the methodology of comparative linguistics to determine the origins of the Japanese language. The project was supported by his students’ groundwork, comparing Japanese to one of its neighbouring languages: Ogura Shinbei 小倉進平 (1882–1944) focused his attentions on Korean, while Iha Fuyū 伊波普猷 (1876–1947) and Gotō Asatarō 後藤朝太郎 (1881–1945) specialized in the Ryūkyūan and Chinese languages, respectively. Additionally, a fellow professor named Fujioka Katsuji 藤岡勝二 (1872–1935) contributed his expertise on the Manchu and Mongolian languages to the project. The late-comer Kindaichi was left with the study of the Ainu language, looking to ancient pieces⁸⁹ of Ainu orature for a suitably old version of it.⁹⁰

As for Kindaichi’s supposed concern for the welfare of the Ainu people, he is often criticized along with other contemporary linguists specializing in the Japanese language and its dialects for caring solely about the language he studied, without any further regard for the challenges faced by its speakers. As Yasuda succinctly states, Kindaichi required only the Ainu language itself to conduct his research, not necessarily the Ainu speakers. This kind of disinterest

⁸⁸ Nakahara–Sugawara 2023: 94.

「先生も大学の教授でアイヌ語の研究者ならそのあたりのことはおわかりでしょう。」

⁸⁹ The epics of Ainu orature are indeed quite old. Quoting Donald L. Philippi (1930–1993), Chiri Mashiho 地理真志保 (1909–1961) and other scholars, Wallner dates the creation of most *kamuy yukar* to the period between the 10th and 16th centuries, while he describes *yukar* as a likely product of a period characterized by either intensifying conflict or trade with the neighbouring populations, which took place either between 650 and 1150 CE or after the 15th century, respectively (Wallner 2017: 153, 201–202).

⁹⁰ Yasuda 2007: 159–162.

in the Ainu people themselves is presumably a product of his time: like many of his contemporaries, Kindaichi uncritically accepted the idea that the Ainu were destined to vanish from the modern world. This belief left him with a sense of urgency to record the Ainu language as quickly as possible, preferably under favourable conditions.⁹¹

Conditions favourable to him, that is. Strong states that the reason for Yukie's early death was a tragic combination of circumstances: the humid heat of Tōkyō's summer, combined with the childcare, sewing, and transcription duties she had to fulfil at the Kindaichi household, was too taxing on her fragile health, which had been compromised by congenital heart disease. She never returned to Hokkaidō, dying of heart failure on 18 September 1922.⁹² Yasuda goes a step further and asserts that Yukie was the victim of Kindaichi's distinctive research approach, which he refers to as imperial capital linguistics (*teito gengogaku* 帝都言語学). Ever since attending the Tōkyō Colonial Exhibition in 1912—where he received some uncredited assistance with his translation work from the exhibited Ainu that led to his first breakthrough—Kindaichi preferred to invite his informants to the capital, rather than undertaking the costly and exhausting journey to visit them in the field. As Yasuda observes, this made him something of a hypocrite: in his later years, he was recorded stressing the importance of fieldwork, as if attempting to obscure his own practices.⁹³ Based on Kindaichi's involvement in Ueda's project, his distinctive research method and his disinterest in the Ainu people, Yasuda argues that Yukie was merely an informant⁹⁴ for the Wajin linguist: a uniquely capable, but ultimately misused one.⁹⁵

Conclusion

During the Meiji period, the homeland of the Ainu people was colonized by an emerging Japanese Empire, which forcefully brought them into the fold of its citizenry as a subordinated population, transforming Hokkaidō into a settler colony in the process. Japanese imperialism and colonialism impacted Ainu people's life in a variety of ways. A notable example of this is the case of the early modern Ainu school system, where Ainu children were cut off from their

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁹² Strong 2011: 2–3.

⁹³ Yasuda 2007: 180–183.

⁹⁴ While the nature of Yukie's relationship to Kindaichi is actively debated here, her younger brother named Mashiho was without a doubt a true protégé of Kindaichi, becoming under his tutelage the first Ainu to gain entrance to the University of Tōkyō and later an accomplished linguist in his own right, specializing in the Ainu language (Refsing 2014: 196–197).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 159, 183, 187.

indigenous roots while still being denied a quality education. Additionally, one can point to the desecration of Ainu graveyards by the first generation of Wajin anthropologist. These injustices can be retroactively interpreted as a violation of Article 14 and Article 12 of the UNDRIP, respectively.

Chiri Yukie and the Ainu and *Song of the Kamuy* are both Japanese comics that introduce their readers to these dark parts of Ainu-Wajin shared history, while dramatizing the biography of Chiri Yukie, an Ainu epic poet whose potential was stifled by her tragically early death. By depicting the violation of indigenous rights from the Ainu characters' point of view, the creators of the aforementioned manga position their—presumably mostly Wajin—audience on the Ainu side of history, effectively transforming them into secondary witnesses, who are invited through the mediation of comics to empathize with the distant suffering of others. By being graphic life narratives that facilitate secondary witnessing, this paper argues that the manga in question possess the potential to highlight or obscure the connection between Hokkaidō's status as a settler colony and the violation of the Ainu people's indigenous rights during Yukie's lifetime.

In a presumed attempt to not alienate any readers, both manga obscure the fact that the special Ainu schools and the desecrated Ainu graveyards were a product of Japanese imperialism. The colonialist roots of Japanese linguistics are also left unacknowledged, hiding behind the friendly face of Kindaichi Kyōsuke. Yet, these manga were created with the clear intent behind them to form and reform their readership's historical consciousness, which transforms them into places of memory. However, their interpretation of Ainu history seems more in line with the Japanese government's current Ainu policy than the subversive potential of Yukie's legacy, leaving their readership with nothing but bittersweet feel-good stories about perseverance and sacrifice, while sneakily propagating Meiji-era narratives about the supposed benefits of separate education for Ainu children and the patriotic *tondenhei* soldiers. Although the empathy of readers is likely moved by the trials and tribulations of an overwhelmingly Ainu cast of characters, it is liable to remain stuck on a personal level, obscuring from their view the Japanese state's domineering position over the indigenous Ainu that connects the dying race narrative of the past with the dying culture narrative of the present. Echoing Komai's doubts about the capacity of the PPA to facilitate Ainu cultural revitalization without a political dimension, this paper concludes with the question if simply fostering empathy for the Ainu people's past plight without facing Hokkaidō's colonial legacy in the spirit of historical truthfulness is enough to transform the manga about Yukie's life into an effective vehicle for deepening the Japanese majority's understanding of current Ainu issues? The shorts answer is likely no, since directionless empathy is rarely a catalyst for change.

On a final note, this paper is not meant to deny Kindaichi's enduring personal devotion for the Ainu epics, which Kirsten Refsing credits as the driving force behind the transformation of Ainu-language research into an established branch of Japanese linguistics.⁹⁶ However, being passionate about one's research subject is not the same as actively advocating for the rights of the indigenous minority one studies, as Kaneda's storyline in *Song of the Kamuy* may imply. Additionally, this paper is not intended to portray Kindaichi as a cartoon villain without any care for Yukie's wellbeing. Although conducting a thorough study of his character would necessitate the incorporation of more material about his own life, the general impression one is left with after reading Yukie's biography is that he was mostly kind—or the very least cordial—to her. What this paper argues for then, is that their interactions on the personal level do not matter much in the grand scheme of things. Similarly to the time when he unintentionally monopolized the Kannari family's only mosquito net, Kindaichi probably did not harbour any bad intentions when he misused Yukie's talents by inviting her to the capital. His decision was most likely the result of a colonial power imbalance that emboldened an esteemed Wajin academic to cut the costs of fieldwork by placing the burden of relocation on his teenage Ainu informant.

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DÁVID HORVÁTH

(*Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary /
Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest*)

An Approach for Supporting Thesis Writing in the Language Curriculum

Uchikawa Kazumi 内川かずみ: *Sotsugyōronbun to nihongokyōiku: TBLL (Thesis Based Language Learning) no rinen to jissen 卒業論文と日本語教育: TBLL (Thesis Based Language Learning) の理念と実践. Thesis Writing and Japanese Language Teaching: Philosophy and Practice of TBLL (Thesis Based Language Learning)*. Tokyo: Coco Shuppan, 2024. 352 pp.

According to current guidelines, students enrolled in the Japanese Studies BA specialization of the Institute of East Asian Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) are required to write their thesis primarily in Hungarian. However, they must also include a summary in Japanese, spanning a few pages. They are also expected to engage with Japanese-language academic sources during the writing process. Of course, thesis supervision is carried out by faculty members who teach historical, linguistic, and other thematic courses, rather than by language instructors, and it is not necessarily the primary aim of the language curriculum to help students engage with these sources. Nevertheless, students rely heavily on the Japanese language skills they have acquired in language classes, and the classes may explicitly or implicitly contribute to the development of the competencies required for thesis writing. Moreover, language learning tends to be more effective when students engage with topics that genuinely interest them. This compelling synergistic potential, which has so far received little academic attention, is the topic of Uchikawa Kazumi's monograph, published in the series *New Currents in Japanese Language Education Studies (Nihongo Kyōikugaku no Shinchōryū 日本語教育学の新潮流)* by Coco Shuppan ココ出版 in 2024.

Kazumi Uchikawa is currently an assistant professor at the Department of Japanese Studies at ELTE, where she previously served for many years as a native-language instructor. She defended her doctoral dissertation within the Doctoral Program in Japanese Studies at the same university in 2022. This dissertation formed the basis of the book under review, in which the author

introduces the term TBLL, or Thesis-Based Language Learning, to describe the type of interaction outlined above.

The book consists of eleven chapters. The first is an introduction, in which the author emphasizes that the book is not a methodological guide for supervising theses. Rather, it has two main objectives: first, to examine whether and how language instruction and thesis writing are connected in Japanese Studies programs across European universities; and second, to provide a theoretical framework for the author's argument that it is important for Japanese language instructors to be involved in supporting the thesis-writing process.

In the remaining chapters, the book addresses both of its stated objectives. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of thesis writing, which has existed in Europe since the Middle Ages and has also been an important part of academic study in Japan since the establishment of universities. Drawing on existing literature, the author outlines the wide range of expectations and attitudes toward thesis writing in various institutions. She also presents findings from her own qualitative study conducted among her students, which shows that while students view the thesis as a significant component of their university education, they do not generally feel that language classes provide meaningful support for thesis writing.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Japanese Studies programs, including the results of a survey conducted among Japanese language instructors in Europe. The findings reveal, for instance, that students are often required or strongly encouraged to use Japanese-language academic sources for their thesis in over half of the programs surveyed. The Hungarian model, i.e., writing the thesis in Hungarian but including a Japanese-language summary, was reported by approximately one-quarter of respondents, a detail that further underscores the absence of a unified or standardized approach across these programs.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide a literature review of best practices in language classes that support thesis writing at universities outside of Japan and continue the discussion of the survey results from the previous chapter. According to the data, 58.1% of the European Japanese language instructors surveyed report offering some form of support for thesis writing, such as assisting students in locating appropriate sources. However, 71.4% reported that Japanese language classes do not currently provide support for the thesis-writing process.

In Chapter 7, the author identifies five key problem areas that contribute to the situation described above. The first is the issue of separate domains and separate instructors: that is, the (usually informal) division between Japanese language and Japanese Studies courses. The second is the issue of expertise, as language instructors do not necessarily have specialized knowledge of the Japanological topics addressed in students' theses. The third concerns challenges

related to scheduling and course design. The fourth issue is students' insufficient proficiency in Japanese. Finally, the fifth issue relates to practical applicability, specifically, the perception that the linguistic competencies required for thesis writing may not be directly useful in the labor market.

Chapters 8 and 9 elaborate on the social and pedagogical background of TBLL. The author argues that in our changing world, both the purpose and perceived value of language proficiency are undergoing transformation, along with the role of teachers and institutional education. She emphasizes that the goals of TBLL align with the principles of constructivist pedagogy and learner-centered education. Among the models more closely related to second language education, she highlights the potential for integration with approaches such as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and PBL (Project-Based and Problem-Based Learning). These chapters also introduce possible assessment methods that can be implemented within the TBLL framework. The symmetrical structure of these chapters, beginning with the presentation of a particular issue or theoretical methodology, followed by a discussion of how TBLL fits into that context, greatly enhances the value of the book, particularly for readers seeking insights into contemporary educational approaches or the discourse regarding the role of education in the 21st century.

In Chapter 10, the author presents her detailed practical experiences with the implementation of TBLL in her courses at ELTE, offering concrete guidance for Japanese language teachers who wish to apply this method in their own classrooms. Finally, Chapter 11 provides a comprehensive summary of the main findings and arguments presented throughout the book.

The author presents a multifaceted argument in support of the usefulness of TBLL, grounded in an extensive body of academic literature and several original, self-conducted empirical studies. It is not easy to define precisely what falls within the scope of TBLL, apart from the general idea that it includes any classroom activity related in some way to thesis writing. However, if we adopt the pedagogical mindset outlined in the second half of the book, it becomes clear that TBLL is not merely concerned with supporting students in the writing process. Rather, it offers a broader pedagogical framework that considers learner motivation, opportunities for collaboration, and the comprehensive development of both linguistic and Japanological academic competencies.

I recommend this book to anyone interested in the state of Japanese language education in higher education, the history and current practices of thesis writing, or holistic approaches to language teaching. It will also be of value to readers seeking a deeper understanding of the evolving role of language instruction and lexical knowledge, as well as recent trends in pedagogy more broadly.

YU-LUNG TSENG

(Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

Viewing the Fall of Ming China through the Lens of Climate Change

Timothy Brook: *The Price of Collapse: The Little Ice Age and the Fall of Ming China*.

Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023. 256 pp.

Conventional historical explanations for the fall of China's Ming dynasty (1368–1644) have generally centred on factors such as factional disputes, political corruption, imperial incompetence, and the Manchu invasion. However, in his recent book *The Price of Collapse: The Little Ice Age and the Fall of Ming China*, Timothy Brook (University of British Columbia) attributes the dynasty's collapse primarily to the effects of climate change, which led to a dramatic rise in grain prices during its final years.

In his study of the late Ming dynasty, Timothy Brook emphasizes how prolonged climate change contributed to social unrest and economic stress through drastic price increase. Timothy Brook is not the first scholar to argue that climate change profoundly influenced the course of human history. Prior to Timothy Brook's work, in 2013, Geoffrey Parker's monograph, *Global Crisis*, notably discusses that the seventeenth century constituted a period of worldwide upheaval, largely precipitated by the extreme and prolonged cooling of the 'Little Ice Age'. Parker's analysis highlights not only the formidable environmental challenges confronting Ming China but also the concomitant crises that afflicted societies across Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and the Americas during the same epoch. Compared to Parker's work, Timothy Brook utilizes historical price data preserved in the records of Ming officials and local gentry, as well as in literary sources, to provide a detailed account of how people were affected by sharply rising and unaffordable grain prices resulting from climate change. In contrast, Parker's monograph does not include such comprehensive collections of price data. Parker's work may be regarded as part of environmental history on a global scale, examining the consequences of climate change in the seventeenth century. Looking to the origins of the field, the introduction of environmental issues into the field of Chinese studies was pioneered by Mark Elvin and Liu

Ts'ui-jung with their 1998 edited volume *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History*. Following this landmark publication, studies of China's environmental history have attracted considerable attention from both Chinese and Western scholars. Moreover, in 2017, Peter C. Perdue's article, 'The Environmental History of China: Past, Present, and Future', offers a valuable reflection on this field. As records of climate change and the phenomena of famine, floods, and droughts frequently appear in Chinese official documents and literati writings throughout the long span of Chinese history, scholars of China's environmental history can draw on these rich sources, alongside other scientific approaches, to reconstruct events in the periods they study. In particular, the 2011 publication of *Zhongguo lichao qihou bianhua* 中國歷朝氣候變化 (*Climate Change across Successive Chinese Dynasties*) by Kexue Chubanshe 科學出版社 in Beijing, which compiled extensive climate records from a variety of sources spanning multiple Chinese dynasties, represented a significant contribution to the study of ancient China's climate change.

From a broader perspective, Brook's *The Price of Collapse* can also be situated within the study of China's environmental history, offering an unconventional interpretation of the Ming dynasty's collapse through the specific lens of severe inflation caused by prolonged climate change. As a matter of fact, in his earlier book published in 2010, *The Troubled Empire: China in Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, which examines the Yuan and Ming dynasties through the lens of climate, economy, society, and maritime trade, the author also touches upon the long-lasting famines caused by the Little Ice Age in late Ming. The innovative approach adopted by the author in *The Price of Collapse* lies in his skilful use of scattered price data from different periods and regions, which he transforms into coherent and convincing patterns to uncover the underlying forces—namely, the climate changes resulting from the Little Ice Age—that shaped the trajectory of Ming China.

In the opening chapter of this book, Chen Qide 陳其德 (?-?), a local gentry who lived in Tongxiang 桐鄉, approximately one hundred kilometres southwest of present-day Shanghai, during the late Ming period, is introduced. In his writings, Chen recalls in the early years of the Wanli 萬曆 reign (1573–1620), when he was a young boy, the region enjoyed abundant harvests and general prosperity. His writings indicate that during the early Wanli years, the price of one peck (*dou* 斗, approximately 10.7 litres) of grain rarely exceeded three to four cents of silver (with one *liang* 兩/tael of silver 銀 equivalent to 37.3 grams of silver). By 1641, however, the price of grain had risen to thirty cents per peck, roughly ten times higher than in the early Wanli period (1573–1620). This dramatic comparison is employed by the author in the beginning of this book to showcase the crippling inflation that universally impacted all segments of society during

the Ming dynasty's final years. Chen Qide lived in the Jiangnan 江南 region (south of the Yangtze River), where vast quantities of grain had been transported northward via the Grand Canal to supply the Chinese empire's food needs from the Sui and Tang dynasties through the Ming and Qing periods. As a result, local price data from southern China more accurately reflect the importance of grain prices to the broader Chinese economy. If grain prices were high even in the south, one can imagine how harsh the situation must have been in the north. Thus, using southern China's price data is both representative and analytically logical. Reinforcing this, in Chapter Four, the author also provides evidence that grain prices in the north were two to three times higher than in the south during the final years of the Ming dynasty. As a matter of fact, the ultimate collapse of the Ming empire originated in the north. Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606–1645), the peasant rebel leader who overthrew the Ming dynasty and forced the emperor to commit suicide in 1644, exploited the famine in Henan 河南 province to expand his army, thereby altering the course of Ming history.

In addition to grain prices highlighted through the account of Chen Qide, Timothy Brook further provides careful estimates of the annual cost of living for ordinary people, based on historical expense records. It was revealed that the annual cost of living of a respectable family in the Wanli reign was about 23 *liang*/taels of silver. For a family living close to subsistence, it was just over 14 *liang*/taels. Grain prices are not the only type of data collected in Brook's study. The author also categorizes a wide range of goods and services, including food and beverages, furnishings, paper, textiles and cloth goods, materials, weapons, books, services, and people. Under each category, he lists multiple items with corresponding years and sources in tabular form, presenting a well-structured and lucid picture of the price regime during the late Ming period. In addition, the book also compiles extensive information on the average annual incomes of various occupations. When considered alongside the price data for different goods and services, this provides readers with a vivid picture of purchasing power during that period. Instead of tracing prices during periods of severe climate conditions, the author proposes using famine prices to detect climate change and then to analyse its consequences for economic and social life.

With the comprehensive data on prices, services, and incomes collected in this book, the author seeks to construct a dynamic model capturing the interactions among climate conditions (through which solar energy is converted into food supply), the cost of living, income levels, and the government's disaster relief measures—all of which together sustained the social equilibrium of Ming China. Among these factors, prices played a pivotal role. However, the prolonged climate changes associated with the Little Ice Age in the early 1640s ultimately disrupted this balance, pushing prices to the level that the state's relief

mechanisms could no longer contain and thereby contributing to the collapse of the Ming dynasty. However, a relevant price-related factor not fully highlighted in this book is the heavy military expenditure, which led to increased taxation that further burdened the general population.

Price-related issues, such as inflation and its driving forces, are central topics in modern macroeconomics. However, due to the lack of continuous and comprehensive price data in historical periods, it is far more difficult for economists to analyse price-related phenomena from several centuries ago than it is today. In the absence of sufficient and continuous long-term data, mathematical techniques such as Time-series Analysis, Regression Analysis, Structural Equation Modelling, and Multivariate Analysis cannot be effectively applied to investigate historical economic dynamics. Although the author has assembled a relatively rich collection of price data, it remains insufficient to support rigorous modern economic analysis. Nevertheless, this limitation does not diminish Timothy Brook's ambition. Recognizing that inflation can be driven by economic growth rather than a climate-induced decrease in supply, by presenting historical price data, the author demonstrated that the annual inflation rate during the first two centuries of the Ming dynasty was approximately 0.5% only. As a sinologist specializing in Ming history, Brook makes full use of the available historical data to showcase how fluctuations in temperature affected agricultural production and prices, and how these, in turn, became a driving force that reshaped the course of Ming China's history.

Referring to the Little Ice Age that overlapped with the Ming dynasty, Timothy Brook, in Chapter Four, identifies six multi-year periods in which severe temperature and/or precipitation anomalies coincided with documented reports of environmental crises, famines, and social distress. He designates these periods the six 'sloughs': the Yongle 永樂 Slough (1403–1406), Jingtai 景泰 Slough (1450–1456), Jiajing 嘉靖 Slough (1544–1545), Wanli I Slough (1586–1589), Wanli II Slough (1615–1620), and Chongzhen 崇禎 Slough (1638–1644). Crucially, the Ming dynasty collapsed during the final slough. However, given China's vast territory and diverse climate conditions, these six sloughs do not fully account for all major famines recorded in historical sources. For instance, while Brook dates the Jiajing Slough to 1544–1545, both the *Ming Shilu* 明實錄 (Veritable Records of the Ming) and the *Mingshi* 明史 (Official History of the Ming) document severe droughts across multiple provinces—including Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Hunan, and Hubei—during the first decade of the Jiajing reign. These events fall outside the timeframe of Brook's defined Jiajing Slough, thus challenging the proposed chronology.

In summary, while numerous articles and books explore the causes of the Ming dynasty's collapse through conventional perspectives, e.g. the Manchu

invasion, factional disputes, imperial incompetence, peasant rebellions, and state financial unsustainability, the author adopts an unconventional approach attempting to demonstrate the dynasty's fall through the lens of continuous price escalation driven by the dramatic and prolonged climate change associated with the Little Ice Age in the seventeenth century, suggesting a crisis far exceeding the scope of government disaster relief measures. The book's most valuable contribution lies in the author's methodical handling and comparison of diverse data sets, which include domestic and overseas trading prices, as well as global climate conditions from that era, all collected across various sources. These data convincingly demonstrate that conventional explanations for the Ming collapse fail to adequately consider the drastic inflation, as well as its profound social and economic impact, all of which were ultimately caused by climate change.

Department of Chinese Studies and ELTE Confucius Institute

Imre Hamar elected as a Corresponding Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

On May 7, 2025, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences held its 199th General Assembly, during which the Assembly of Academicians elected the Academy's new full, corresponding, external, and honorary members from among 136 researchers included on the joint list of academic nominees. Based on the Assembly's decision, Professor Imre Hamar, Head of Department and Professor at the Institute of East Asian Studies, Director of the ELTE Confucius Institute, was elected as a Corresponding Member of the Academy's Section of Linguistics and Literary Studies.



On October 13, 2025, Professor Hamar delivered his inaugural lecture at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The ceremonial event took place in the Academy's Reading Room. The chair of the session was Professor Dr. Balázs Borsos, anthropologist and member of the Academy's public body, who, after welcoming the audience, read the laudation written by Professor Dr. István Vásáry, turkologist and full member of the Academy.



The 12th Training Program of the ELTE Central and Eastern European Regional Teacher Training Center Successfully Concluded May 8–12, 2025



Between May 8 and 12, the ELTE Central and Eastern European Regional Teacher Training Center held its 12th training program. A total of 80 Chinese language teachers participated in the event, coming from ten countries in the Central and Eastern European region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Serbia, Ukraine), as well as from Denmark and the United States.



Professor Imre Hamar Honoured Among ELTE Award Recipients

At the opening ceremony of the academic year on September 5, 2025, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) presented its annual distinctions. Professor Imre Hamar, outgoing Vice-Rector for International Affairs of ELTE and Director of the ELTE Confucius Institute, was awarded the Pro Universitate Medal of Merit, Gold Grade, by Rector Dr. Lénárd Darázs.



Department of Japanese Studies

Guest lecturers at the Department

On 27 March 2025, two guest lecturers visited the Department. Stella Zhivkova from the University of Sofia, Bulgaria, held a lecture titled ‘Ukiyo-e woodblock prints as an aesthetic phenomenon and a channel of Japanese soft power’, while Irena Srdanovic from the University of Pula, Croatia talked about ‘How new technologies engage with languages: from language corpora to AI advances’.

Head of Department Balázs Szabó guest lecturer at Kyoto University

Head of Department Balázs Szabó lectured on the understanding of Nishida Kitarō’s philosophy in Hungary between 12–20 May 2025 as a guest lecturer at Kyoto University, Japan.



Department of Korean Studies

Korea Day 2025

The ELTE Department of Korean Studies held its Korea Day on 24 April 2025, featuring the department's 7th Student Conference. The event was organized mainly by the first-year MA students, who—together with other presenters—introduced a wide range of topics on Korean history, society, traditional culture, and modern developments. In the afternoon, the ELTE Sejong Institute offered additional cultural activities, such as hanbok trying, traditional games, food tasting, and craft workshops. The day ended with a lecture by Professor Ágnes Birtalan on Korean shamanism and its appearance in contemporary popular culture.



Head of Department Beatrix Mecsi Invited to Lecture at Korea University, Seoul

Beatrix Mecsi, Head of the Department, was invited by the Research Institute of Korean Studies (RIKS) at Korea University, Seoul, to deliver a lecture on 31 October 2025. She presented a talk titled 'Korean Art in Hungary' at the event 'The Current State of Korean Art History Studies in Europe'.



Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies

Visit of Khamba Nomun Khan D. Javzandorj, the Abbot of the Gandantegchenlin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar

On 17 January 2025, the head of the central institution of Mongolian Buddhism, the Abbot of the Gandantegchenlin Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, Khamba Nomun Khan D. Javzandorj, visited the Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University. Abbot D. Javzandorj and the delegation were received by the head of the department, Ágnes Birtalan, the staff and doctoral students of the department, as well as Mongolian students studying in Hungary.



Invitation

We cordially invite the Mongolian students studying in Hungary to meet the abbot of the Gandantegchenlin Monastery, Khamba nomun khan, Geshe Lharampa D. Javzandorj

The meeting will be held on 17 January, 2025 (Friday), 10:00
at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities,
1088 Budapest, Múzeum körút 4, Building D, Eötvös hall

All interested are welcome to attend the public meeting



ELTE

FACULTY OF
HUMANITIES

DEPARTMENT OF MONGOLIAN
AND INNER ASIAN STUDIES



5th International Conference on the Aspects of Mongolian Buddhism

The Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies, ELTE in cooperation with the Institute of East Asian Studies, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and other partner institutions organized the 5th International Conference on the Aspects of Mongolian Buddhism – Textual Tradition of Mongolian Buddhism: Written and Oral Traditions on 08–09 April 2025. The conference was dedicated to the 90th anniversary of Professor György Kara's (1935-2022) birth and the 75th anniversary of the establishment of Hungarian–Mongolian diplomatic relations. The conference was attended by participants from 13 countries who delivered more than 70 presentations.



ASPECTS OF MONGOLIAN BUDDHISM

Textual Tradition of Mongolian Buddhism: Written and Oral Traditions

International conference dedicated to the 90th anniversary of Professor György Kara's birth (1935–2022)
and the 75th anniversary of the establishment of Hungarian-Mongolian diplomatic relations

8–9 April, 2025, Budapest

Venue April 8 – 1088 Budapest, Múzeum körút 4 (ELTE, Trefort Campus)

April 9 – 1088 Budapest, Múzeum utca 17 (KRE, Károlyi-Csekonics Palace)

The conference is organized by

ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities
Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies
Research Centre for Mongolian Studies

Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary
Institute of East Asian Studies

Partner institutions

Hungary

Budapest Centre for Buddhist Studies, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University
Dharma Gate Buddhist Church
Institute of Ethnology, HUN-REN Research Centre for the Humanities
Oriental Collection, Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Mongolia

Embassy of Mongolia in Budapest
Gandantegchenling Monastery, the Centre of Mongolian Buddhists
Öndör Gegeen Zanabazar Buddhist University of Mongolia
Institute for Mongolian Studies, National University of Mongolia
International Association for Mongol Studies
Institute for Mongolian Studies, Mongolian National University of Education
Institute of Language and Literature, Mongolian Academy of Sciences
Buddha Dharma Research Institute of Religion and Cultural Heritage NGO



Website



Program



Visit of the delegation of the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

In connection with the visit of the Mongolian Foreign Minister, B. Battsetseg, to Hungary, a delegation from the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited the Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies on 26 April 2025. The delegation included Ambassador at Large D. Mönkhtör, Ambassador of Mongolia to Budapest S. Baatarjav, and L. Dashnyam, President of the National Language Policy Council of Mongolia.



Visit of the delegation of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

On 26 May 2025, a delegation from the Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences visited the Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University. Liu Hiuchun, Deputy Head of the Institute, Qi Huijun, Head of the Department of Northern Borderland Studies, and researcher Altanochir were welcomed by the staff and doctoral students of the department. During the meeting, the Chinese delegation presented the work of their institute, and the members of the Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies also introduced their research, and activities.



Delegation of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

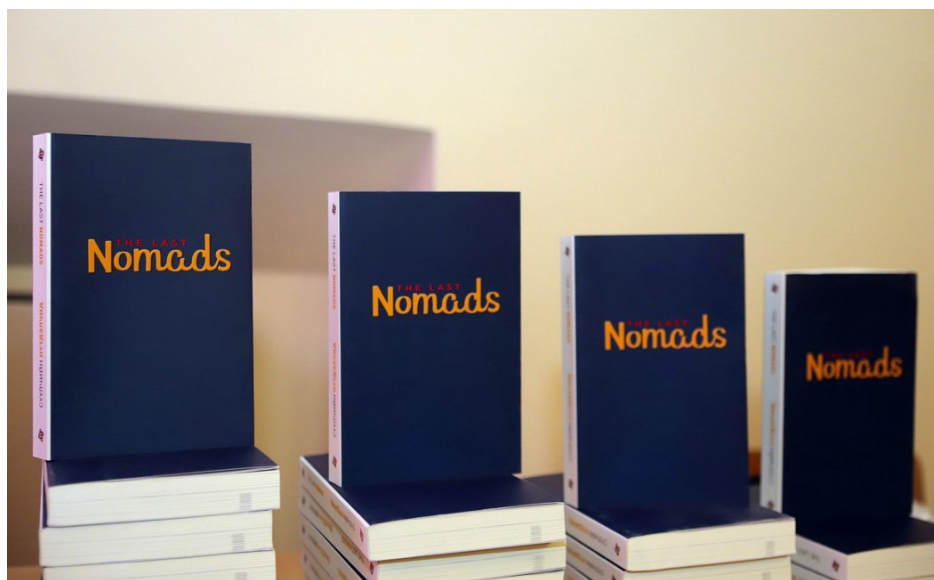
Visit of the delegation of the Inner Mongolian University (China)

On 15 September 2025, a delegation of the School of Mongolian Studies, Inner Mongolia University (China) visited the Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). In the framework of a round-table discussion, the members of the delegation, Professor Chagaansar (Zhengyue), Uyanga (Wuyingga), and Chen Lijuan reviewed the problems of standardizing the Latin transcription of texts written in Mongolian script and other writing systems.



Book-launch of The Last Nomads

On 12 November 2025, the Department of Mongolian and Inner Asian Studies, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University in cooperation with the Institute of Ethnology, Research Centre for the Humanities organized a book-launch event of E. Khurelbaatar's new book, *The Last Nomads* (Сүүлчийн нүүдэлчид), published in English and Mongolian. In this publication, the 11 contributors introduced various aspects of the simple yet extraordinary life of the Mongolian nomads through 32 stories. The stories describe the compassion, courage, endurance, patience and love of the humble and proud people of the grasslands, and the significance of the deep bond between nature and humans.



Department of Buddhology and Tibetology

Visit of the China Tibetology Research Center

Between April 7 and 11, the Department was honoured to receive a delegation from the China Tibetology Research Center led by Wenjuan Huang (Deputy Director at the Administrative Office of Scientific Research) and Qiu Yihua (Deputy Director, Research Librarian), accompanied by four scholars of the Center, Jurong Wang (Research Librarian), Xiaochun Yang (Researcher), Lumucao (Associate Researcher), and Sanmudan (Assistant Researcher). In a dynamic one-day workshop, the guests and the Department's colleagues delivered presentations on a rich variety of topics, laying the groundwork for promising new avenues of future cooperation.¹



‘Philology in the Service of Intellectual History’

On October 2, the Department hosted an interdisciplinary conference titled ‘Philology in the Service of Intellectual History’. The purpose of the event was to provide an opportunity for promising young scholars to present their text-based research from a wide range of fields, and also to foster exchange between disciplines.²

¹ CTRC colleague of the Department Sanmudan has prepared a longer presentation here: http://www.tibetology.ac.cn/2025-08/25/content_43210892.htm

² A detailed account (in Hungarian) is available here: <https://buddh-tib.elte.hu/content/beszamolo-filologia-az-eszmetortenet-szolgalataban-hallgatoi-konferencia.t.49945>

Head of Department Péter Dániel Szántó visiting professor at École Pratique des Hautes Études

In May, the head of the Department, Péter Dániel Szántó, was visiting professor (directeur d'études invité) at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sciences religieuses), PSL Paris, where he held a series of seminars on Indian Buddhist epistolary and homiletical literature.



Buddhist Homiletics: Forays into a Neglected Tradition
 lecture series by Prof. Peter-Dániel Szántó (ELTE, Budapest)
 invited by Vincent Eltschinger and Judit Törzsök

This seminar series explores the largely overlooked tradition of Buddhist homiletics, focusing on the relationship between Late Antique Indian (monastic) Buddhism and the laity through the medium of preaching. Discussions will center on excerpts from three key texts:

- The *Suḥṛlekha* ("Letter to a Friend") and the *Ratnāvali Rājaparīkathā* ("Jewel Garland, a Royal Sermon), traditionally attributed to Nāgārjuna. According to legend, both these texts were composed to instruct a king; their complete, original Sanskrit witnesses have only recently resurfaced.
- The **Saddharmaparīkathā* ("Sermons on the True Law"), an anonymous work that survives in a single manuscript and remains for the most part unedited.

In addition to examining these texts through the lens of detailed textual criticism, the seminar will investigate the rhetorical strategies employed by Buddhist preachers and consider their potential impact on lay audiences.

Seminar titles, dates and venues:

1. Buddhism for Beginners: Edifying Literature for the Laity in the Early First Millennium and Beyond. 28th April, 2025, 13h. EPHE Sorbonne, salle Gaston Paris.
2. The Epistolary Literature Attributed to Nāgārjuna: Two Letters to Kings and Their Recently Recovered Sanskrit Witnesses. 30th April, 2025, 17h. EPHE 54 Blvd Raspail, salle 26.
3. Preaching to the Laity: The **Saddharmaparīkathā* as a Guidebook for Buddhist Homiletics. 19th May, 2025, 13h. EPHE Sorbonne, salle Gaston Paris.
4. Buddhist Homiletics Against Vices: Sermons against the Vices of Gambling, Drinking, and Fornication. 22nd May, 2025, 14h. EPHE 54 Blvd Raspail, salle 17.

