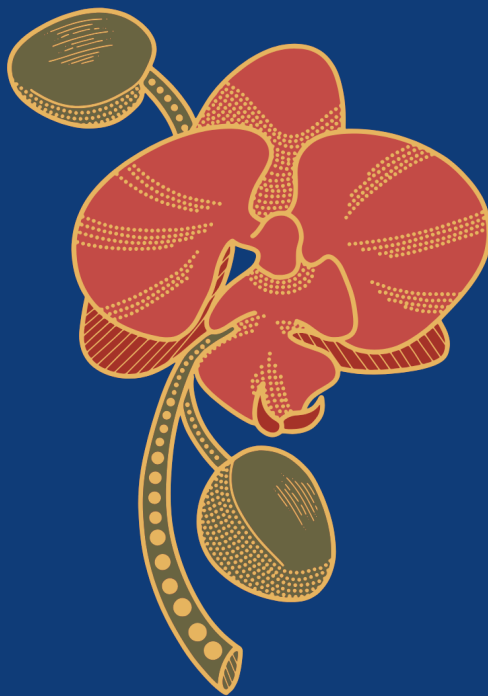


Emory Journal of Asian Studies

Volume VIII • 2026



Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia

Dear Reader

I am pleased to introduce Volume VIII of the Emory Journal of Asian Studies (EJAS), a multidisciplinary academic journal published by Emory University undergraduates.

Since 2018, the Journal has aimed to provide publishing opportunities for undergraduate students conducting insightful research on topics related to Asia.

This year's journal has received exceptional submissions from students attending academic institutions across the United States. I am delighted to share this year's selected works.

The Journal's continuing success could not have been achieved without the generous support of our faculty advisor, Dr. Sarah Mellors Rodriguez, Associate Professor and historian of China in the Department of Russian and East Asian Languages and Cultures at Emory College of Arts and Sciences, Emory University.

We are also grateful for the support of Dr. Yawei Liu, the Director of the Carter Center's China Program and long-time supporter of the journal, Dr. Ed Lee of the Emory Barkley Forum, and the Emory Media Council.

I am grateful to our incredible Editorial Board and the authors of this issue for all of their hard work over the past academic year. Their contributions have allowed us to continue broadening the field of Asian Studies.

I hope you enjoy Volume VIII of the Emory Journal of Asian Studies.

Sincerely,
Ethan Tai, Chief Editor

Journal Staff

Executive Board

Ethan Tai – Chief Editor

Madeleine Pelli – Managing Editor

Hunter Richmond – Head Editor

Alice Liu – Manager of Peer Review

Aerin Engelstad – Treasurer

Journal Staff

Katya Burklin – Peer Reviewer

Thaddeus Cross – Peer Reviewer

Anusha Das – Peer Reviewer

Daniel Gallagher – Peer Reviewer

Edwin Huang – Peer Reviewer

Grace Kang – Peer Reviewer

Tyler Lee – Peer Reviewer

Matthew Li – Peer Reviewer

Manisha Murthy – Peer Reviewer

Chan-Hyuk Park – Peer Reviewer

Margaret Stearns – Graphic Designer

The *Emory Journal of Asian Studies* is published with the support of its advisors Dr. Sarah Mellors Rodriguez, Dr. Yawei Liu, and Dr. Ed Lee III. We would like to extend an additional thanks to the Barkley Forum for Debate, Deliberation, and Dialogue, the Department of Russian and East Asian Languages and Cultures, and the Emory Media Council for their support.

To view subscription information and past issues, please visit ejasonline.org.

To submit to the Journal, please visit <https://ejas-online.org/>

Volume VIII | May 2026

Table of Contents

Yu Xuanji: Poet, Dreamer, and Woman

Tianne Chazin

Unequal Burdens and Ignored Grievances: Why the U.S.-Japan SOFA Has Never Been Revised

Susan Flatt

Sensuality and Subservience: An Analysis of Sex Appeal and Rape in Rashomon

Keira Hallauer

The Name Game: Taiwan, China, and Olympic Representation

Abby Lu

Is India's Democracy Backsliding?

Rithik Mandalapu

Our Flag Means Liberation: The Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger in the Gen Z Protests

Matthew Ji-Yun Nguyen

When Indonesia Looks Like America: How Jakarta's suburbs reflect the influence of American cultural supremacy

Mitra Nourbakhsh

Examining LGBTQ+ Identity and Shame in Indian Film through the lens of Cobalt Blue

Ria Patel

The Grand Canal as an Ecological Agent: Environmental Consequences of Ming-Qing China's Grand Canal Restoration Efforts

Sydney Robinson

The Power of Printed Propaganda: Redefining the Cultural Revolution

Mia Jasmine Kanchanapoomi

Yu Xuanji: Poet, Dreamer, and Woman

Tianne Chazin

University of California, Irvine

Abstract

Amidst the rise of legendary male poets such as Du Fu and Li Bai, China's Tang Dynasty also saw the proliferation of female courtesan poets such as the infamous Yu Xuanji. Within the rigid patriarchal structure of premodern Chinese society, poetry provided a vehicle for intellectual and emotional expression not typically accessible to women. Courtesans' status as actors on the fringes of society afforded them further freedom from traditional norms which allowed them to resist male censorship. This article argues that Yu Xuanji's particularly brazen voice among courtesans provides clearer insight into premodern Chinese women's lives and feelings. Yu Xuanji's refusal to adhere to social norms resulted in unrestrained, explicit communication of her sentiments within her work. Examining her writing in conversation with the works of other female poets across different social strata reveals a feminine narrative of ambition and resistance not found in the numerous male-authored accounts of women's lives. Uncovering premodern Chinese women's own voices allows them to reclaim their individuality while shifting scholarship away from male-centered tradition.

Known as the "golden age" of Chinese shi poetry, the Tang Dynasty is one of the most celebrated periods in Chinese literature. While shi verse poetry is an ancient tradition with varied rules regarding lines and syllables,¹ male Tang poets like Du Fu and Li Bai developed new conventions for shi that "set the model for poetry in traditional China for the next thousand years."² However, shi poetry's popularity was not limited to the confines of gender; the Tang Dynasty also saw a rise of courtesan poets, including the infamous Yu Xuanji. As "public women," or women who filled the feminine space in public society which Confucian gender roles forbade gentry women from entering, courtesans such as Yu Xuanji provided literary and sometimes sexual companionship to male literati.³ Poetry was an essential art pervasive throughout premodern Chinese culture,⁴ so courtesans needed to be literate women with whom elite men could mutually inspire intellectual and emotional expression through poetry and other arts. Existing somewhat outside social expectations for women allowed courtesans to enjoy more independence and express themselves more freely,⁵ which Yu Xuanji took advantage of by critiquing and rebelling against Confucian norms. To the chagrin of her contemporaries, she wrote unrestrained poetry which showcased her passionate and even haughty personality, as well as her lamentations as a woman of low status in a patriarchal society. A revolutionary woman who renounced gender roles in her way of life and writings, Yu Xuanji's work provides a glimpse into premodern Chinese women's lives from their own perspective.

Yu Xuanji was certainly no gentry woman. Throughout her life, Yu Xuanji opted for paths which opposed expectations for female propriety. These conventions held upper class women as the standard. Like many other courtesans, she spent some of her life as a concubine. However, shortly after a trip to central China together, Yu Xuanji's

¹ Zhao, Yang, "Stephen Owen, "Poetry in the Chinese Literary Tradition"," Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.

² Stephen Owen, "Poetry in the Chinese Tradition," *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, edited by Paul S. Ropp, University of California Press, 1990, 303.

³ Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans: Public Women," In *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, Harvard University Press, 2004, 174.

⁴ Owen, "Poetry in the Chinese Tradition," 295.

⁵ Zhao, Yang, "Fallen Women? The Courtesans of the Tang (618-907)," Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.

husband Li Yi sent her away, possibly due to jealousy from his principal wife.⁶ After her expulsion, Yu Xuanji found a natural place amongst the Daoist nuns, another group of women less bound by social customs. The ease with which Li Yi abandoned Yu Xuanji demonstrates that while courtesans could live more independently than gentry ladies, they still lived at the whims of the men in their lives. Becoming a nun, however, allowed Yu Xuanji to live outside of the traditional family unit, interact with men, and participate in society even though she herself was not strictly devoted to the Dao.⁷ Yu Xuanji thus "maintained warm contacts with many literary gentlemen" such as poet Wen Tingyun, so she was easily able to become a courtesan.⁸ Although Hangfu Mei attributes Yu Xuanji's transition from nun to courtesan to her "weak nature" which made her "incapable of preserving her honor,"⁹ Yu Xuanji's networking was actually a display of ingenuity. Since she was not born into status,¹⁰ Yu Xuanji instead took advantage of her connections to find upper class men she could rely upon after Li Yi expelled her from his household. Furthermore, courtesans like Yu Xuanji had more freedom in choosing men to be with since serving many different men was part of their profession. Gentry women conversely could only have relationships with their husbands. Failure to obey one's husband was unacceptable, as seen in the case of gentry woman Li Qingzhao of the Song Dynasty, who faced criticism after she not only remarried after her first husband's death but also spent time in jail for divorcing her abusive second husband.¹¹ Adopting the lifestyle of a public woman was a means of survival which afforded Yu Xuanji the privileges of affluence that she was not allowed from birth in addition to the freedoms of living outside of Confucian tradition.

Many of Yu Xuanji's poems follow the traditional sorrowful and lonely feminine voice, but she does not always adhere strictly to convention. Her poem "Selling Wilted Peonies" overtly advertises her profession and demonstrates her self-confidence through comparing herself to the flower. In the poem, Yu Xuanji wryly laments that no

6. Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 189.

7. Zhao, "Fallen Women?"

8. Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 189-91.

9. Hangfu Mei, quoted in Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 191.

10. Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 189.

11. Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, "Li Qingzhao," In *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, Harvard University Press, 2004, 216-17.

one will buy the peonies since they are too beautiful and expensive: "It must be because of their high price that no one shows interest, / And because of their extreme fragrance butterflies cannot come near."¹² The comparison serves to mock a man not willing to pay a fair price for one as exquisite as herself. The butterflies symbolize male patrons being overwhelmed by how stunning she is. She not only affirms self-awareness of her own beauty but flaunts it: "But when their roots will have been transplanted to the Imperial Park, / You, my prince, will then regret that you can no longer buy them!"¹³ She alludes to serving in the Inner Palace¹⁴ to illustrate her popularity, then directly addresses the reader to assert nonchalance at rejection—she could have any man thanks to her transcendent fairness, so the loss is the reader's should he deny her. Yu Xuanji's brash voice in "Selling Wilted Peonies" contrasts with the common societal expectation for women to be meek and subservient toward men.

In "During a Visit to the Southern Tower of the Veneration of Truth Monastery I Saw the New Examination Graduates Writing Their Names on the Wall," Yu Xuanji goes as far as to express disdain for her womanhood: "Oh how I hate this gauze gown for hiding my verses!"¹⁵ Although access to education for women was accessible and acceptable, they could not take the civil service examination or serve as officials.¹⁶ For women to even publish literary works was "improper" since publishing brought a woman into the public sphere. Therefore, those who published their works were viewed as courtesans.¹⁷ A courtesan herself, Yu Xuanji was free to share her literary works, but doing so merely reinforced the alleged impropriety of her profession. The gown thus represents Yu Xuanji's femininity as a barrier to having her work known respectably as a man's would be known. In the following line, as the title suggests, Yu Xuanji reveals that her indignation stems from her unachievable ambition to gain recognition through the civil service examination: "To no avail I look up with envy at the names on the list." By Yu Xuanji's time, Empress Wu Zetian had already officially added poetry to the civil

¹² Yu Xuanji, quoted in Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 194.

¹³ Yu Xuanji, quoted in Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 194.

¹⁴ Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 194.

¹⁵ Yu Xuanji, quoted in Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 195.

¹⁶ Dorothy Ko, "Gender and the Politics of Chinese History," In *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1994, 11-12.

¹⁷ Zhao, "Fallen Women?"

service examination,¹⁸ so the means by which Yu Xuanji desired to share her verses was likely the examination. Additionally, her forthright expression of jealousy toward her male counterparts further demonstrates her self-confidence; her resentment suggests a belief in her own capability to pass the examination if given the opportunity.

Even Yu Xuanji's more stereotypical poems bend some of the rules of the feminine writing persona. In "Boudoir Bitterness," Yu Xuanji uses the conventional setting of the woman's boudoir yet deviates from the typical abandoned woman trope. She writes in the third person, describing the lonely life of a particular woman who "weeps in the late sunlight" when "she's just heard her neighbor's husband has come back home."¹⁹ Since the boudoir is a private space to segregate a woman from the public, it is "a symbol of emotional withdrawal and imprisonment" which contrasts with the freedom of male symbols like the road, mountains, and rivers.²⁰ The neighbor and her husband represent the antithesis of the woman abandoned by a freely wandering husband since the woman's husband actually returns. The reunited couple contrasts the female subject's feelings of isolation and refutes the image of the eternally abandoned woman perpetuated in women's poetry. Nevertheless, Yu Xuanji's subject is indeed lovesick and alone: "autumns go[,] springs come and still no news / she slides the bolts of her red doors[,] nobody's coming."²¹ The subject differs from her neighbor and even the typical abandoned woman in that her lover will not return. The abandoned woman usually implies the return of her lover, as in Li Qingzhao's final line of her lyric "To the Melody of 'Dotting Red Lips:'" "I gaze at the road along which he'll come home."²² Yu Xuanji's subject's permanent abandonment reflects the poet's real life ousting from Li Yi's household, though Yu Xuanji herself was the one made to leave in her case. The ending line of "Boudoir Bitterness" further departs from the traditional tragic love poem by depicting acceptance of being alone: "why bother pounding the laundry or washing

¹⁸. Zhao Yang, "A Survey of Chinese Literary Genres and the Significance of Poetry in Chinese Literary History," Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.

¹⁹. Yu Xuanji, "Boudoir Bitterness," In *The Clouds Float North: The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji*, Translated by Jiann I. Lin and David Young, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998, lines 1-2.

²⁰. Anne Birrell, introduction to *New Songs from a Jade Terrace: An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry*, edited by J. H. Prynne, translated by Anne Birrell, Penguin Classics, 1987,

²¹. Yu, "Boudoir Bitterness," lines 6-7.

²². Yu Xuanji, quoted in Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 225.

the curtains?"²³ The subject expresses resignation to her fate of solitude, unlike her neighbor and Li Qingzhao, who both wait for their husbands' return. Although acknowledging that her lover will not return only adds to her melancholy, the subject's unwillingness to delude herself into awaiting a man who will not come suggests a sort of independence. The line demonstrates society's subjugation of women by reducing the female subject to household chores and awaiting the return of her lover. However, she breaks free from the unreciprocated dependence by choosing not to wait for him any longer. Still, the final line in tandem with the imagery in the first line of "grass overgrown with weeds"²⁴ effectively conveys the subject's depression to the point of listlessness as she allows her home to become unkempt. "Boudoir Bitterness" thus exemplifies the conventional women's love poem while simultaneously showcasing Yu Xuanji's unique voice.

Yu Xuanji's poem for Wen Tingyun, "To Wen Feiqing on a Winter's Night," continues her personal theme of accepting loneliness despite the sadness it causes. Though the poem may not strictly be a love poem since Yu Xuanji was only rumored to be romantically involved with Wen Tingyun,²⁵ her sentiments are nonetheless both compelling and fresh even when read platonically. Yu Xuanji begins by referencing the origin of their relationship: "In bitter longing I sought poems to recite beneath the lamp."²⁶ Since she utilized poetry to connect with her clients,²⁷ Yu Xuanji mentions poetry to allude to her status as a courtesan as well as maintain the anguish of the literary feminine archetype. She continues to set the melancholy scene: "Leaves strewn across the courtyard lamented when winds rose; / through gauze window curtains I grieved at the setting moon."²⁸ As in "Boudoir Bitterness," the disorder in the courtyard resembles allowing the weeds in the grass to become overgrown, and her perspective gazing out through the window from within mirrors being sequestered to the boudoir. Despite acknowledging her low status and playing into traditional themes, she depicts

²³ Yu, "Boudoir Bitterness," line 8.

²⁴ Yu, "Boudoir Bitterness," line 1.

²⁵ Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 190.

²⁶ Yu Xuanji, "To Wen Feiqing on a Winter's Night," In *The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji: Poems from a Courtesan in Tang Dynasty China*, Translated by Leonard Ng, 2011, CC BY-NC 3.0, line 1.

²⁷ Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 191.

²⁸ Yu, "To Wen Feiqing," lines 3-4.

herself as having her own ambitions: "Thoughts scattered and released, at last I found fulfillment: / through the emptiness of rise and fall, I saw True Mind."²⁹ Although the "True Mind" is associated with Confucian scholar Mencius, the idea of cultivating oneself to return to a state of innocence also exists in Daoism,³⁰ which Yu Xuanji followed. Yu Xuanji's "fulfillment" through seeing "True Mind" shows her desire to become an immortal. Whereas the prescribed role of women only considers them through their relationships to men, Yu Xuanji instead voices that what she wants for herself notably does not necessitate the presence of Wen Tingyun: "Now roosting in seclusion, away from paulownias, / an evening sparrow twitters, simply circling the grove."³¹ The somber tone resolves itself into acceptance in the final two lines through imagery which reflects a life away from the mundane world. A lone bird may also signify the loneliness of one without a romantic partner, which adds to the double entendre of the poem. Under the guise of a poem of lovesickness, Yu Xuanji actually voices her spiritual longing to a fellow poet and friend.

Considering her fierce personality and penchant for rebellious writing, Yu Xuanji's short life was not without controversy. Hangfu Mei alleged in his *Minor Writings from Shanshui* that Yu Xuanji murdered her maid in a jealous rage while under the impression that the maid had slept with one of her clients.³² However, "[h]er biographers seem to have been particularly interested in presenting her as a specimen of scandalous womanhood, a promiscuous, uncontrollable woman....,"³³ so the tale of murdering her maid may well have been slander serving to condemn Yu Xuanji for her overt womanhood in the public eye. Her execution then may also have been fabricated or the result of false accusation.³⁴ Innocent or guilty, executed or not, the dissemination of word of the purported crime echoes society's contempt for her way of life long after

²⁹ Yu, "To Wen Feiqing," lines 5-6.

³⁰ David Wong, "Mind (Heart-Mind) in Chinese Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/chinese-mind/>, Accessed 3 June 2024.

³¹ Yu, "To Wen Feiqing," lines 7-8.

³² Grant and Idema, "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans," 191-2.

³³ Leonard Ng, foreword to *The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji: Poems from a Courtesan in Tang Dynasty China*, by Yu Xuanji, Translated by Leonard Ng, CC BY-NC 3.0, 2011, 7.

³⁴ David Young, "Yu Xuanji: An Introduction," In *The Clouds Float North: The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji*, by Yu Xuanji, Translated by Jiann I. Lin and David Young, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998, x.

her death. In the Ming Dynasty, Liu Rushi went so far as to name Yu Xuanji as comparison for another courtesan poet she wished to criticize, Liang Xiaoyu: “It would have been a more appropriate ritual, however, if she had replaced [Su Xiaoxiao and Guan Panpan] with Li Ye and Yu Xuanji!”³⁵ Like Yu Xuanji, Li Ye was executed, albeit for the more severe crime of treason. Despite also spending time as a courtesan poet herself, Liu Rushi often denounced them through harsh critiques, though Liu Rushi was an outlier as she eventually achieved full ritual marriage with an upper class man.³⁶ Liu Rushi’s disparagement of courtesans was likely an effort to shun her past as a public woman by adhering to common sentiments perpetuated by men. Yu Xuanji conversely elected to live against norms and was not ashamed of her profession. For all Yu Xuanji was villainized, the poor historical depictions of her only support indications that premodern Chinese society held women at the behest of men, including their stories. Only through examining these women’s own writing do their true voices become apparent.

The likelihood of one taking direct inspiration from a supposed convicted murder is slim, much less openly professing so. Nonetheless, the spirit of Yu Xuanji’s sentiments persisted through later women poets like Luo Qilan of the Qing Dynasty. Although Luo Qilan was a gentry lady, she was not afraid to freely express her feelings and sought recognition for her work. In her self-preface for the section in her poetry collection which was dedicated to friends’ poems, Luo Qilan uses the masculine symbols of mountains and rivers to contrast her gender role as a woman with her true desires:

“[I]t is harder for a woman poet to establish her fame than it is for a gentleman of talent. This is because she lives in the woman’s quarters and her experience is extremely limited...she also lacks the opportunity to climb mountains and gaze upon rivers in order to display her talent and style.”³⁷

³⁵ Liu Rushi, quoted in Zhao Yang, "The Glory of the Ming Courtesans and the First High Tide of Women’s Literature," Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.

³⁶ Zhao, "The Glory of the Ming Courtesans."

³⁷ Luo Qilan, quoted in Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, "Luo Qilan," In *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, Harvard University Press, 2004, 612.

As Yu Xuanji yearned for the chance to demonstrate her talent like the examination graduates, Luo Qilan resented gender inequity in the literary realm and the societal norms which confined women to the household. Two lines in her poem, "Climbing the Highest Peak of Maoshan," resemble Yu Xuanji's "During a Visit to the Southern Tower of the Veneration of Truth Monastery I Saw the New Examination Graduates Writing Their Names on the Wall" since both use clothing to symbolize how their gender hinders their aspirations: "Alas! Hampered as I was by my woman's scarf, / It was impossible to tread that holy ground."³⁸ In the poem, which describes Luo Qilan's pilgrimage to the sacred mountain, Maoshan, she considers surmounting the summit a liberating experience: "Before, I was a bird locked up in its cage, / But now I was a boat leaving the Gorges!"³⁹ The setting of climbing a mountain again evokes masculine imagery which, through Luo Qilan's usage, becomes synonymous with freedom. The caged bird thus signifies a woman confined to the boudoir and the boat her release due to the association of traveling and wandering with men.

Luo Qilan defied expectations of upper class gender propriety by not merely writing about masculine topics but also interacting with men other than her husband. As a public woman, Yu Xuanji could interact freely with many men. Luo Qilan, conversely, was bound by custom, so her contact with men was considered scandalous. Yu Xuanji's apparently platonic relationships with men were significant in their own right considering the sexualization of her profession and general disparity of respect between the sexes, yet Luo Qilan's shameless intermingling with men despite her status demonstrated her own boldness. Luo Qilan was not only one of Yuan Mei's infamous group of female disciples, but visited two other male mentors, Wang Chang and Wang Wenzhi.⁴⁰ Maintaining friendships with men was not Luo Qilan's only "masculine" tendency. In "Mocking Myself," she satirizes the supposed indecency of her affinity for so-called "male" activities:

"When I was young, by nature I loved the rough and honest,

³⁸ Luo, quoted in "Luo Qilan," 615.

³⁹ Luo, quoted in "Luo Qilan," 615.

⁴⁰ Zhao Yang, "The Second High Tide of Women's Literature: Yuan Mei and His Female Disciples," Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.

So much so that people would call me a man among women.

If I just donned a helmet, they said, and served on the border,

A portrait of me would be painted for the gallery of heroes!”⁴¹

Luo Qilan calls attention to the double standard for accomplishments between men and women; whereas a man would be praised for the things she enjoys and aspires to do, she is chastised. In “Records of Dreams, Eight Poems, with a Preface, VII,” Luo Qilan again uses the example of going to war to illustrate her dissatisfaction with gender norms. She begins describing a dream in which she “headed the imperial troops.”⁴² In her preface, she considers the dream—among the other dreams she writes about—“strange” since they “mostly concerned things that I could not even begin to wish for.”⁴³ Based on the remainder of the poem, more likely than Luo Qilan’s disinterest in masculine affairs was her feeling that such achievements were so far out of reach for her that to aspire to them was a waste of effort:

“At the border I displayed my heroic tactics,

On the dome of the sky I wrote my ambitions.

Until suddenly I awoke at the sound of a bell,

To find myself still wearing three-inch shoes.”⁴⁴

She imagines herself as a hero just as she does in “Mocking Myself,” then calls upon the power of such an image to manifest her yearning for things not available to her as a woman. When she awakes, she returns to the motif of women’s clothing to represent the constraints of womanhood through the reference to her bound feet. Though dynasties apart, Luo Qilan’s despair at the realization that she could never accomplish her dreams complements the anguish underlying Yu Xuanji writings.

⁴¹ Luo, quoted in “Luo Qilan,” 616.

⁴² Luo, quoted in “Luo Qilan,” 617.

⁴³ Luo, quoted in “Luo Qilan,” 616.

⁴⁴ Luo, quoted in “Luo Qilan,” 616.

Despite the shortness of her life and the scant definitive knowledge about it, Yu Xuanji's personality shines through her poetry. Amidst the possible narrative corruption in the story of her trial and execution, her writings serve as inference points to envision how she may have told her own story. Even if her extant poems were selected to defame her, they are invaluable glimpses into a story less told in premodern China: the story a woman tells about herself. Yu Xuanji was not unique in her sentiments, but her tenacity was not common among her peers, either. Examining the life and works of Yu Xuanji together with other remarkable, ambitious women like Luo Qilan breaks the monolith of womanhood in premodern China and offers wider insight into female poets as individuals.

Bibliography

- Birrell, Anne, introduction to *New Songs from a Jade Terrace: An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry*, 1-28. Edited by J. H. Prynne, translated by Anne Birrell, Penguin Classics, 1987.
- Grant, Beata, and Wilt L. Idema. "Ladies, Nuns, and Courtesans: Public Women." In *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China, 174-95*. Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Grant, Beata, and Wilt L. Idema. "Li Qingzhao." In *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 204-43. Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Grant, Beata, and Wilt L. Idema. "Luo Qilan." In *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, 612-620. Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Ko, Dorothy. "Gender and the Politics of Chinese History." In *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, 1-26. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Ng, Leonard, foreword to *The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji: Poems from a Courtesan in Tang Dynasty China*, by Yu Xuanji, 7-9. Translated by Leonard Ng, [CC BY-NC 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), 2011.
- Owen, Stephen. "Poetry in the Chinese Tradition." *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, 294-308. Edited by Paul S. Ropp, University of California Press, 1990.
- Wong, David. "Mind (Heart-Mind) in Chinese Philosophy." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/chinese-mind/>. Accessed 3 June 2024.
- Young, David. "Yu Xuanji: An Introduction." In *The Clouds Float North: The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji*, by Yu Xuanji, ix-xviii. Translated by Jiann I. Lin and David Young, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.
- Yu, Xuanji. "Boudoir Bitterness." In *The Clouds Float North: The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji*, 11-12. Translated by Jiann I. Lin and David Young, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.
- Yu, Xuanji. "To Wen Feiqing on a Winter's Night." In *The Complete Poems of Yu Xuanji: Poems from a Courtesan in Tang Dynasty China*, 11. Translated by Leonard Ng, 2011. [CC BY-NC 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).
- Zhao, Yang. "A Survey of Chinese Literary Genres and the Significance of Poetry in Chinese Literary History." Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.
- Zhao, Yang. "Fallen Women? The Courtesans of the Tang (618-907)." Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.
- Zhao, Yang. "The Glory of the Ming Courtesans and the First High Tide of Women's Literature." Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.
- Zhao, Yang. "The Second High Tide of Women's Literature: Yuan Mei and His Female Disciples." Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.
- Zhao, Yang. "Stephen Owen, 'Poetry in the Chinese Literary Tradition'." Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, 2024.

Unequal Burdens and Ignored Grievances: Why the U.S.-Japan SOFA Has Never Been Revised

Susan Flatt

University of Chicago

Abstract

For decades, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Japan has served as the bedrock for the geopolitical order in the Pacific region. This bilateral relationship is governed in large part by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which enables the United States to maintain permanent bases in Japan, along with the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which establishes the conditions for the American military presence in Japan. The following paper takes up the question of why, in the sixty years since its establishment, the U.S.-Japan SOFA has never been revised. Through this, I aim to explore and attempt to resolve an apparent contradiction, in which the background and terms of the SOFA have contributed to persistent problems in some parts of Japan, while still failing to generate enough backlash to make revisions politically necessary. In this analysis, I will focus particularly on the case of Okinawa, which bears a disproportionate burden of the American military presence in Japan, examining the ways in which stakeholders in the United States, Japan, and Okinawa have interacted to shape the current state of affairs. Ultimately, I will argue that the political marginalization of Okinawa has created a situation in which the serious local problems associated with the U.S.-Japan SOFA can be largely ignored by both governments with minimal long-term strain on their bilateral relationship, decreasing the incentives to pursue serious revisions.

Introduction

For decades, the bilateral relationship between the United States and Japan has served as the bedrock for the geopolitical order in the Pacific region. This bilateral relationship is governed in large part by the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, which enables the United States to maintain permanent bases in Japan, along with the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which establishes the conditions for the American military presence in Japan. Unlike comparable agreements with Germany, Italy, and South Korea, the U.S.-Japan SOFA has never been revised.¹ This paper will explore and attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction, in which the background and terms of the SOFA have contributed to persistent problems in some parts of Japan, while still failing to generate enough backlash to make revisions politically necessary.

In this paper, I will begin by outlining the historical background of the U.S.-Japan SOFA in the period immediately following the American occupation of Japan, as well as its legal foundation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) SOFA. I will then proceed to explain how this background, along with the contents of specific clauses within the U.S.-Japan SOFA, contribute to both theoretical infringements on Japanese sovereignty and substantive domestic problems. By theoretical infringements, I refer simply to structural factors of the alliance that interfere with Japan's ability to enforce laws within its borders, which can be seen as an infringement on Japanese sovereignty based on the way sovereignty is often theoretically defined. In this analysis, I will focus particularly on the case of Okinawa, which bears a disproportionate burden of the American military presence in Japan, using the unique political situation of Okinawa to finally explain why the U.S.-Japan SOFA has never been revised. Ultimately, I will argue that the political circumstances of Okinawa have created a situation in which the serious local problems associated with the U.S.-Japan SOFA can be largely ignored by both governments with minimal long-term strain on their bilateral relationship.

¹ Akiko Yamamoto, "All Local Governments with U.S. Military Bases Request Revision of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement," Discuss Japan – Japan Foreign Policy Forum, *Society* 84 (November 6, 2024): 3, <https://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/society/pt2024110617054914762.html>.

Historical and Legal Background

The U.S.-Japan SOFA that exists today dates back to the years following the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, during which it became necessary for the United States and Japan to redefine their relationship after the end of formal occupation. The same day that the San Francisco Treaty was signed, on September 8, 1951, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida signed the original Security Treaty with the United States, under which the United States could maintain a military presence in Japan indefinitely and use such forces at will for “the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East.”² From the outset, the terms of this new bilateral relationship were far from equal, with John Foster Dulles describing the original treaty as “a voluntary continuation of the occupation.”³ This imbalance was keenly felt on the Japanese side, leading to a re-negotiation of the Security Treaty in 1960, which produced the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security that governs the U.S.-Japan relationship to this day. This new treaty addressed major grievances with the original Security Treaty, specifically by creating a stronger United States security guarantee and mandating the creation of a pursuant agreement to clarify the conditions of the American military presence in Japan: the U.S.-Japan SOFA.⁴ The lasting effects of these circumstances, particularly the Japanese desire to obtain a stronger security guarantee from America, can be seen in the eventual terms of the SOFA, particularly in contrast to comparable agreements with other nations.

Legally speaking, the U.S.-Japan SOFA draws many of its provisions directly from the NATO SOFA, with a few notable exceptions that reflect the different circumstances under which they were signed. A Status of Forces Agreement can be defined simply as an agreement between nations that outlines the “legal rights and responsibilities of military forces on foreign soil,” thereby serving as the bedrock for the

² Security Treaty Between Japan and the United States of America, U.S.-Japan, September 8, 1951, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19510908.T2E.html>.

³ Kenneth B. Pyle, “Troubled Alliance,” *Asia Policy* 10 (July 2010): 3–9, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2010.0031>, 5.

⁴ Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America, U.S.-Japan, January 19, 1960, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

working relationship between those nations.⁵ As the first agreement of its kind, the NATO SOFA delineated a relationship between equals, balancing the interests of every party to find a middle ground in which the legal rights of service members could be protected without infringing overmuch on the sovereignty of the host nation. To this end, the NATO SOFA established a system of “concurrent jurisdiction,” repeated near verbatim in the U.S.-Japan SOFA, in which the host nation retains primary jurisdiction whenever the law of both countries has been violated, except in cases where the offenses arose in the course of “official duty” or solely involved the property or individuals of the sending nation.⁶ In the NATO SOFA, these standards are applied reciprocally, regardless of which nation is the host, but in Japan’s case, it is a purely unilateral agreement, concerned only with the rights and privileges of American personnel in Japan, and not vice versa.⁷ This reflects the historical context in which the agreement was signed, as at the time, the United States military presence in Japan was seen as a way of keeping Japan under control and aligned with American interests.⁸ Furthermore, because of domestic pressure to obtain a clearer security guarantee from the United States, Japan approached the negotiating table with limited bargaining power, resulting in an agreement that was both shorter and potentially less clear than comparable agreements with other nations.⁹ These factors all contribute to the challenges surrounding the U.S.-Japan SOFA today.

The U.S.-Japan SOFA and Its Controversies

⁵ Jaime M. Gher, “Status of Forces Agreements: Tools to Further Effective Foreign Policy and Lessons To Be Learned from the United States-Japan Agreement,” *University of San Francisco Law Review* 37 (2002): 229, <https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1218&context=usflawreview>.

⁶ Joseph H. Rouse and Gordon B. Baldwin, “The Exercise of Criminal Jurisdiction Under the NATO Status of Forces Agreement,” *American Journal of International Law* 51, no. 1 (January 1957): 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2195176>.

⁷ Keara Schmeiser, “A Delicate Balance: The Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement Applying a Comparative Framework to Recommend Changes to Criminal Jurisdiction Provisions in the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement to Better Protect the Interests of Japan and the United States,” *Brooklyn Journal of International Law* 50, no. 1 (December 1, 2024): 169, <https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/bjil/vol50/iss1/6>.

⁸ Pyle, “Troubled Alliance,” 6.

⁹ Gher, “Status of Forces Agreements,” 241.

The bulk of the controversies related to the U.S.-Japan SOFA come from its provisions on criminal jurisdiction and custody. Particularly, Article XVII of the U.S.-Japan SOFA establishes a system of concurrent jurisdiction very similar to that of the NATO SOFA, including the same two exceptions to Japanese primary jurisdiction, along with a clause mandating “sympathetic consideration” of any requests to waive primary jurisdiction absent those exceptions.¹⁰ In practice, this has created a situation in which the United States claims jurisdiction far more often than the law suggests, as American military authorities are instructed to “maximize United States jurisdiction,”¹¹ both by stretching the “official duty” exception as far as possible and by automatically requesting waivers in all other cases.¹² Though this in itself can be seen as a theoretical infringement on Japanese sovereignty, an even larger source of controversy is the provision in Article XVII which enables the United States to largely retain pre-indictment custody over affiliated individuals accused of a crime.¹³ This provision, designed to protect service members from due process violations at the hands of local law enforcement, has provoked considerable outrage, on the grounds that it impedes local investigations and prioritizes the service members’ wellbeing over that of the locals. Unlike comparable agreements with nations like the Republic of Korea and Germany, the U.S.-Japan SOFA is relatively unclear about the limited circumstances in which Japan may retain pre-indictment custody of suspects.¹⁴ This is likely a product of Japan’s comparatively limited bargaining power at the time of the SOFA negotiations and furthers tensions over the custody issue, particularly regarding crimes such as murder and rape.

Beyond issues of jurisdiction and custody, the other key source of tensions over the U.S.-Japan SOFA relates to land use and the associated environmental problems.

¹⁰Agreement Under Article VI of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America, Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan, U.S.-Japan, January 19, 1960: Article XVII, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.

¹¹ Department of the Army and Department of the Navy, Army Regulation 27-50: Status of Forces Policies, Procedures, and Information, Headquarters Departments of the Army and the Navy, December 15, 1989: 1-2, <https://federallibrary.us/HQDA/AR/27-50/CURRENT/TITLE.html>

¹² Cathleen Caron, “Whose Security Is It? Military Violence Against Women During Peacetime,” *Human Rights Brief* 6, no. 3 (1999): 13–14, <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/vol6/iss3/7/>.

¹³ Keara Schmeiser, “A Delicate Balance,” 176-77.

¹⁴ Ibid, 176-79.

Under Article II of the SOFA, the United States is entitled to the use of “specific facilities and areas” within Japan and, under Article IV, has no obligation to restore these facilities and areas to their prior condition if and when they should be returned to Japan.¹⁵ This creates ample opportunities for lasting environmental damage to the areas surrounding United States military bases, particularly considering that local laws for environmental protection cannot be applied to bases under the exclusive management of United States Forces.¹⁶ There are also significant controversies over transparency surrounding environmental issues, as there have been several instances, both on the mainland and in Okinawa, in which local authorities have been prevented from investigating the sources of pollutant leaks—particularly per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS)—even when the effects of such pollution extend beyond the bases themselves.¹⁷ These high levels of PFAS exposure have been found to place local communities at high risk of immunotoxicity, making it all the more pressing to investigate and prevent the source of leaks.¹⁸ The signing of the Supplementary Agreement on Environmental Stewardship in 2015, despite being intended to address such issues, only exacerbated them, by giving the United States final say over environmental standards and failing to establish a clear procedure for local investigations. For example, under this supplementary agreement, it is the United States—not Japan—that is responsible for establishing the “final governing standards” over environmental compliance issues on the bases, “including provisions for spill response and prevention.”¹⁹ Thus, beyond the obvious issue of safety, this has also become an issue of sovereignty, in that Article IV of the U.S.-Japan SOFA has come to

¹⁵ Status of Forces Agreement, U.S.-Japan, Articles II and IV.

¹⁶ Japanese Communist Party, “Problems of U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa,” February 2000: 9-10, https://www.jcp.or.jp/seisaku/gaiko_anpo/Okinawa.pdf.

¹⁷ Yamamoto, “All Local Governments,” 2; Taro Ono, Kazuyuki Ito, and Shino Matsuyama, “Renewed Focus on Revising Japan-U.S. SOFA Ahead of Election,” *The Asahi Shimbun*, October 22, 2024: <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15475748>.

¹⁸ Zhaoqing Lyu et al., “Is Japan at Low Risk for PFAS Immunotoxicity?: Human Biomonitoring Study in Contaminated Areas in Japan,” *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine* 29, no. 0 (July 26, 2024): <https://doi.org/10.1265/ehpm.24-00047>, 37.

¹⁹ Agreement Between the United States of America and Japan on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Stewardship Relating to the United States Armed Forces in Japan, Supplementary to the Agreement Under Article VI of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States of America and Japan, Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan, U.S.-Japan, September 28, 2015: Articles III and IV, <https://www.state.gov/15-928/>.

actively prevent Japanese authorities from enforcing Japan's own environmental standards in areas within close proximity to American bases.

The Unique Case of Okinawa

Although the problems surrounding the U.S.-Japan SOFA theoretically apply to Japan in general, their impacts are particularly acute in Okinawa, which bears a vastly disproportionate burden of the United States presence in Japan. Despite making up only 0.6% of Japan's total landmass, Okinawa hosts approximately 70% of the American military installations in Japan.²⁰ This is a direct product of Okinawa's history during and after World War II. During the war, Okinawa was the only Japanese territory on which a ground battle was fought, costing the lives of approximately a quarter of the Okinawan population and stripping around 50,000 others of their lands due to the United States occupation.²¹ Under the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the United States retained control over Okinawa until 1972, using the islands as a staging ground for the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Throughout these two decades, the American military presence on Okinawa increased dramatically, in part because forces withdrawn from the mainland were transferred to Okinawa to satisfy Japanese demands for base reductions.²² As a result of this expanded military presence, the Okinawan economy gradually became dependent on the bases, as farmers who had their lands confiscated were forced to rely on those bases for employment.²³ When the reversion of Okinawa to Japanese control was eventually negotiated in the 1970s, there was a widespread expectation among Okinawans that these problems would be addressed and the Japanese government would restore Okinawa to "homeland level" status, under which

²⁰ Ryo Kiyomiya, Nen Satomi, and Takashi Watanabe, "U.S. Experts Say Plan to Replace Futenma Is the 'Worst Solution,'" *The Asahi Shimbun*, September 23, 2024: <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15422915>.

²¹ Masamichi Sebastian Inoue, John Purves, and Mark Selden, "Okinawa Citizens, U.S. Bases, and the Security of Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 6 (February 13, 1998): 264, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4406373>; Japanese Communist Party, "Problems of U.S. Military," 3.

²² Jacques Fuqua, "Understanding Okinawa's Role in the U.S.-Japan Security Arrangement," Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, December 2001: 1, https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/understanding_okinawas_role_in_the_usjapan_security_arrangement.

²³ John Junkerman, "Base Dependency and Okinawa's Prospects: Behind the Myths," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 14, no. 22 (November 15, 2016): 2–3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s155746601601305x>.

Okinawa would bear a comparable share of the military burden to mainland Japan.²⁴ However, in the years since reversion, the amount of land controlled by the United States military in Okinawa has decreased by only 14%, compared to approximately 60% on the four main islands, provoking a sentiment that Okinawa has been “taken advantage of” or even “sacrificed” on Japan’s behalf.²⁵

Though opposition to the American bases is almost always present within Okinawan political discourse, such opposition has historically been inflamed by instances of crimes committed by service members and the associated jurisdictional difficulties. In the years since Okinawan reversion, a total of 6,235 criminal cases have occurred involving American military personnel and affiliates, including more than 1,000 cases of sexual crimes, a number which is likely underreported due to the stigma associated with victimhood.²⁶ Rape is generally considered one of the most underreported crimes, a fact which is likely only exacerbated by the expectation that perpetrators will not be adequately punished.²⁷ Among those crimes that *have* been reported, undoubtedly the most infamous occurred on September 4, 1995, when three American service members kidnapped, assaulted, and ultimately gang-raped a twelve-year-old Okinawan girl, only for Okinawan authorities to be denied pre-indictment custody over the perpetrators under Article XVII of the SOFA.²⁸ The rape of 1995 served as the impetus for one of the largest protest movements in Okinawan history, in which 85,000 Okinawans gathered at the Okinawa Prefectural People’s Rally to demand not only strict discipline against perpetrators and proper compensation for prior victims, but also prompt SOFA revisions and an overall reduction of the military presence in

²⁴ Hiroshi Komatsu, “The Negotiating Process Around ‘Homeland Level Status’ Reversion Between Japan and Okinawa,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 18, no. 1 (December 15, 2017): 74-5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcx022>.

²⁵ Robert D. Eldridge, “The 1996 Okinawa Referendum on U.S. Base Reductions: One Question, Several Answers,” *Asian Survey* 37, no. 10 (October 1, 1997): 882, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645611>.

²⁶ Young Women’s Christian Association of Japan, “Statement submitted by YWCA of Japan, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council,” E/CN.6/2025/NGO/145, United Nations, December 14, 2024: 2-3 <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2025/NGO/145>.

²⁷ Jodie Murphy-Oikonen et al., “Unfounded Sexual Assault: Women’s Experiences of Not Being Believed by the Police,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 11–12 (December 11, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520978190>, NP8917.

²⁸ Yumiko Mikanagi, “Okinawa: Women, Bases and U.S.–Japan Relations,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 4, no. 1 (2004): 99, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26156559>.

Okinawa.²⁹ In this way, crimes committed by service members have generally served as a flashpoint for Okinawan resentments over the terms of the SOFA and the presence of United States military bases more broadly. This is because such crimes and the ways in which they are handled, often through non-judicial punishments or court martials, provoke the sentiment that the current system exists to protect American service members at the locals' expense.³⁰

Beyond issues of criminal jurisdiction, the other major source of tension in Okinawa revolves around the land claimed by American forces under Article IV of the SOFA, specifically the many failed efforts to see such land returned to local communities. Although local landowners *are* currently paid by the Japanese government for the use of their lands, historical grievances remain over the fact that these lands were originally taken by force, and even today, anti-war landowners are denied the ability to voluntarily end their leases.³¹ Resentment over the land ownership issue has often come hand-in-hand with outrage over criminal cases, as one of the chief demands of the protests following the 1995 rape was the return of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.³² In fact, one of the few substantive outcomes of the protests was the signing of an agreement in 1996 to return the land used by Futenma, which has been described as “the most dangerous military base in the world” due to its proximity to a heavily populated urban area.³³ Contrary to the expectations of the United States and Japanese governments, however, this agreement was met with intense backlash, as it mandated the creation of a new sea-based facility that would serve the same function as Futenma before the air station could be returned.³⁴ Thus, though almost 20 years have passed since the United States government first agreed to return Futenma Air Station, the base remains in use to this day, due to logistical and political difficulties associated with constructing its replacement. Within Henoko, where the replacement facility is

²⁹ Eldridge, “1996 Okinawa Referendum,” 883.

³⁰ Gher, “Status of Forces Agreements,” 240.

³¹ Eldridge, “1996 Okinawa Referendum,” 896-98.

³² Inoue et al., “Okinawa Citizens,” 264.

³³ Kiyomiya, “U.S. Experts Say.”

³⁴ Yukihiro Ikeda, Fumio Kyūma, William J. Perry, and Walter Mondale, The SACO Final Report on Futenma Air Station, U.S.-Japan, December 2, 1996: Article II, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/96saco2.html>.

being constructed, repeated protests and referendums have shown deeply rooted local opposition to the relocation.³⁵ This reveals a larger pattern in which, even when the central Japanese government attempts to address Okinawan grievances, they do so while cutting locals out of the decision-making process, provoking outrage instead of alleviating it.

Failure to Revise the SOFA

An examination of United States policy can shed some light on both failures to revise the SOFA and, particularly, the limited results of efforts to relocate bases outside of Okinawa. In regard to the latter, Okinawa has often been described as the “Keystone of the Pacific” due to its central position in the region.³⁶ Although these geographical advantages have certainly been diminished by the development of long-range missiles, Okinawa’s positioning remains valuable enough that the United States is unlikely to pursue relocation absent significant external pressure.³⁷ In regard to the terms of the SOFA, meanwhile, it is worth noting that the provisions which draw by far the most controversy, those of Article XVII, are the ones that the United States is by far the least likely to amend. This is due to the ingrained fear that American service members might be treated “unjustly” in the Japanese legal system, which would be a big hit to domestic support for stationing troops abroad.³⁸ It is generally thought by military and political leadership that American voters will not tolerate stationing our military abroad if they believe those service members are likely to lose their due process rights as a result. And yet, it is not entirely outside of American interests to re-negotiate the SOFA in such a way that minimizes bilateral tensions, particularly over perceived threats to Japanese sovereignty. United States government reports indicate an awareness of the fact that a

³⁵ Human Rights Now, “Joint written statement submitted by Human Rights Now, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status,” A/HRC/33/NGO/X, United Nations, August 2024: 2-3, <https://hrn.or.jp/eng/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/HRN-written-statement-on-Okinawa-for-33rd-HRC.pdf>; Young Women’s Christian Association of Japan, “Statement submitted,” 4.

³⁶ Inoue et al., “Okinawa Citizens,” 264.

³⁷ John Junkerman, “Base Dependency,” 6; Katsuyuki Yakushiji, “The Okinawa Factor in the Japan-U.S. Alliance,” The Tokyo Foundation, July 13, 2012: <https://www.tokyofoundation.org/research/detail.php?id=361>.

³⁸ Yamamoto, “All Local Governments,” 6.

well-negotiated SOFA can be instrumental in preventing “breakdowns in bilateral relations,” and yet despite the history of protests in Okinawa, American officials have apparently never felt a need to seriously consider U.S.-Japan SOFA revisions.³⁹ This is likely due to the impression that unrest in Okinawa does not present a serious enough threat to U.S.-*Japan* relations to make SOFA revisions necessary, as the Japanese central government has generally cooperated with the United States to quell or quash such unrest.

As a whole, it seems as though the single largest reason that the U.S.-Japan SOFA has never been revised is simply that key figures within the Japanese central government have always been content to maintain the status quo, in which Japan is able to fulfill its treaty obligations in such a way that confines the burden to an ineffectual minority: the Okinawans. Surveys have consistently shown that although Japanese citizens do believe the American military presence contributes to Japan’s security, the vast majority (recently, as high as 82%) are opposed to the idea of having a base in their city.⁴⁰ This contradiction in public opinion is effectively resolved by the fact that most Japanese citizens do *not* live in close proximity to bases. It is only the residents of Okinawa, Japan’s smallest and poorest prefecture, who live out their lives surrounded by American bases, including several towns in which a majority of the land is controlled by those bases.⁴¹ As a tiny minority of the population, with less than ten Diet representatives, Okinawans do not have the power to make effective demands of the Japanese government.⁴² Consequently, keeping the bases largely confined to Okinawa enables Japan to avoid the potential strain on U.S.-Japan relations that fighting for SOFA revisions might cause. Thus, from the beginning of the United States occupation, the Japanese government has held a “position of cooperative acquiescence” towards the American presence in Okinawa, based on the implicit assumption that when the United

³⁹ International Security Advisory Board, “Report on Status of Forces Agreements,” United States Department of State, January 16, 2015: 46, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/isab/236234.htm#9>.

⁴⁰ Yamamoto, “All Local Governments,” 6; “Hardly Any Japanese Want a U.S. Base in Their Neighborhood, Online Survey Finds,” Japan Today, September 18, 2025, <https://japantoday.com/category/features/kuchikomi/hardly-any-japanese-want-a-us-base-in-their-neighborhood-online-survey-finds>.

⁴¹ Fuqua, “Understanding Okinawa’s Role,” 1; Japanese Communist Party, “Problems of U.S. Military,” 1.

⁴² Kōya Nomura, “Undying Colonialism: A Case Study of the Japanese Colonizer,” translated by Annmaria Shimabuku, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Toward a New Parallax, 12, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 99, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949768>.

States and Japan decided on a solution, the Okinawan people would have to calmly accept.⁴³ The magnitude of protests in Okinawa has undoubtedly challenged this assumption over time, but numerous administrations have nonetheless been able to weather these periods of unrest with minimal political or international consequences.

Since the Okinawan reversion, the Japanese government has used economic incentives and piecemeal solutions to beat back Okinawan unrest, allowing Japan to maintain the illusion of addressing Okinawan grievances, while avoiding the diplomatic challenge posed by actual SOFA revisions. Historically, the Japanese government has served as the middleman between the United States and Okinawa, which “paves the way with local entities for U.S. activities” through an “economic carrot-and-stick approach.”⁴⁴ The effect of such economic incentives has only increased over time, as the Okinawan economy went into a sharp downturn in the 1990s, creating a situation in which over 70% of the prefecture’s income was provided by the central government by 2001.⁴⁵ This acute economic dependence is precisely what enabled Japan and the United States to get past the 1995 protests without pursuing SOFA revisions, as then-Prime Minister Hashimoto effectively used the promise of economic development to pressure Okinawan leadership into accepting the unpopular plan laid out by the Special Action Committee on Okinawa (SACO).⁴⁶ The SACO itself, though nominally intended to “reduce the burden on the people of Okinawa,” ultimately led to minimal substantive changes in the base presence.⁴⁷ This reveals yet another notable pattern, in which grievances have been addressed through piecemeal solutions and supplemental agreements, rather than tackling them at their source: the SOFA. Beyond the case of the

⁴³ “U.S. Policy in the Ryukyu Islands, Memorandum of Conversation,” National Security Archive, George Washington University, July 16, 1965: 3, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16859-document-2-u-s-policy-ryukyu-islands>; Richard L. Sneider, “Trip Report: Okinawan Reversion on the Front Burner,” National Security Archive, George Washington University, December 24, 1968: 3, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16865-document-3-trip-report-okinawan-reversion>.

⁴⁴ “Okinawa – Then and Now,” National Security Archive, George Washington University, May 26, 1983: 2, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16861-document-5-okinawa-then-and-now-cable-naha-300>; Fuqua, “Understanding Okinawa’s Role,” 2.

⁴⁵ Mikanagi, “Okinawa: Women, Bases,” 105.

⁴⁶ Inoue et al., “Okinawa Citizens,” 265-66.

⁴⁷ Yukihiro Ikeda, Fumio Kyūma, William J. Perry, and Walter Mondale, The SACO Final Report, U.S.-Japan, December 2, 1996: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/96saco2.html>; Mikanagi, “Okinawa: Women, Bases,” 100-102.

SACO, this pattern can also be seen in the pursuit of “operational improvements” such as the Supplementary Agreement on Environmental Stewardship and the Supplementary Agreement on the Civilian Component, which enabled Japan and the United States to present the image of addressing grievances while in reality changing very little.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Throughout the decades since it was signed in 1960, the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement has never been revised, despite its numerous theoretical infringements on Japanese sovereignty and the practical problems posed by consistent backlash from Okinawa. This is likely because neither the Japanese nor the United States government wants to risk upsetting the balance of the US-Japan bilateral relationship by taking on the diplomatic challenge posed by re-negotiating the SOFA. Most Japanese citizens do not feel the negative effects of the American military presence, because the burden is so concentrated on Okinawa, which has little political leverage. Thus, the status quo enables both Japan and the United States to ignore the persistent problems caused by the SOFA, focusing instead on appeasing Okinawa through half-steps and economic stimulus. Considering this, absent significant changes in Japan’s domestic political situation, it seems unlikely that we will see comprehensive SOFA revisions in the future.

⁴⁸ Ono et al., “Renewed Focus;” Agreement on Environmental Stewardship, Supplementary; Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Japan on Cooperation with Regard to Implementation Practices Relating to the Civilian Component of the United States Armed Forces in Japan, Supplementary to the Agreement Under Article VI of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States of America and Japan, Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan, U.S.-Japan, January 16, 2017: <https://www.state.gov/17-116/>.

Bibliography

- “About USFJ.” U.S. Forces Japan. Accessed December 8, 2025. <https://www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ/>.
- Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of Japan on Cooperation with Regard to Implementation Practices Relating to the Civilian Component of the United States Armed Forces in Japan, Supplementary to the Agreement Under Article VI of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States of America and Japan, Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan, U.S.-Japan. January 16, 2017. <https://www.state.gov/17-116/>.
- Agreement Between the United States of America and Japan on Cooperation in the Field of Environmental Stewardship Relating to the United States Armed Forces in Japan, Supplementary to the Agreement Under Article VI of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States of America and Japan, Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan, U.S.-Japan. September 28, 2015. <https://www.state.gov/15-928/>.
- Agreement Under Article VI of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America, Regarding Facilities and Areas and the Status of United States Armed Forces in Japan, U.S.-Japan. January 19, 1960. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q%26a/ref/2.html>.
- “Background Paper - Okinawa, ca.” National Security Archive. George Washington University, July, 1992. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16863-document-7-background-paper-okinawa-ca-july-1992>.
- Caron, Cathleen. “Whose Security Is It? Military Violence Against Women During Peacetime.” *Human Rights Brief* 6, no. 3 (1999): 13–17. <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/hrbrief/vol6/iss3/7/>.
- Department of the Army, and Department of the Navy. Army Regulation 27-50: Status of Forces Policies, Procedures, and Information. Headquarters Departments of the Army and the Navy, December 15, 1989. <https://federallibrary.us/HQDA/AR/27-50/CURRENT/TITLE.html>
- Eldridge, Robert D. “The 1996 Okinawa Referendum on U.S. Base Reductions: One Question, Several Answers.” *Asian Survey* 37, no. 10 (October 1, 1997): 879–904. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645611>.
- Fisch, Arnold G. “Strategic Decisions and American Military Government on Okinawa, 1945-50.” *Army History* 41 (Spring 1997): 33–37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26304383>.
- Fuqua, Jacques. “Understanding Okinawa’s Role in the U.S.-Japan Security Arrangement.” Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, December 2001. https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/understanding_okinawas_role_in_the_usjapan_security_arrangement.
- Gher, Jaime M. “Status of Forces Agreements: Tools to Further Effective Foreign Policy and Lessons To Be Learned from the United States-Japan Agreement.” *University of San Francisco Law Review* 37 (2002): 227–56. <https://repository.usfca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1218&context=usflawreview>.
- “Girard v. Wilson et al.” *The American Journal of International Law* 51, no. 4 (October 1957): 794–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2195360>.
- “Hardly Any Japanese Want a U.S. Base in Their Neighborhood, Online Survey Finds.” Japan Today, September 18, 2025. <https://japantoday.com/category/features/kuchikomi/hardly-any-japanese-want-a-us-base-in-their-neighborhood-online-survey-finds>.
- Human Rights Now. “Joint written statement submitted by Human Rights Now, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status.” A/HRC/33/NGO/X. Human Rights Council, 33rd

- Session. United Nations, August 2024. <https://hrn.or.jp/eng/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/HRN-written-statement-on-Okinawa-for-33rd-HRC.pdf>.
- Ikeda, Yukihiro, Fumio Kyūma, William J. Perry, and Walter Mondale. The SACO Final Report, U.S.-Japan. December 2, 1996. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/96saco1.html>.
- Ikeda, Yukihiro, Fumio Kyūma, William J. Perry, and Walter Mondale. The SACO Final Report on Futenma Air Station, U.S.-Japan. December 2, 1996. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/security/96saco2.html>.
- Inoue, Masamichi Sebastian, John Purves, and Mark Selden. "Okinawa Citizens, U.S. Bases, and the Security of Asia." *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 6 (February 13, 1998): 264–66. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4406373>.
- International Security Advisory Board. "Report on Status of Forces Agreements." United States Department of State, January 16, 2015: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/avc/isab/236234.htm#9>.
- Ivey, Matthew. "Using Mediation to Resolve Disputes Between U.S. Military Bases and Foreign Hosts: A Case Study in Japan." *Harvard Negotiation Law Review*, March 9, 2009. <https://journals.law.harvard.edu/hnlr/2009/03/using-mediation-to-resolve-disputes-between-us-military-bases-and-foreign-hosts-a-case-study-in-japan/>.
- Japanese Communist Party, "Problems of U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa." February 2000. https://www.jcp.or.jp/seisaku/gaiko_anpo/Okinawa.pdf.
- "Joint Statement of Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato and U.S. President Richard Nixon." *The World and Japan Database*. National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), November 21, 1969. <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19691121.D1E.html>.
- Junkerman, John. "Base Dependency and Okinawa's Prospects: Behind the Myths." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 14, no. 22 (November 15, 2016): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s155746601601305x>.
- Kiyomiya, Ryo, Nen Satomi, and Takashi Watanabe. "U.S. Experts Say Plan to Replace Futenma Is the 'Worst Solution.'" *The Asahi Shimbun*, September 23, 2024. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15422915>.
- Komatsu, Hiroshi. "The Negotiating Process Around 'Homeland Level Status' Reversion Between Japan and Okinawa." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 18, no. 1 (December 15, 2017): 71–98. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcx022>.
- Levie, Howard S. "The NATO Status of Forces Agreement: Legal Safeguards for American Servicemen." *American Bar Association Journal* 44, no. 4 (April 1958): 322–26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25720336>.
- Lummis, C. Douglas. "The U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement and Okinawan Anger. A Debate." *Asia-Pacific Journal* 6, no. 10 (October 3, 2008): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1557466008007705>.
- Mikanagi, Yumiko. "Okinawa: Women, Bases and U.S.-Japan Relations." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 4, no. 1 (2004): 97–111. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26156559>.
- Murphy-Oikonen, Jodie, Karen McQueen, Ainsley Miller, Lori Chambers, and Alexa Hiebert. "Unfounded Sexual Assault: Women's Experiences of Not Being Believed by the Police." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 11–12 (December 11, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520978190>.
- Nomura, Kōya. "Undying Colonialism: A Case Study of the Japanese Colonizer." Translated by Annmaria Shimabuku. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Toward a New Parallax, 12, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 93–116. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41949768>.
- "Okinawa – Then and Now." National Security Archive. George Washington University, May 26, 1983. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16861-document-5-okinawa-then-and-now-cable-naha-300>.

- Ono, Taro, and Nen Satomi. "Unequal Ties Remain 20 Years After U.S. Helicopter Crash." *The Asahi Shimbun*, August 13, 2024. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15387478>.
- Ono, Taro, Kazuyuki Ito, and Shino Matsuyama. "Renewed Focus on Revising Japan-U.S. SOFA Ahead of Election." *The Asahi Shimbun*, October 22, 2024. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15475748>.
- Pyle, Kenneth B. "Troubled Alliance." *Asia Policy* 10 (July 2010): 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2010.0031>.
- Rouse, Joseph H, and Gordon B. Baldwin. "The Exercise of Criminal Jurisdiction Under the NATO Status of Forces Agreement." *American Journal of International Law* 51, no. 1 (January 1957): 29–62. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2195176>.
- Schmeiser, Keara. "A Delicate Balance: The Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement Applying a Comparative Framework to Recommend Changes to Criminal Jurisdiction Provisions in the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement to Better Protect the Interests of Japan and the United States." *Brooklyn Journal of International Law* 50, no. 1 (December 1, 2024): 160–200. <https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/bjil/vol50/iss1/6>.
- Security Treaty Between Japan and the United States of America, U.S.-Japan. *The World and Japan Database*. National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), September 8, 1951. <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/docs/19510908.T2E.html>.
- Sneider, Richard L. "Trip Report: Okinawan Reversion on the Front Burner." National Security Archive. George Washington University, December 24, 1968. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16865-document-3-trip-report-okinawan-reversion>.
- Tabuki, Yoko. "Web Exclusive: Looking Back on the Distressful 12 Years in Takae through Photos." *Ryukyu Shimpo*, October 11, 2019. <https://english.ryukyushimpo.jp/2019/10/16/31132/>.
- Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States of America, U.S.-Japan. January 19, 1960. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html>.
- Uniform Code of Military Justice - Art. 134. General Article, 10 U.S. Code § 934 (1950).
- "United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region." *The World and Japan Database*. National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), February 27, 1995. <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/JPUS/19950227.O1E.html>.
- "U.S. Policy Toward the Ryukyu Islands, Memorandum of Conversation." National Security Archive. George Washington University, June 4, 1964. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16864-document-1-u-s-policy-toward-ryukyu-islands>.
- "U.S. Policy in the Ryukyu Islands, Memorandum of Conversation." National Security Archive. George Washington University, July 16, 1965. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16859-document-2-u-s-policy-ryukyu-islands>.
- Watanabe, Takashi. "SOFA Needs Review to Protect Health of Locals Near U.S. Bases." *The Asahi Shimbun*, May 5, 2024. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15234395>.
- Yakushiji, Katsuyuki. "The Okinawa Factor in the Japan-U.S. Alliance." The Tokyo Foundation, July 13, 2012. <https://www.tokyoofoundation.org/research/detail.php?id=361>.
- Yamamoto, Akiko. "All Local Governments with U.S. Military Bases Request Revision of the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement." Discuss Japan – Japan Foreign Policy Forum, *Society* 84 (November 6, 2024). <https://www.japanpolicyforum.jp/society/pt2024110617054914762.html>.
- Young Women's Christian Association of Japan. "Statement submitted by YWCA of Japan, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council." E/CN.6/2025/NGO/145. Commission on the Status of Women, 69th Session. United Nations, December 14, 2024. <https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2025/NGO/145>.

Lyu, Zhaoqing, Kouji H. Harada, Junko Kimura-Kuroda, and Yasuharu Tokuda. "Is Japan at Low Risk for PFAS Immunotoxicity?: Human Biomonitoring Study in Contaminated Areas in Japan." *Environmental Health and Preventive Medicine* 29, no. 0 (July 26, 2024): <https://doi.org/10.1265/ehpm.24-00047>.

Sensuality and Subservience: An Analysis of Sex Appeal and Rape in Rashomon

Keira Hallauer

University of Georgia

Abstract

After winning the Golden Lion at the 12th Venice International Film Festival, Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950) was brought to the global stage, and Kurosawa was acclaimed by film critics as a detail-oriented mastermind. Kurosawa centered the film around the murder trial of a dead samurai and three inconsistent testimonies, where the rape of the samurai's wife, Masago, was exploited as a simple plot device. The legal proceedings incorporate expectations towards Japanese women that are outlined in the 家 (ie) household system and the Criminal Code of 1880. Kurosawa was inspired by the wigmaker in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's 1915 short story "Rashomon", an animalistic frightening older woman who elicits fear in the narrator and who subverts traditional social norms and hierarchies. His characterization of the film's Shinto medium continued the typecasting of an older woman associated with the supernatural serving as a foil to the young female protagonist. Both characters also demonstrate the hostility or unease directed towards older women who have lost their sex appeal and are no longer serving the patriarchal system. Likewise, Kurosawa's film is a direct adaptation of Akutagawa's "In A Grove", and it further reinforces the 1922 short story's justification of rape and victim-blaming mentality. With contrasting visuals, overhead shots, and music scores, Kurosawa builds upon these misogynistic ideals. The film director develops an androcentric perspective in *Rashomon* by making Tajomaru's testimony the sole account of the rape, silencing female voices and portraying rape as a forcible act rather than a non-consensual act.

In the 1940s, Akira Kurosawa was just beginning his directing career, having released his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata*, in 1943 and *Drunken Angel*, his first film starring Toshiro Mifune, in 1948.¹ Nonetheless, he was already becoming famous for detailed, deeply involved work. Leading scholars on Kurosawa's career, such as Donald Richie, have argued that the director was meticulous in his work, intentional in a way that he dictated every little detail and choice regarding each of his films.² When Kurosawa began production for his next film, *Rashomon*, he drew inspiration from Ryunosuke Akutagawa's "Rashomon" to typecast his two female characters as a supernatural older woman or a sensual younger woman. Following the plot of Akutagawa's "In a Grove", Kurosawa made choices in his depiction that enforced a victim-blaming mentality. The emphasis on Tajomaru's account of what happened in Kurosawa's *Rashomon* meant that rape was exploited as a plot device rather than being acknowledged as an immoral act. In his 1950 film *Rashomon*, Kurosawa reflected traditional narratives that follow a larger historical trend of the subjugation of women, and he actively justified the marginalization of female characters in film.

The 1950 film production of *Rashomon* tells the story of a murder and the subsequent trial. It follows three inconsistent accounts from testimonies of Tajomaru, the deranged bandit accused of the crime, Masago, the wife of the murdered samurai, and Takehiro, the murder victim himself, relayed through a Shinto medium.³ In Tajomaru's account, he follows the couple after seeing the wife pass by in her veil. Then, he lures the husband away, rapes the wife after she drops her dagger, and fights the husband on the wife's request. Meanwhile, Masago's testimony includes the husband's anger and loathing at her for allowing such a thing to happen to herself and alludes to Masago killing the husband before passing out. Lastly, the husband's account depicts the wife as greatly traitorous, with her asking Tajomaru to kill the husband, which

¹ Akira Kurosawa, *Something Like an Autobiography*, trans. Audie E. Bock (Vintage International, 1983), 121 & 197.

² Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. 3rd ed. (University of California Press, 1996), 244.

³ Akira Kurosawa, director. *Rashomon*. (1950, Daiei Film), Criterion Collection. https://www.criterionchannel.com/rashomon?utm_source=criterion.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=watch-now&utm_content=film

Tajomaru refuses to do before the husband ultimately kills himself with the wife's dagger.

The setting of the film *Rashomon* is the 11th to 12th century of the Heian period, which according to the Wakita Haruko's article in *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, is when the 家 (ie) household system first became common practice.⁴ The system involved "yometori" marriage, where the wife is brought into the husband's household. Before this practice was introduced, the husband and wife often had separate households, or the husband would come to live with the wife's family. Women in the household system were expected to manage household affairs, with their status determined by their ability to bear children or serve as a wise mother to the head of the house. The class structure of the Heian period consisted of the emperor and imperial family, powerful aristocratic families, and an emerging group of provincial warriors known as samurai, who began to challenge the central government towards the end of the 12th century. Seven hundred years later, during the Meiji period, the samurai class had been largely dismantled, and many former samurai had turned their efforts to lawmaking. This is the era in which the famous author Ryunosuke Akutagawa began writing his short stories that Kurosawa would later draw inspiration from. *The Journal of Japanese Studies* features Hiromi Sasamoto-Collin's analysis of how the lawmakers embedded gender inequality in the new structures of state.⁵ At the peak of the Meiji period, the samurai turned legislators passed the Criminal Code of 1880. It determined that a "wife guilty of adultery shall be punished by imprisonment for no less than six months" while adultery for husbands was perfectly legal, and if a husband "killed or injured her or her lover immediately at the actual place [kansho] where they were discovered, the crime is excusable". The code is a manifestation of cultural values that direct shame to perceived expressions of sexuality by Japanese women. It was highly critical of any sort of promiscuity or deviation from the household system's mandate of a woman's duty to maintain her virtue for her

⁴ Wakita Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the "Ie" in Japan: An Overview from the Medieval Period to the Present", translated by David P. Phillips. *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* no. 4 (1993): 83. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42772054>

⁵ Hiromi Sasamoto-Collins, "The Emperor's Sovereign Status and the Legal Construction of Gender in Early Meiji Japan" *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 43 no. 2 (2017): 271. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26448192> .

husband. This legal attitude shapes the judiciary proceedings of the trial in Kurosawa's *Rashomon*.

The testimonies and Kurosawa's screenplay are an adaptation of two short stories written by Ryunosuke Akutagawa in the 1910s, titled "Rashomon" and "In A Grove", with many of the film's misogynistic themes derived from the original source material. Akutagawa's 1915 short story "Rashomon" is the namesake of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. Though the film follows a different plot, Kurosawa incorporates the setting of the rainy, desolate conditions under the Rashomon gate for the prelude with the Buddhist monk, woodcutter, and commoner as well as the dehumanization of older women. In "Rashomon", the main character, a discharged servant of a samurai, finds a gaunt wigmaker with an unattractive appearance. The story is centered on wigmakers' alarming nature and the narrator's distaste for her.⁶ The wigmaker supports a stereotype commonly found in media where older women are monstrous, otherworldly beings with an off-putting aura that contrasts the qualities of the protagonist. This is evident in the popularity of evil stepmothers or meddling older witches who draw attention to the sensuality and purehearted nature of their female counterparts. For example, Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, who has greyed hair and a pinched appearance, is abusive towards her hardworking stepdaughter.⁷ The American film was released the same year as *Rashomon*, showcasing that during this time the archetype was present throughout various forms of international media.

Akutagawa has the narrator paint a bleak image of the wigmaker as a "white-haired and monkey-like" individual that acted "like a monkey searching for fleas on its child" as she leans over the bodies and plucks the hair from their heads.⁸ The attribution of the wigmaker as animalistic does more than suggest she is no longer human; it also separates her from the realm of society in which Japanese women are treated with care and are seen as valuable. Since she no longer has the sex appeal of a younger woman, the patriarchy, which prioritizes a woman's physical appearance and fertility, deems her

⁶ Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, translated by Takashi Kojima (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 3-9.

⁷ Wilfred Jackson et al., director. *Cinderella*. (1950, Walt Disney Productions), Disney+. <https://www.disneyplus.com/browse/entity-f7272318-0b08-46f5-b89e-284b3e8a7234>.

⁸ Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 6.

worthless and discardable. The wigmaker belongs to the group of older women that are past their child-bearing age but are still expected to benefit society by managing household affairs. There is an expectation that a woman her age should still be taking care of her husband and grandchildren. However, Akutagawa's narrator points out that "No ordinary person could be burning a light up here in the Rashomon on a rainy night", insinuating that she does not subscribe to ordinary societal expectations for older women and does not have a household.⁹ Hence, the "hag" has lost not only her fertility but also her familial duty. This influences how the narrator deems her sub-human creature with little to no worth.

Although, her lack of worth does not diminish her power, as Akutagawa describes how the narrator's "hairs on his head were growing thick", after realizing that the wigmaker is making wigs from corpses.¹⁰ His physical reaction to the sight of her parallels that of a prey animal encountering a predator. The wigmaker has ability to incite fear in men, who are supposed to exude strength rather than vulnerability. Her power over the man directly challenges the patriarchal hierarchy in place, during both 1915 and 1950, where men's power could only be undermined by other men. According to Haruko, the wigmaker's characterization maintains the "assumption that men are associated with civilization and women with the primitive", an assumption was part of the 家 (ie) household system.¹¹ Therefore, while her existence poses a threat to the patriarchy, the harmful attitude directed towards her defiant behavior is a continuation of a patriarchal historical trend. This is present how women were still not allowed to participate in "civilization" and vote in elections as most countries did not grant women's suffrage until widespread suffrage movements broke out after 1915. It was an effective tactic for the patriarchy to refer to women as "beastly" and "crazy" during these movements as well, in order to disregard their demands as absurd. In the wigmaker's case, the way the narrator demonized her effectively diminished her challenge to patriarchal norms as the act of a deranged person. With a terrifying presence that

⁹ Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 5.

¹⁰ Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 6.

¹¹ Haruko, "Women and the Creation of the "Ie" in Japan: An Overview from the Medieval Period to the Present", 84.

haunts the readers and challenges the narrator's masculinity, the wigmaker's character emphasizes how older women are often stigmatized because they do not conform to the androcentric ideal of subordinate, desirable women.

Likewise, in Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, the character of the Shinto medium who gives the third and final testimony is played by an older woman with greying hair. A Shinto medium serves as a bridge between the living and spirit world. In the film, she summons the murdered man to take control of her, providing the samurai's testimony in his own voice and likeness. Her occupation directly links her to the supernatural, compared to the wigmaker in "Rashomon" who is associated with the supernatural through the narrator's perspective. The actress for the medium, Noriko Honma, is only 13 years older than the actress for Masago, Machiko Kyo, and yet their roles and appearances in the film are vastly different.¹² Kurosawa's opening scene for the medium's character has her shaking a rattle. The medium incites a disturbance to beckon the spirits and becomes possessed, compared to the wife's peaceful introduction of her serenely riding on horseback covered in an expansive veil.¹³ This serves as another representation in media of an older woman whose foil is a younger, attractive female character. The medium goes against the expectations that women should be quiet and not interfere in affairs outside of the household. The scene where the dead man possesses the medium creates a tense, frightening atmosphere through its use of the actress's unblinking eyes, canine-like breathing sounds, the wind blowing in her face, and an increasing tempo of the drums.¹⁴ Therefore, Kurosawa replicates how Akutagawa typecasted older women into social outcasts associated with the supernatural. In the film, Machiko Kyo is also given a softer appearance from the styling team, with distinct downturned eyebrows that create an aura of innocence and desperation for her character. On the other hand, the medium has harsh features and drastic, upturned eyebrows, creating a hair-raising appearance that makes her seem like a crazed, mischievous individual. The intentional, detail-oriented approach to the contrasting appearances of the medium and Masago further cements their status as foil characters

¹² "Rashomon." IMDb, 2025. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0042876/>.

¹³ *Rashomon*, 0:51:44 & 0:13:50.

¹⁴ *Rashomon*, 0:51:44.

in Kurosawa's film. Kurosawa's depiction of these characters showcases his adherence to the social categorizations of older women as undesirable and younger women as inherently sensual.

Akutagawa's other short story "In a Grove", published in 1922, is what Kurosawa's plot development is largely contrived from. The short story assigns the blame of the rape to the samurai's wife and depicts the act as more of an inevitability rather than a crime. Similar to the film, in the short story, Tajomaru, a wild bandit at large in society, is responsible for the rape and in some accounts the samurai's death. Akutagawa showcases that Tajomaru's decision to rape the samurai's wife is spurred on by a momentary blip in the woman's virtue. Tajomaru claims that a "puff of wind lifted her veil, and I caught a peek of her".¹⁵ In this sense, Tajomaru's violation of Masago's personal autonomy is depicted as reasonable as he was tempted by a promiscuous visual. The act of her veil lifting was seen as a violation of the Japanese standard for female modesty at the time. The patriarchal system often does not give significant consideration to the intent, such as whether this was purposeful on the woman's part, compared to the result. For rape, that brief glimpse is all that is needed to justify his act. It is presumed that this is the natural order of things, where a woman who is immodest with her appearance is asking for male attention, as assumption that carried onto the modern age. Meanwhile to explain his decision-making behind the murder, Tajomaru must share his entire background and personal philosophy, and he acknowledges its immoral quality.

In addition, Akutagawa does not have Tajomaru describe the act of raping the samurai's wife at all in his confession. Instead, Tajomaru simply asserts that, after he easily defeated her self-defense efforts, he "was able to make the woman [his] without taking her husband's life".¹⁶ This claim understates the act of raping an individual as a mere expression of a man's biological impulse rather than a brutal, violent action. It also once again puts the act of rape in direct contrast with murder, which is seen as the ultimate violation of humanity. Similarly, the woman's confession is also focused on

¹⁵ Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 13.

¹⁶ Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 14.

what the act entails for the men as she exclaims, “How humiliated my husband must have felt!”.¹⁷ There is no description of the crime directed towards her but instead a focus on the dishonor that she has brought to her family and her husband through the violation of her virtue. The samurai’s testimony, told through the medium, reveals the embedded victim-blaming mentality that both the men have. After Masago begs Tajomaru to kill her husband due to him witnessing her dishonor, Tajomaru asks the husband if he should kill her instead. The husband responds, “For this, if nothing else, I am ready to forgive the bandit of his crimes”.¹⁸ The influence of the Criminal Code of 1880 manifests in the nonchalant manner of Tajomaru’s offer to kill the wife in the location where the rape occurred, since the murder of the wife after such an act is seen as excusable. Akutagawa creates an alliance through the husband’s appreciation of Tajomaru offering to help avenge his wife’s betrayal, even though Tajomaru was the cause of the betrayal. Through this representation of male camaraderie in the husband’s account, Akutagawa ostracizes the woman and implies that the rape, which she has brought upon herself, was more unforgivable than Tajomaru’s murder. Akutagawa’s writing puts forth the woman’s loss of virtue, Tajomaru’s justification for the rape, and her overwhelming shame to make her the true villain of the story rather than Tajomaru.

Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* stays true to much of the original source material of “In a Grove” and glosses over the rape, with only Tajomaru’s account directly referencing the sexual encounter. In the film, the level-headed monk only claims that one tragedy has occurred: “A man has been murdered”.¹⁹ The monk is someone who the audience automatically trusts and sees as reliable due to his occupation, so his words reinforce the narrative of disregarding what has happened to the woman. Kurosawa centers the tension of the movie over the man being murdered, even though the rape is the driving force of the sequence of events in each account. It is ironic that there is little focus on the rape in the film considering that in, *The Films of Kurosawa*, the author Donald Richie states that Kurosawa has credited the film’s popularity to the fact that, “it is about this rape”.²⁰ Richie’s leading academic text on Kurosawa paints the filmmaker in a more

¹⁷ Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 16.

¹⁸ Akutagawa, *Rashomon and Other Stories*, 18.

¹⁹ *Rashomon*, 0:13:12.

²⁰ Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 75.

positive light, praising the brilliance of his work and how his films contain unique messages that often subvert aspects of traditional Japanese thought. However, by centering the film around the rape, but not the veritable act itself or how it affected the woman, Kurosawa depicts the importance of rape as the aftermath of a woman losing her virtue and dishonoring her husband. The plot follows how the rape affects the male characters instead, whether it be through how the disgrace leads to the men fighting or the anger of the husband witnessing it.

Likewise, the only scenes of the rape that Kurosawa chose to shoot are through Tajomaru's perspective. In her book *Framed: Women in Law and Film*, Orit Kamir argues this makes, "Tajomaru's version the exclusive account of the sexual encounter", and by showing it as an on-screen flashback, it influences the audience to believe they are seeing an authentic version of what happened.²¹ There are no other perspectives of the rape shown in the film, but rather vague descriptions provided, and while the sequence of events differs in each testimony, the descriptions largely support Tajomaru's account of the rape. This makes it easy for Kurosawa to convince the audience to assign blame to the wife, paralleling Akutagawa's victim-blaming mentality in "In a Grove". Additionally, in an article published in the *Journal of Musicological Research*, Robynn Stilwell points out that the entirety of the woman's testimony is scored by, "an obvious parody of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*, a piece with a distinct reputation for its eroticism and seductiveness".²² Kurosawa knew the piece's reputation and specifically asked for Fumio Hayasaka, the composer responsible for the film's score, to replicate it. The sultry soundtrack further competes with the woman's voice and tints her account in the lens of a seductress who lured Tajomaru in through her erotic acts, looks, and sexuality.

Through Tajomaru's exclusive account of the rape, Kurosawa even portrays rape as a consensual act. Tajomaru's testimony has a scene that centers on the samurai's wife dropping her dagger straight into the ground, and reciprocating affection to Tajomaru

²¹ Orit Kamir. *Framed: Women in Law and Film* (Duke University Press, 2006), 58.

²² Robynn J. Stilwell, "The 'Rashomon Effect' Effect: Post-Orientalism in the Era of #MeToo" *Journal of Musicological Research*, 40 no. 1 (2020): 77. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01411896.2020.1754128?scroll=top&needAccess=true#abstract>

with reaching hands.²³ The dagger represents the woman's resistance against Tajomaru's actions, so by dropping the dagger, Tajomaru's account illustrates how she gave up resisting and willingly participated in the sexual encounter. Hence, the movie aligns with Japan's long-lasting legal definition of rape as a forcible act of sexual intercourse rather than a non-consensual one, which was eventually altered in 2023. Kamir also argues, "Not even the woman is permitted by the film to portray her rape as anything other than complicit adultery".²⁴ Rape as complicit adultery follows a societal ideal that a woman is supposed to preserve her honor at all costs, even if that meant following the bushido code for women and using her dagger, as intended, to end her own life after being dishonored. In the context of sexual entitlement, the woman is not viewed as a victim, but as an individual that allowed this to happen to herself. This entitlement grants men the right to have sex with women regardless of consent. Hence, the act is still classified as adultery because the man simply exercised his natural right while the woman allowed it to happen despite her marriage status. By portraying the woman as the perpetrator of the act of adultery, the film also parallels the Civil Code of 1880's implication that men cannot legally commit adultery if the woman is always at fault.

The film also shows how Kurosawa reproduces the misogynistic values of his society by discrediting female voices. The wife in the film is controlled by what the men around her think about her dishonor. The only voice she is allowed to emit is begging for the surviving man to take her away and pleading for her husband to kill her.²⁵ Both scenes are filmed with an overhead shot with Masago on her knees. Even in her own account, she is in both a physical and social position that requires her to be subservient to the men and use her voice to reconcile with them. The account of the samurai's wife is also rebuked by the commoner who, under the loud sound of the rain falling, mumbles, "But women use their tears to fool everyone. They even fool themselves,".²⁶ This claim establishes women as unreliable witnesses, undermining any of the audience's sympathy towards Masago during her earlier account. In a film about the inconsistent nature of

²³ *Rashomon*, 0:30:40.

²⁴ Kamir, *Framed: Women in Law and Film*, 66.

²⁵ *Rashomon*, 0:31:52 & 0:44:49.

²⁶ *Rashomon*, 0:49:24.

truth, the commoner's statement still stands out. While the probability of lies is highlighted throughout the film, fooling a person with tears is not a lie but rather a sneakier way of misleading a person. Stilwell describes it as "a kind of passive-aggressive power play that a nice, clean lie doesn't use".²⁷ Women's sins are hence scrutinized on a different level than the men's in the film, with the wife being associated with dirty tricks. Therefore, even the lies spoken from a male voice are allotted more respect, and the nature of what constitutes a justifiable lie is used to perpetuate the idea that women are more untrustworthy than men.

In an article in the *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, Erik Lofgren counters Donald Richie's claim that *Rashomon* is a film that escapes the traditional patterns of Japanese thought. Instead, she argues that by portraying the rape through male perspectives, it continuously reinforces traditional patterns of Japanese thought by reifying "women in a position subject to the dominant male voice."²⁸ The submissive female voice is continuously imparted through the wife's pleas directed towards the male characters in every account. The female voice in the film is also literally silenced in the form of the medium, who speaks through the husband's voice rather than her own. Despite being one of the only female characters, her entire purpose is to serve as a tool for delivering the husband's androcentric account of the events.²⁹ Therefore, the medium is representative of how, despite Kurosawa's film having female characters, no autonomous, individualistic female voices are expressed. Lofgren argues that the way the medium's character is used in the film is "parallel to the way *Rashōmon*...seeks to subsume the crime against the wife into the male narrative of murder".³⁰ Even though her character is an integral part of the plot, her existence is underscored by the man's possession of her and his account of the events.³¹ Thus, both Kurosawa's film and Akutagawa's "In A Grove" clearly use rape as a plot device, evident by the story being

²⁷ Stilwell, "The 'Rashomon Effect' Effect: Post-Orientalism in the Era of #MeToo", 83.

²⁸ Erik Lofgren, "The Interstitial Feminine and Male Dominance in *Rashōmon*" *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 7 no. 2 (2015): 127, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01411896.2020.1754128>.

²⁹ *Rashomon*, 0:52:20.

³⁰ Lofgren, "The Interstitial Feminine and Male Dominance in *Rashōmon*", 122.

³¹ Lofgren, "The Interstitial Feminine and Male Dominance in *Rashōmon*", 122.

framed in the context of a trial, that is not intended to obtain justice for the woman but instead to find out how she played a role in her husband's demise.

Overall, Kurosawa's *Rashomon* is a faithful adaptation of Akutagawa's short stories, with little to no alterations of the misogyny in the original source material, demonstrating a continuation of conservative social norms towards women from the 1910s to the 1950s in Japan. To reproduce the misogynistic values of the film's setting for a 1950s audience, Kurosawa utilizes filmmaking techniques such as contrasting visuals, overhead shots, and music scores. He portrays how older women often subverted patriarchal norms and were associated with the supranatural, in his Shinto medium character, while younger women were expected to be the epitome of both sensuality and subservience, in his depiction of Masago. *Rashomon* facilitates the traditional expectations of Japanese women by assigning the samurai wife the responsibility for the rape with an overarching victim-blaming mentality, silencing the autonomous female voice in the film to create one-dimensional female characters, and using rape as a simple plot device in the context of a man's murder. Despite being one of Kurosawa's most famous films, the misogynist lens Kurosawa shot *Rashomon* through do not hold up well against increased social equality for women and changing laws in Japan that now define rape as non-consensual as of 2023.³²

³² Juliana Kim, "Japan Expands the Definition of Rape and Raises the Age of Consent to 16 from 13," NPR.org, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/17/1182659759/japan-rape-law-nonconsensual-sex-age-consent-16>.

Bibliography

- "Rashomon." *The Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*, 2025. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0042876/>.
- Akutagawa, Ryunosuke. *Rashomon and Other Stories*. Translated by Takashi Kojima, W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.
- Haruto, Wakita. "Women and the Creation of the "Ie" in Japan: An Overview from the Medieval Period to the Present". Translated by David P. Phillips, *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* no. 4 (1993): 83. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42772054>
- Jackson, Wilfred, Hamilton Luske, and Clyde Geronimi, directors. *Cinderella*. (1950, Walt Disney Productions), Disney+. <https://www.disneyplus.com/browse/entity-f7272318-0b08-46f5-b89e-284b3e8a7234>.
- Kamir, Orit. *Framed: Women in Law and Film*. Duke University Press, 2006.
- Kim, Juliana. "Japan Expands the Definition of Rape and Raises the Age of Consent to 16 from 13." *National Public Radio (NPR)*, June 17, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/17/1182659759/japan-rape-law-nonconsensual-sex-age-consent-16>.
- Kurosawa, Akira, dir. *Rashomon*. 1950; Daiei Film. Criterion Collection. https://www.criterionchannel.com/rashomon?utm_source=criterion.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=watch-now&utm_content=film.
- Kurosawa, Akira. *Something Like an Autobiography*. Translated by Audie E. Bock, Vintage International, 1983.
- Lofgren, Erik. "The Interstitial Feminine and Male Dominance in *Rashōmon*", *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 7 no. 2 (2015): 113-132, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17564905.2015.1087146#abstract>.
- Richie, Donald. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. 3rd ed. University of California Press, 1996.
- Sasamoto-Collins, Hiromi. "The Emperor's Sovereign Status and the Legal Construction of Gender in Early Meiji Japan", *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 43 no. 2 (2017): 257-288. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26448192>
- Stilwell, Robynn J. "The 'Rashomon Effect' Effect: Post-Orientalism in the Era of #MeToo", *Journal of Musicological Research*, 40 no. 1 (2020): 76-94, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01411896.2020.1754128?scroll=top&needAccess=true#abstract>.

The Name Game: Taiwan, China, and Olympic Representation

Abby Lu

UNC Chapel Hill

Abstract

The Olympic Games serve as a critical display of international diplomacy and power, where symbolic representation often mirrors geopolitical reality. This paper examines the evolution of Taiwan's Olympic participation, focusing on representative name changes from "Republic of China" to "Chinese Taipei," and analyzing how the International Olympic Committee and its policies became an area where the People's Republic of China asserted sovereignty claims and applied political pressure. Furthermore, I explore the shifting internal landscape of Taiwanese identity, noting how athletes and the general public moved towards a more distinct identity separate from China. My findings indicate that while the "Chinese Taipei" name compromise was a strategic concession forced by Cold War pressures from the PRC, it inadvertently fostered a counter-narrative of Taiwanese agency, showing how Olympic nomenclature plays a role in cross-strait power dynamics and international legitimacy.

The Olympics are a symbol of international legitimacy – the requirement of athletes to represent nations at the Olympics transformed the Games into a unique diplomatic space where states compete in representation and nationalism as much as they compete in athletics. In the mid-1970s, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) began to narrow the scope of what entity could have a recognized National Olympic Committee. Since 1996, this entity was defined as an independent state recognized by the international community.¹ However, several current Olympic participants are not United Nations Member States, including Puerto Rico, Hong Kong, Palestine, and, perhaps most complex of all, Taiwan.

For Taiwan, Olympic participation is inextricably entangled with questions of sovereignty and international legitimacy. After the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) used global institutions to deny Taiwan international recognition. In October 1971, the UN ousted Taiwan and recognized the PRC as the sole representative of China.² Since then, the Olympic movement has been one major area in which Taiwan accepted arrangements that diminished its international status. This Olympic struggle between China and Taiwan illustrated how symbolic battles over names and representation mirrored a broader contest over national identity and power. The Olympics became a stage where China asserted sovereignty claims and Taiwan asserted an increasingly distinct identity – competing reactions that reflected rising cross-strait tension and shaped international narratives about Taiwanese legitimacy, emphasizing that an unresolved and disputed sovereignty.

The struggle for a distinct sport identity was not new to Taiwan. Taiwanese Olympic athletes have a long history of being unable to compete under their desired name due to shifting colonial and political situations. At the earliest, Chang Hsing-hsien

¹ International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter* (Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2025), rule 30, 68, <https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Documents/International-Olympic-Committee/IOC-Publications/EN-Olympic-Charter.pdf>

² United Nations General Assembly, *A/RES/2758 (XXVI): Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*, October 25, 1971.

Note: The wording of UNGA Resolution 2758 is particularly interesting. It expels “the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek” from the UN rather than expelling “Taiwan,” leaving an interesting gray area of potential for Taiwan’s presence and representation in the UN.

(張星賢), the first Taiwanese Olympian, was forced to compete under the Japanese team in 1932, as Taiwan was then a colony under the Japanese empire.³ Following World War II, Japan relinquished control of Taiwan, and the nationalist Republic of China (ROC) government retreated to the Taiwanese island following Communist control of the mainland. At the 1960 Rome Games, Taiwan's delegation competed under the name "Taiwan" but held up an "under protest" sign during the opening ceremony. At that time, Taiwan wanted to be recognized as the "Republic of China," claiming that they were the legitimate representative government of China in the One-China debate. ROC officials argued that their National Olympic Committee represented the legitimate government of China, while the PRC maintained that recognition of any Taiwanese representation violated the One-China principle. Over the following decades, the PRC gained diplomatic recognition, isolating Taiwan further. However, sentiment about national identity in Taiwan shifted towards a local identity separate from the China-centric framework, showing a modern repositioning toward the right to be called "Taiwan."⁴

By the mid-1970s, shifting diplomatic recognition towards the PRC transformed the Olympic Games into a key arena for cross-strait political confrontation. States increasingly recognized Beijing as the sole representative of China, which made Taiwan's position in international sport vulnerable. At the 1976 Montreal Games, Canada banned Taiwanese athletes from competing due to pressure from the PRC. In response, the IOC threatened to cancel the Games unless Canada relented on the issue.⁵ The U.S., which then held formal diplomatic ties with the Republic of China, even received 100 telegrams urging a withdrawal from the Games in solidarity unless Canada softened its stance on Taiwan.⁶ The IOC and the U.S. approved a compromise by Canada

³ Han Cheung, "Taiwan in Time: Identity Crisis of the Taiwanese Olympian," *Taipei Times* 台北時報, September 29, 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2024/09/29/2003824509>.

⁴ Benjamin Herscovitch, "Five One-Chinas: The contest to define Taiwan," *Lowy Institute*, January 2025, <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/one-china-contest-to-define-taiwan/>

⁵ Robert Trumbull, "Threat to Cancel Olympics Made Over Taiwan Dispute," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/10/archives/threat-to-cancel-olympics-made-over-taiwan-dispute-threat-to-cancel.html>

⁶ Steve Cady, "Canada Softens on Taiwan; Start of Olympics Assured," *The New York Times*, July 16, 1976, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/16/archives/canada-softens-on-taiwan-start-of-olympics-assured.html>

that would allow Taiwan to participate without calling themselves the ROC.⁷ Nonetheless, Taiwan rejected this proposal, citing political discrimination, and withdrew from the Games.⁸ The Olympic Games, supposedly an apolitical arena, was an area where PRC pressure demonstrated the politicization of Olympic representation, pushing the idea of Taiwanese illegitimacy. The resistance from the U.S. reflected ideological lines and Cold War anticommunism themes, and Taiwan's initial reaction suggests strong defiance to the PRC. These confrontations also shaped global perceptions of Taiwan, as the narrative of contested sovereignty was broadcasted to an international audience that increasingly viewed the issue through the lens of PRC pressure and Cold War geopolitics.

In the late 1970s, Taiwan's use of the "Republic of China" name was increasingly contested within international sport organizations. In 1979, the IOC passed the Nagoya Resolution, which officially stripped Taiwan of the ROC name, flag, and anthem, and forced Taiwan to go by the name "Chinese Taipei."⁹ In the IOC Olympic Review, then IOC President Lord Killanin called the name "Republic of China" a "political definition which is not internationally recognized, and thus involves the IOC politically, bringing it into conflict with the 120 countries which do not recognize the 'Republic of China' under that name."¹⁰ This attempt to neutralize the name situation did not hide the reality of shifting Cold War diplomatic alignments, which were already forming a pattern not only in formal diplomatic relations, but also in sport. An increasing number of international sports federations expelled Taiwan in favor of admitting China. Chi Cheng, a Taiwanese sprinter and later secretary general of Taiwan's Track and Field federation, said that these decisions were "worse than expulsion, it is forceful absorption," noting that Beijing had no jurisdiction over the athletes in Taiwan.¹¹ Taiwan did not agree to the "Chinese

⁷ Cady, "Canada Softens on Taiwan; Start of Olympics Assured."

⁸ "Diplomatic Controversies," Olympics, last modified April 18, 2024, <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/diplomatic-controversies>

⁹ "Resolution of the International Olympic Committee Executive Board," International Olympic Committee, October 25, 1979, <https://www.sport.gov.cn/wls/n23370746/c953251/part/597954.pdf>

¹⁰ Sir Michael Morris (Lord Killanin), "Memorandum from the President Lord Killanin approved by the Executive Board," *Olympic review : official publication of the Olympic Movement*, vol. 145 (1979): 629, <https://library.olympics.com/Default/doc/SYRACUSE/168903/olympic-review-official-publication-of-the-olympic-movement-vol-145-november-1979/>.

¹¹ Special to the New York Times, "Taiwan Hints at Olympic Entry," *The New York Times*, December 1, 1978, <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/12/01/archives/taiwan-hints-at-olympic-entry-actions-against-taiwan.html>.

Taipei” name decision immediately, opting to boycott the 1980 Moscow Games. After a series of objections and attempted appeals, Taiwan agreed to the name change in 1981 in order to stay in the Olympics, backing down from previous insistence on the ROC identity.¹² This decision aligned with the tactics of practical diplomacy that then Taiwanese President Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) initiated, aiming to maintain a firm One-China baseline yet preserving flexibility to join nongovernmental organizations. But, the imposition of the “Chinese Taipei” name framed Taiwan as a non-state actor, showing how Olympic nomenclature became a vehicle through which geopolitical power affected international understanding of Taiwan’s political status.

Relinquishing symbols of statehood in this way was a significant concession for Taiwan. Taiwan’s contested international status was key to the broader PRC diplomatic campaign to discredit Taiwanese statehood internationally. American observers also noted that Taiwan was avoiding “being shut out of international relations” through this concession as states continued to shift formal ties to Beijing.¹³ Rather than a voluntary compromise by Taiwan, this was a strategic concession forced by Cold War geopolitics, and paralleled changes in international relations. In 1979, the same year as the Nagoya Resolution, the United States also switched formal diplomatic ties to the PRC. The “Chinese Taipei” compromise reflected growing PRC power, putting Taiwan on losing ground in the fight for recognition not only in the sports world, but also in diplomatic power.

Even after the Cold War, Taiwan’s international representation dispute persisted. China continued to treat Taiwan’s participation in international events as a sovereignty threat, using Olympic symbolism as a way to prevent perceptions of Taiwanese statehood. At the 1994 Asian Games, China threatened to boycott if then Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui attended.¹⁴ Two years later, China claimed that any Taiwanese

¹² Joe Ritchie, “Taiwan Reaches Accord on Entry into Olympics,” *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1981, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/03/24/taiwan-reaches-accord-on-entry-into-olympics/ae222ac5-df7c-4d2c-accd-aea9e00d8b1c/>.

¹³ Ritchie, “Taiwan Reaches Accord on Entry into Olympics.”

¹⁴ “China rules out Olympic boycott,” *UPI*, February 13, 1996, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/02/13/China-rules-out-Olympic-boycott/5405824187600/>

officials attending the 1996 Atlanta Games would be seen by the mainland as an attempt to “create two Chinas.”¹⁵ Chinese language reporting and media have a large impact on the perception of the “Chinese Taipei” name as well. In the PRC, “Chinese Taipei” is often translated to 中國台北 (zhong-guo tai-bei), which directly translates to “China’s Taipei,” with the implication that Taipei is a part of China. Meanwhile, Taiwanese media translates it to 中華台北 (zhong-hua tai-bei), or “[ethnically] Chinese Taipei.” This PRC assertiveness escalated as political power in the mainland grew relative to Taiwan, and the Olympics remain an arena where the PRC exhibits narrative control. By controlling language, symbols, and the presentation of Taiwan’s identity in the Olympic context, the PRC actively worked to shape international perception to constrain Taiwan to a non-state identity.

In contrast, Taiwanese perception and response began to shift after the Cold War, largely symbolized through athlete statements and public opinion. In 2004, Chu Mu-yen won Taiwan’s first ever Olympic gold medal, opening his post-medal ceremony speech by saying “I am from Taiwan” in English to avoid association with the PRC, and dedicated his medal to the people of Taiwan.¹⁶ In 2021, badminton gold medalist Wang Chi-lin posted “I’m from Taiwan” online, and Taiwanese social media exploded with tags of “Team Taiwan” and “Taiwan is Taiwan.”¹⁷ Despite such excitement, the Taiwanese public still held major concerns about national security. In 2018, a referendum asked the Taiwanese public whether the Olympic name should be changed back to “Taiwan.” The majority voted against the plan, but not because they preferred the name “Chinese Taipei” over “Taiwan.” Rather, they were driven by a pragmatic fear that the Taiwanese would be banned from the Olympics if they broke the compromise of the Nagoya

¹⁵ UPI, “China rules out Olympic boycott.”

¹⁶ “Taekwondo team wins Taiwan’s first-ever Olympic gold,” *Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States*, August 27, 2004, https://www.roc-taiwan.org/us_en/post/505.html

¹⁷ Yimou Lee, “Taiwan’s Olympic medals revive debate over use of ‘Chinese Taipei,’” *ABS-CBN*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/08/03/21/taiwans-olympic-medals-revive-debate-over-use-of-chinese-taipei>

Resolution.¹⁸ Although constrained by the geopolitical reality, Taiwanese athletes used Olympic visibility to create a counter-narrative emphasizing Taiwanese distinctiveness.

These athlete statements paralleled a broader Taiwanese national identity shift away from China. Earlier disputes had focused on which government represented China, but growing public identification as Taiwanese pushed the narrative of Taiwan as a distinct political and cultural community. According to annual polls conducted by National Chengchi University, self-identification as Taiwanese increased from only 13.6% in 1991 to over 45% in 2004.¹⁹ A 2016 poll conducted by the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation found that 80% of respondents described themselves as Taiwanese, significantly among younger generations.²⁰ Freddy Lim, a lawmaker elected in 2016, said that the “Chinese Taipei” name was not only disrespectful, but inaccurate: Taiwanese Olympic athletes come from all over the island with varying ethnic backgrounds, so the name itself was not accurately representing the athletes.²¹ Unlike the Cold War era, Taiwan increasingly embraced a separate identity from the mainland, and athlete statements acted as resistance against Taiwanese national erasure. The Chinese Taipei Olympic Committee said in a statement that Taiwanese membership in international organizations was “marginalized by the Chinese mainland” since 1971.²² But despite name constraints, Taiwan used the Olympics to assert national agency. The forceful resistance from the PRC on the restriction of Taiwan’s naming ironically fostered a stronger Taiwanese identity.

Ultimately, the Olympics have shown continuity and change on the cross-strait conflict. The PRC continued to see Taiwan’s name as a sovereignty threat and pressured global institutions to enforce its claim. However, a diplomatically weak Cold War Taiwan forced into symbolic concession started to reclaim the athletic and public

¹⁸ Huang Chiao-wen (黃巧雯), “東奧正名公投未過 林鴻道發文感謝,” *Central News Agency*, November 25, 2018, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/201811250083.aspx>

¹⁹ Rich Chang, “‘Taiwan identity’ growing: study,” *Taipei Times* 台北時報, March 12, 2006, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2006/03/12/2003296948>.

²⁰ Abraham Gerber, “Taiwanese identity reaches record high,” *Taipei Times* 台北時報, May 28, 2016, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/05/28/2003647291>.

²¹ James Griffiths, “What’s in a name? Anger in Taiwan over ‘Chinese Taipei’ Olympics moniker,” *CNN Sports*, August 6, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/05/sport/taiwan-olympics-chinese-taipei>.

²² Griffiths, “What’s in a name? Anger in Taiwan over ‘Chinese Taipei’ Olympics moniker.”

narrative, defying a China-centric identity and displaying a reaction that evolved from survival to resistance. The case of “Chinese Taipei” revealed how geopolitics manifest in the Olympics, not just treaties, policies and battles. It tracked the aggressive expansion of the PRC sovereignty campaign and the rise of a separate Taiwanese identity, suggesting that the symbolic conflict over the “Chinese Taipei” name was a major part of geopolitical competition and cross-strait relations.

Bibliography

- Cady, Steve. "Canada Softens on Taiwan; Start of Olympics Assured." *The New York Times*, July 16, 1976. <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/16/archives/canada-softens-on-taiwan-start-of-olympics-assured.html>.
- Chang, Rich. "'Taiwan identity' growing: study." *Taipei Times* 台北時報, March 12, 2006. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2006/03/12/2003296948>.
- Cheung, Han. "Taiwan in Time: Identity Crisis of the Taiwanese Olympian." *Taipei Times* 台北時報, September 29, 2024. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2024/09/29/2003824509>.
- Gerber, Abraham. "Taiwanese identity reaches record high." *Taipei Times* 台北時報, May 28, 2016. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2016/05/28/2003647291>.
- Griffiths, James. "What's in a name? Anger in Taiwan over 'Chinese Taipei' Olympics moniker." *CNN Sports*, August 6, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/05/sport/taiwan-olympics-chinese-taipei>.
- Herscovitch, Benjamin. "Five One-Chinas: The contest to define Taiwan." *Lowy Institute*, January 2025. <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/one-china-contest-to-define-taiwan>.
- Huang Chiao-wen 黃巧雯. "東奧正名公投未過 林鴻道發文感謝." *Central News Agency*, November 25, 2018. <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/201811250083.aspx>
- International Olympic Committee. *Olympic Charter*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, 2025. Rule 30, p. 68. PDF. <https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Documents/International-Olympic-Committee/IOC-Publications/EN-Olympic-Charter.pdf>
- International Olympic Committee. "Resolution of the International Olympic Committee Executive Board." October 25, 1979. <https://www.sport.gov.cn/wls/n23370746/c953251/part/597954.pdf>
- Lee, Yimou. "Taiwan's Olympic medals revive debate over use of 'Chinese Taipei.'" *ABS-CBN*, August 3, 2021. <https://www.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/08/03/21/taiwans-olympic-medals-revive-debate-over-use-of-chinese-taipei>.
- Morris, Michael (Lord Killanin). "Memorandum from the President Lord Killanin approved by the Executive Board." *Olympic review : official publication of the Olympic Movement*, vol. 145 (1979): 629. <https://library.olympics.com/Default/doc/SYRACUSE/168903/olympic-review-official-publication-of-the-olympic-movement-vol-145-november-1979>.
- Olympics. "Diplomatic Controversies." Last modified April 18, 2024. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/diplomatic-controversies>.
- Ritchie, Joe. "Taiwan Reaches Accord on Entry into Olympics." *The Washington Post*, March 24, 1981. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/03/24/taiwan-reaches-accord-on-entry-into-olympics/ae222ac5-df7c-4d2c-accd-aea9e00d8b1c>.
- Special to the New York Times. "Taiwan Hints at Olympic Entry." *The New York Times*, December 1, 1978. <https://www.nytimes.com/1978/12/01/archives/taiwan-hints-at-olympic-entry-actions-against-taiwan.html>.
- Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States. "Taekwondo team wins Taiwan's first-ever Olympic gold." August 27, 2004. https://www.roc-taiwan.org/us_en/post/505.html.

Trumbull, Robert. "Threat to Cancel Olympics Made Over Taiwan Dispute." *The New York Times*, July 10, 1976. <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/10/archives/threat-to-cancel-olympics-made-over-taiwan-dispute-threat-to-cancel.html>.

United Nations General Assembly. *A/RES/2758 (XXVI): Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*. October 25, 1971.

UPI. "China rules out Olympic boycott." *UPI*, February 13, 1996. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1996/02/13/China-rules-out-Olympic-boycott/5405824187600/>

Is India's Democracy Backsliding?

Rithik Mandalapu

New York University

Abstract

Understood through the lens of its press freedoms, India's democracy is backsliding. To meet the categorization of a democracy, a nation is required to uphold certain institutional standards. In addition to the bare minimum requirements of free and fair elections, this involves fostering an environment of open political discussion, to which a free press is essential. As such, the BJP's actions against the free press signal a serious and more lasting change to India's political culture and the standing of its democracy. The current regime has confirmed its intent through the consolidation of media ownership and the repression of journalists. This unfortunate fact has been noted in multiple organizations measuring nations press freedoms, as seen in the form of a downward trend in the standard of the free press since the BJP took power. In this fashion, the BJP has severely damaged India's democracy, moving its categorization toward an authoritarian democracy.

Framework

When assessing the status of India's democracy from the perspective of its press freedom, it is clear that India is experiencing a process of democratic backsliding, as targeted BJP actions work to erode the standing of the free press. In the discussion of India's democratic backsliding, it is critical to first define a handful of key terms to better substantiate the argument being made. This includes defining democracy, democratic backsliding, and press freedoms, specifically why press freedoms are important in a democratic environment. This paper will work off of Amartya Sen's definition of democracy. In this view, democracy is defined as "not only an arena of coming to terms with diverse and possibly conflicting demands on society and governance, it is also the arena in which such conflicts can be addressed not just through some mechanical procedure of voting but through interactive discussion and public reasoning."¹ Fundamentally, what this means is that in addition to the standard *modus operandi* of democracy, an elected representative body achieved through a competitive struggle², democracy includes the presence of "unfettered public discussion and political action," which is "central to the philosophy of democracy."³ In a system, by its very definition meant to be ruled by the people, it is necessary to have the freedom to discuss and voice opinions without fear of government retaliation. Both to be true to the nature of democracy, but also for the real implications this can have on the social welfare of the people. It is not enough to hope that those in power will pursue the best policies for their people solely because power is reliant on them. A functioning democracy needs an active and educated citizenry that is free to discuss politics without the fear of government reprisal, so it may hold the government accountable in times of government malfeasance.⁴ The classification of a democracy as only holding free and fair elections is not enough to ensure a true democratic environment. This can be evidenced by the numerous electoral autocracies, regimes where "citizens have the right to choose the chief executive and the legislature through multi-party elections; but they lack...freedoms of association or expression that make the elections meaningful, free, and fair."⁵ In regimes that meet this classification, such as Turkey

¹ Annemie Maertens and Kaushik Basu, *The Concise Companion to Economics in India* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 23.

² Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, (Harper and Brothers, 1942), 269.

³ Maertens and Basu, *The Concise Companion*, 24.

⁴ Maertens and Basu, *The Concise Companion*, 22.

⁵ "Political Regime, 2021," Our World in Data, accessed May 8, 2025, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/political-regime?time=2021>.

under Tayyip Erdogan, competitive elections are held, but there is a widespread suspension of basic liberties as seen through the mass arrest of journalists, activists, academics, the ban on protests, widespread surveillance and censorship, and a crackdown on Kurdish political parties.⁶ A regime as this can hardly be viewed as a true democracy. Therefore, democracy can not only be understood under its minimalist definition but through the necessary inclusion of civil liberties, namely the right to political discussion and action. India itself recognizes and confirms this right as an essential aspect of its democracy, with Article 19 of the Constitution protecting the freedom of speech and expression.

With democracy defined, the logical next question is what importance does the free press play in upholding the true definition of democracy? The freedom of the press is defined as the protection of “newspapers, television shows, social media, or any other forms of news sources to freely investigate and report information to the public.”⁷ This also extends to not forcing publishers to report specific content and offering them the full freedom to investigate and report on what they choose. It is a well-documented fact that a free press plays a vital role in educating citizens on the issues of their nation. A free press fosters an environment in which true democracy can be upheld, as portrayed through the various connections between civic engagement and a free press. In Mozambique, voter turnout rose and citizens were more prepared to contact policymakers when they gained access to a free, independent newspaper.⁸ In Uganda, communities with better access to radio were found to be more politically active, while in Liberia, media coverage helped to significantly amplify the positive impact of local public debates on voter knowledge and turnout.”⁹ The importance of a free press in a democratic society can not be understated; it is the people’s source of education on various political issues and a check against abuses of power by the governing body.

Therefore, in understanding what true democracy means and how the free press fosters a democratic climate, it becomes clear that India is no doubt experiencing an era of democratic

⁶ SCF, “Turkey among top 10 countries with sharpest decline in freedoms: Freedom House,” *Stockholm Center for Freedom*, February 26, 2025, <https://stockholmcf.org/turkey-among-top-10-countries-with-sharpest-decline-in-freedoms-freedom-house/>.

⁷ “Freedom of the Press,” Legal Information Institute, last modified July 2024, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/freedom_of_the_press.

⁸ Dieter Zinnbauer, *Why Media Freedom Matters*, (Media Freedom Coalition, 2024).

⁹ Zinnbauer, *Why Media Freedom Matters*, 2024.

backsliding. Democratic backsliding can be defined as the purposeful deconstruction of democratic institutions or norms by elite actors.¹⁰ India, since its independence, has maintained and defended a free press. “In 1954, Justice Rajadhyaksha established a Press Commission. One of the main suggestions put forward by the committee was the creation of the All India Press Council. On 4 July 1966, it was officially founded as an independent, legal, quasi-judicial entity, led by Justice J.R. Mudholkar.”¹¹ The All India Press Council was created with the sole purpose of protecting the free press by preserving and enhancing the standards of India’s newspapers and news agencies. It is clear that a free press has been a norm of India’s political culture, to the extent of establishing a governing body to defend that norm. And although India has experienced its moments of authoritarian taste testing, these changes were never able to permanently alter India’s democratic norms, that is, until now. As the BJP begins to intentionally target the free press, it becomes obvious that India is experiencing a state of democratic backsliding.

Press Freedom in India

“India...is where the global battle for democracy is being fought.”¹² The current situation of India’s democracy is not one of extreme turns into dictatorship but of a slow erosion of its democracy into an authoritarian state. As Maya Tudor argues, as authoritarians learn to adapt and better hide their takeovers, democratic backsliding occurs not as an explosion but as a slow deterioration of institutions that uphold a democracy. Where now “troubled democracies are now more likely to erode than shatter.”¹³ This is indeed the case with India, at first glance, press freedoms do not appear to be under threat, with 393 news channels, 3,700 digital news publications, and over 70,000 newspapers, there seems to be a plurality of content which would likely express a diverse set of opinions and report on the issues the people face. However, this is not the case when looking closer at the issue, as the majority of news in India is controlled by a small number of conglomerates, most of which maintain close ties to the

¹⁰ Vineeta Yadav, “Why India’s Political Elites Are to Blame,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900442>.

¹¹ Resha Aanabbh, “Press Freedom in India: A Complete Analysis,” *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* 5, no. 8 (2024): 111-112, <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi>.

¹² Maya Tudor, “Why India’s Democracy is Dying,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900438>.

¹³ Tudor, “Why India’s Democracy is Dying,” 124.

current regime. This can best be seen through the example of Mukesh Ambani, India's richest man, and a man with "close ties to Modi,"¹⁴ he commands an estimated 14.1% market share of India's television news industry through his conglomerate Network18.¹⁵ While this may seem a small share, his news channels combine for a viewership of an estimated 800 million Indians, with that number only rising since its 2023 estimate.¹⁶ This point is further seen with the purchasing of India's last mainstream independent news channel, NDTV, by Gautam Adani, "another close Modi associate."¹⁷ This monopolization of the press by Narendra Modi's associates has major implications for the nature of free reporting in India. As a "study analyzing prime-time television debates on the channel Times Now...found not a single episode in which a debate criticized the Modi government in any form."¹⁸ And a separate study of "RepublicTV...found coverage to be consistently biased in favour of the Modi government and its policies."¹⁹ This demonstrates targeted actions by the Modi regime to control the output of the independent media.

Modi's actions do not simply end with the purchasing of news networks but extend to the targeted use of government action against those journalists or news organizations who critique the BJP narrative. In line with the regime's use of existing legislation to attack opponents, most notably employing the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA); journalist Rana Ayyub, a columnist for the Washington Post critical of the Modi regime, was stopped before attempting to travel abroad and charged under the PMLA for "misappropriating funds she raised for charitable



Narendra Modi present at the wedding ceremony of Mukesh Ambani's younger

¹⁴ Tudor, "Why India's Democracy is Dying," 128.

¹⁵ *Network18 Earnings Release: Q4 FY 2024-25*, (Network18 Media & Investments Ltd., 2025).

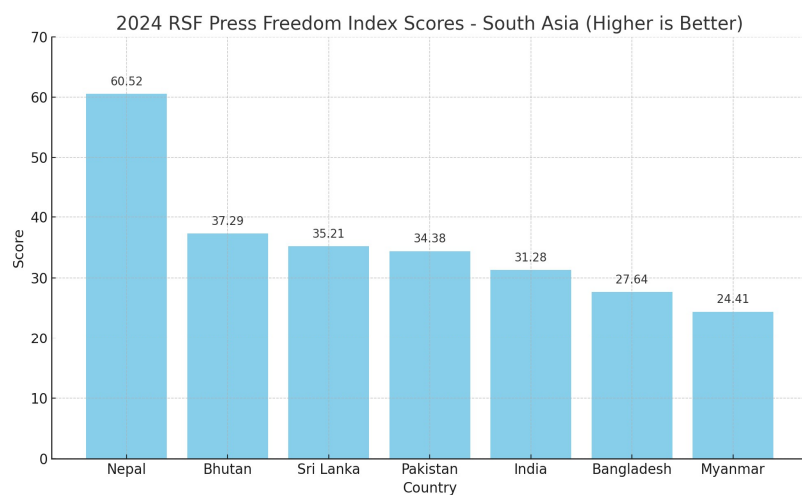
¹⁶ Tudor, "Why India's Democracy is Dying," 128.

¹⁷ Tudor, "Why India's Democracy is Dying," 129.

¹⁸ Tudor, "Why India's Democracy is Dying," 127.

¹⁹ Tudor, "Why India's Democracy is Dying," 128.

purposes.”²⁰ A similar example can be seen with Bobby Ghosh, an editor for the Hindustan Times, who launched a Hate Tracker as a means to “enumerate incidents of caste-, religious-, and ethnic-based violence across the country.”²¹ However, almost immediately after its launch, he abruptly stepped down from the organization with reports suggesting he was forced out by the Modi government. These are simply the most notable of the recorded cases of targeted actions against the free press, and are not outliers in an otherwise free environment, as “the Committee to Protect Journalists” noted “a growing number of questionable incarcerations and killings of reporters as well as the illegal use of spyware to surveil journalists’ phones.”²² This combination of targeted government action and the monopolization of news ownership portrays a disturbing trend emblematic of the survival of democratic norms under the Modi regime.



Moreover, the downward trend of India’s free press is not only based on anecdotal accounts but is sufficiently backed up by worldwide data. The Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index portrays this trajectory of decline since the BJP’s rise to power. The criteria for this index are based on five categories: a nation’s political context, legal framework, its economic context, its sociocultural context, and safety for journalists. On the index, measured from a 0 to 100 scale with 100 being a score representative of the best conditions for press freedom, India ranks at 159th out of

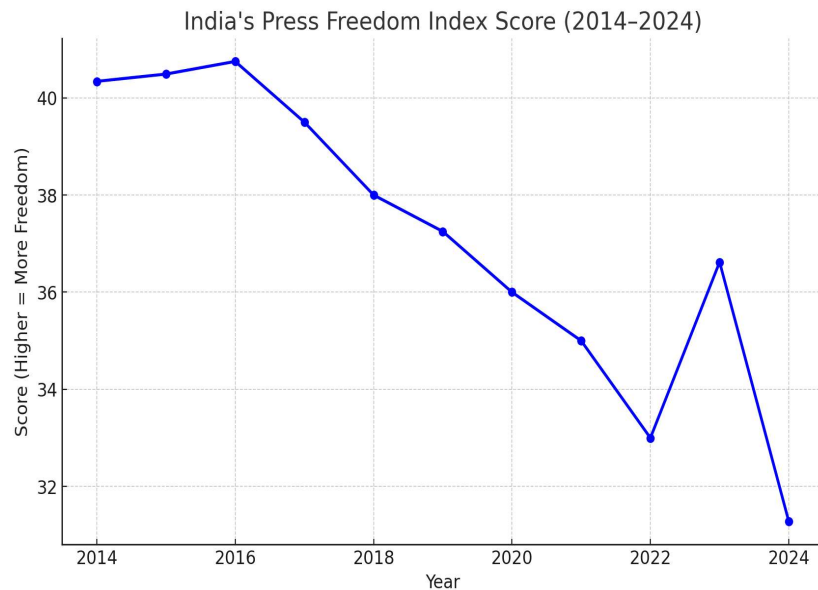
²⁰ Šumit Ganguly, “Modi’s Undeclared Emergency,” *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 148, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900440>.

²¹ Ganguly, “Undeclared Emergency,” 147.

²² Ganguly, “Undeclared Emergency,” 147.

180 nations with a score of 31.28.²³ With the exception of a sharp increase in 2023, the trend depicts a consistent decline in the ranking of India's press freedoms since Modi and the BJP's ascent to power. Amongst its South Asian neighbors, India now ranks among the worst, just above the military dictatorship of Myanmar and the politically turbulent environment of Bangladesh. This indicates a consistent path sought out by Modi's regime towards curbing the free press. This progression is also consistent with other indices measuring

democratic health. The V-Dem country graph portrays multiple indices under which governments can be analyzed, among which include a detailed analysis of media freedoms in various nations. And when viewing India under the



indicators of government censorship efforts of the media, the harassment of journalists, and media bias, this development becomes apparent. The journalist harassment indicator is measured by asking “are individual journalists harassed --- i.e., threatened with libel, arrested, imprisoned, beaten, or killed --- by governmental or powerful nongovernmental actors while engaged in legitimate journalistic activities.”²⁴ Additionally, the censorship effort indicator asks, “does the government directly or indirectly attempt to censor the print or broadcast media”²⁵ while the media bias indicator questions “is there media bias against opposition parties or candidates.” A score of 0 indicates the negative extreme, and 4 indicates a positive extreme for all

²³ Reporters Without Borders, *World Press Freedom Index 2024*, Reporters Without Borders, 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

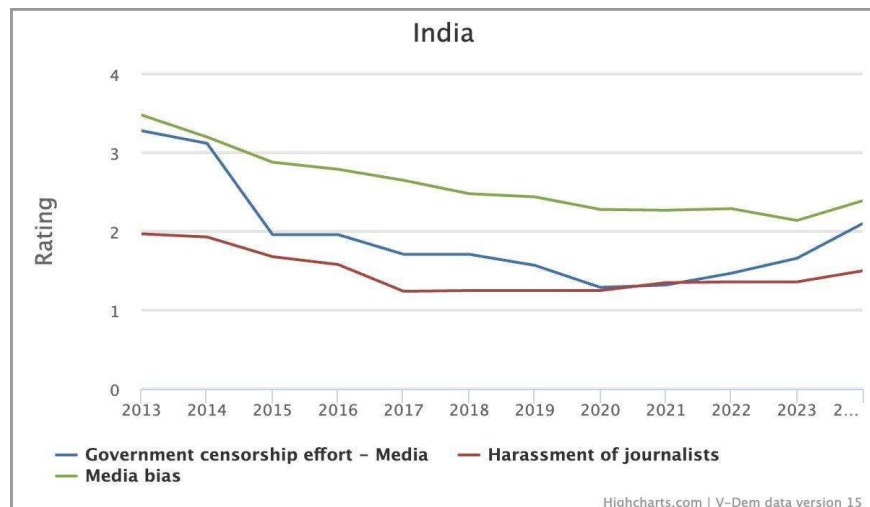
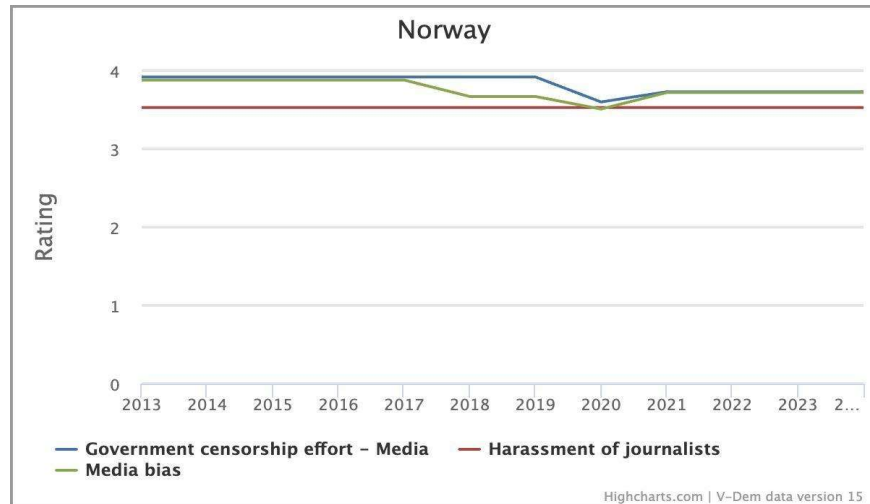
²⁴ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Country Graph, Accessed May 10, 2025. https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

²⁵ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Country Graph, Accessed May 10, 2025.

indices. Since Modi took office for his first term in 2014, India has experienced a trend towards an overall decline in all these indicators. The harassment of journalists has dropped from a score of 1.97 in 2013, meaning some journalists who offend elite actors are forced to stop, but many journalists are allowed to practice freely, to a score of 1.56 in 2024, a score closer to indicating that when journalists offend or critique elite actors, they are almost always forced to stop.²⁶

Additionally, the media bias indicator reflects a pattern of bias consistent with the increasing level of news media ownership by Modi affiliates. This score has subsequently dropped from 3.48 in 2013, indicating that,

for the most part, press coverage of the opposition was impartial, with the governing party receiving greater levels of press coverage, to 2.39 in 2024, meaning that some opposition was more or less impartial but gave significant negative coverage to at least one opposition party.²⁷ The most jarring decline can be seen through the government censorship indicator, as in 2013, the score stood at 3.28, meaning any attempts to censor were indirect and limited to sensitive issues, to a score of 2.1, in 2024, meaning



²⁶ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Country Graph, Accessed May 10, 2025.

²⁷ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Country Graph, Accessed May 10, 2025.

government efforts to censor are direct and limited to sensitive issues.²⁸ When comparing this to Norway, which ranks first in the world for press freedoms, according to the RSF, India is performing exceedingly inadequately in terms of its commitment to a free press. In the immediate years before Modi, India maintained at least the qualifying factors to be classified as a democracy. India's index scores were overall higher than they are now under Modi. What Modi has done is change the political climate of India, pushing it away from its democratic status, as evidenced by the RSF and V-Dem measurements. Given these facts, the situation becomes clear, assessing the condition of India's democracy from the aspect of its press freedoms, India is no doubt experiencing an age of democratic backsliding.

Counterargument

Some scholars challenge this argument by making the claim that India has never been a democracy. One of the most compelling comes from Tripurdaman Singh's article titled "The Authoritarian Roots of India's Democracy."²⁹ He argues that, given the particular situation of India's founding moment, with "the violence and upheaval of partition, the pressures of establishing political sovereignty, a largely uneducated and destitute population with limited knowledge or experience of democracy, deep-seated social divisions and hierarchies,"³⁰ India's central government was granted an excess of power and dominance over the states. He argues that this authoritarianism is not only a "feature of the Constitution" but "a mandate of it."³¹ He corroborates his argument by pointing to such legislation as the Preventive Detention Act and the Uttar Pradesh Gangster Act, which allow for the temporary suspension of certain civil liberties under specific conditions.³² He makes the distinction that India's freedoms have always been granted in a fairly unstructured manner, which expands and contracts "as per the executive's determination to intervene in social questions."³³ This points to his main

²⁸ Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Country Graph, Accessed May 10, 2025.

²⁹ Tripurdaman Singh, "The Authoritarian Roots of India's Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 133-143, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900439>.

³⁰ Singh, "Authoritarian Roots," 134.

³¹ Singh, "Authoritarian Roots," 136.

³² Singh, "Authoritarian Roots," 137.

³³ Singh, "Authoritarian Roots," 137.

argument that given India's constitutional construction and these legislative tools India is neither a consolidated democracy nor a full autocracy but rather its democratic institutions operate with inherent authoritarian tendencies. In this reading, Modi's regime is simply building upon and confirming the political history of India's 'democracy.' While this does serve as a compelling reading of India's political landscape, Singh's argument that India has never been a democracy is greatly overstated. Many of the most highly rated democracies in the world maintain laws that allow for the suspension of civil liberties. In Canada, a nation that ranks 5th in the world on the Freedom House index, an Anti-Terrorism Law, Bill C-51, allows the state the power to surveil its people and to preventively detain them.³⁴ In New Zealand, a nation that ranks 2nd on the same index, the Search and Surveillance Act of 2012 allows the police expanded power to conduct surveillance without significant judicial oversight.³⁵ But what separates these nations from outright autocracies is not the mere existence of these laws but the qualifying factors of a democracy: strong institutional checks, compliance with democratic norms, and the protection of civil liberties. While it is true that these nations have a greater degree of enforcement of their democratic norms than India, the point still stands. The presence of such laws does not alone determine the regime type. India's turbulent political history has been marked by a centralization of power and authoritarian-style legislation, yet it is imprecise to argue that India has never met the minimum criteria for a democracy. Despite its challenges, the nation has at least maintained a commitment to fair elections and free political debate. The nation has held consistent, competitive elections since its inception, with even Indira Gandhi obeying the results of the election after her post-Emergency loss. India also has a vibrant culture of political discussion, at least before Modi's government, as evidenced by the multitude of social movements, for instance, the India Against Corruption Movement, the JP Movement, and the Anti-Mandal Commission Protests. While Singh raises some

³⁴ "Understanding Bill C-51 in Canada: The Anti-Terrorism Act, 2015," Canadian Civil Liberties Association, last modified May 19, 2015, <https://ccla.org/get-informed/talk-rights/understanding-bill-c-51-in-canada-the-anti-terrorism-act-2015/#:~:text=WHAT%20IS%20IN%20THE%20C,may%E2%80%9D%20commit%20such%20an%20offence;,.>

³⁵ "Review of the Search and Surveillance Act 2012" Ministry of Justice, accessed May 10, 2025, <https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/key-initiatives/key-initiatives-archive/ssa/>.

important claims about India's democracy, his argument ultimately overstates the extent to which India fails to meet the criteria of a democracy.

Conclusion

In no uncertain terms, India has experienced an age of democratic backsliding as BJP actions unravel the threads of Indian democracy. It is through the concentration of news media ownership by Modi associates and the use of vaguely defined legislation to threaten journalists that the Modi regime has forced India's press to push forward his party's rhetoric. This fact has become an unfortunate consensus among organizations measuring democratic health. And while academics point to India's troubled political past as evidence for the fact that India has never been a democracy, and that therefore these actions are in line with the Indian system. That reading is far too hyperbolic and ignores the bare minimum qualities of democracy, free elections and free political discussion, which India had previously committed itself to. Yet, under the current regime, even those final criteria for democracy are under attack. Modi's targeting of the free press is but one piece in his larger plot to shore up power and to ensure a compliant citizenry. While it may be too alarmist to call a time of death for India's democracy, there is no doubt an unfortunate prognosis for its health.

Bibliography

- Aanabbh, Resha. "Press Freedom in India: A Complete Analysis." *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews* 5, no. 8 (2024): 109-115. <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi>
- Canadian Civil Liberties. "Understanding Bill C-51 in Canada: The Anti-Terrorism Act, 2015." last modified May 19, 2015. <https://ccla.org/get-informed/talk-rights/understanding-bill-c-51-in-canada-the-anti-terrorism-act-2015/#:~:text=WHAT%20IS%20IN%20THE%20C,may%E2%80%9D%20commit%20such%20an%20offence;>
- Ganguly, Šumit. "Modi's Undeclared Emergency." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 144-152. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900440>.
- Legal Information Institute. "Freedom of the Press." Last Modified July 2024, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/freedom_of_the_press.
- Maertens, Annemie., and Basu Kaushik. *The Concise Companion to Economics in India*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Ministry of Justice. "Review of the Search and Surveillance Act 2012." accessed May 10, 2025. <https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/key-initiatives/key-initiatives-archive/ssa/>
- Network18 Media & Investments Ltd. *Network18 Earnings Release: Q4 FY 2024-25*. (Mumbai: Network18, 2025).
- "Political Regime, 2021." Our World in Data. accessed May 8, 2025. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/political-regime?time=2021>.
- SCF. "Turkey among top 10 countries with sharpest decline in freedoms: Freedom House." *Stockholm Center for Freedom*, February 26, 2025. <https://stockholmcf.org/turkey-among-top-10-countries-with-sharpest-decline-in-freedoms-freedom-house/>
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. Harper and Brothers, 1942.
- Singh, Tripurdaman. "The Authoritarian Roots of India's Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 133-143. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900439>.
- Supreme Court Observer. "Pegasus Spyware Probe." accessed May 10, 2025. <https://www.scobserver.in/cases/manohar-lal-sharma-prime-minister-pegasus-spyware-probe-case-background/>.
- Tudor, Maya. "Why India's Democracy is Dying." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 121-132. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900438>.
- Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). Country Graph. Accessed May 10, 2025. https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.
- Yadav, Vineeta. "Why India's Political Elites Are to Blame." *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (2023): 162-172. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.a900442>.
- Zinnbauer, Dieter. *Why Media Freedom Matters*. Media Freedom Coalition, September, 2024. <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/MFC-Final-Report.pdf>.

Photo Citations

- Coppedege, Micheal. *Country Graph*. 2024. Distributed by Varieties of Democracy, https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/.

Jaiswal, Sujit. "The Ambani family poses for photos as they arrive at Friday's wedding ceremony in Mumbai." July 15, 2024. Photograph. Getty Images. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/15/style/ambani-wedding-mumbai-modi-kardashian/index.html>

Our Flag Means Liberation: The Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger in the Gen Z Protests

Matthew Ji-Yun Nguyen

University of Washington

Abstract

In the wake of the 2025 Gen Z protests, individuals took to the streets and waved symbols in protest of government corruption; among these symbols was the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger. The flag's appearance within these protests marks the first widespread usage of the flag as a symbol of protest. The flag created for the manga One Piece serves as the symbol of the story's main protagonist, Monkey D. Luffy. However, like other symbols used in protest movements, the values associated with the flag began to change as the Jolly Roger was adopted by protestors. The adoption of the One Piece flag by protestors reveals not only how the values represented in the manga reflect the protestors' values but also reveals the conditions of a symbol's universality. Through the analysis of multiple news articles and the manga One Piece, this paper argues that the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger became a symbol of revolution which reflected the varied values of the protestors who flew the flag. The Jolly Roger serves as a symbol of the protestors' hopes for the future and the unity that they share.

Introduction

On September 9, 2025, with the Singha Durbar Palace ablaze in the background, a flag hung from the building's golden gates.¹ The flag



Fig. 1 The Straw Hat Pirate's Jolly Roger in front of the Singha Durbar Palace. From Sunil Pradhan, Anadolu, September 9, 2025.

showed a skull and crossbones; the skull adorned with a yellow straw hat with a red ribbon. The flag flown originates from the 1997

Japanese manga *One Piece* by Eiichiro Oda, a running comic series with over 110 volumes and 1160 chapters. In the comic, the flag serves as the Jolly Roger of the crew of the Straw Hat Pirates, the pirate crew of the main character Monkey D. Luffy (モンキー・D・ルフィ), also known as Straw Hat Luffy (麦わらのルフィ).² Under his Jolly Roger, which wears his iconic Straw Hat, Luffy and his pirate crew sail the high seas in pursuit of their dreams. Within the real world, the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger (麦わらの一味の海賊旗) has shown up across the world as part of many recent Gen Z protests. Gen Z protests refer to political movements led by those born within the late 1990s and early 2000s, often with the aim of overthrowing their local government due to corruption and economic inequality. These protests surged in September 2025, spanning across multiple countries like Indonesia, Nepal, Madagascar, Morocco, Mexico, and the

¹ Lex Harvey, "Gen Z protesters are uniting behind a manga pirate flag," *Cable News Network*, September 19, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/19/asia/one-piece-flag-indonesia-nepal-protesters-intl-hnk-dst>. Fig 1, is from this article.

² Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece*, Volume 1: Romance Dawn (VIZ Media LLC, 2003). For context, manga is a term for Japanese comics and graphic novels. Eiichiro Oda writes and illustrates the entirety of *One Piece*; however, he has an editor who helps him correct mistakes. This paper uses the English translated versions of the manga, not the original Japanese versions. Fig. 2 is from this book.



Fig. 2 “The Straw Hat Pirate’s Jolly Roger.” By Eiichiro Oda.

Philippines. Some of the Gen Z protests are even ongoing as of December 2025. This paper aims to examine the importance of this symbol within these Gen Z protests, structured into two principal components: the establishment of the Straw Hat Pirates’ Jolly Roger as a symbol representing freedom, friendship, and liberation, and the connection of the usage of this symbol within Gen Z protests with generational camaraderie. This paper also aims to examine the values that the Straw

Hat Pirates’ Jolly Roger represents, how those values diffused with the flag, and how those values changed as the flag spread across nations and cultures.

Symbols Within Protests

Symbols are an integral part of revolutionary movements, as symbols allow individuals to rally beneath shared images that reflect the ideologies and beliefs protestors are fighting for. One example of this is the Guy Fawkes mask from the movie *V for Vendetta*, which rose to prominence during the Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States in 2011 as a symbol of populism and assertion that the many can overthrow the oligarchy.³ The use of the Guy Fawkes mask enabled protestors not only to express their beliefs but also to visually identify others with shared beliefs, as they wore these masks in mass protest movements marching through the streets of major cities. The spread of the use of the Guy Fawkes mask by protestors abroad from 2011 to 2016 allowed local movements to see themselves within a broader global movement, being the Movement of the Squares.⁴ These protests occurred primarily within the United States, Greece and Spain, with a push for the elevation of the vast majority (99%) over the rich and elite.

³ Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 98-99.

⁴ Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41. The Movement of the Squares 2011 was a wave of protests in reaction to social and economic inequality. These movements often involved occupying public squares with a horizontal organizational structure.

Scholarship on symbols within the context of resistance is extensive; however, as the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger originated within the last thirty years and only appeared on a large scale within the context of the Gen Z protests starting in September 2025, substantial scholarly analysis of the symbol does not exist. Therefore, the research methods within this paper shall be based on the methodology of works pertaining to a similar symbol of resistance, being the Raised Fist. Similar to the Straw Hat Jolly Roger, the Raised Fist was a symbol that adapted existing symbols by groups calling for increased power to the individual. In Sherwin Simmons' essay *Hand to the Friend, Fist to the Foe*, Simmons examines the creation of the symbol of the Raised Fist, going through the creation of fascist symbols in Germany in the 1920s to the usage of hands within the worker's movements to the first usage of the Raised Fist in 1928 in opposition to the fascist movement.⁵ The Raised Fist then became a symbol of Communism, aimed against Fascism, and a hand outstretched to other revolutionaries. Like the thesis of this paper, Simmons' essay evaluated the values attributed to a symbol of resistance and the uniting properties of an image. Like Simmons' essay, this paper will analyze the origins of the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger, then examine the widespread usage of the flag, alongside identifications of the values the symbol represents. In Gottfried Korff and Larry Peterson's essay *From Brotherly Handshake to Militant Clenched Fist: On Political Metaphors for the Worker's Hand*, a similar approach is taken, analyzing how hands have evolved as a symbol within Germany, then explaining the origins of the clenched fist as a product of spontaneous usage in 1880 strikes.⁶ The paper then analyzes the German Communist Parties' usage of the Raised Fist and how



Fig. 3 Poster of the Industrial Workers of the World, 1917.

⁵ Sherwin Simmons, "'Hand to the Friend, Fist to the Foe': The Struggle of Signs in the Weimar Republic." *Journal of Design History* 13, no. 4 (2000): 319–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3527066>.

⁶ Gottfried Korff and Larry Peterson, "From Brotherly Handshake to Militant Clenched Fist: On Political Metaphors for the Worker's Hand." *International Labor and Working Class History*, no. 42 (1992): 70–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27672022>. Fig. 3 is from this article.

the gesture gained and lost popularity over time, being used in contrast to the fascist symbol of an open hand “German” salute, being used by the Nazi party. Korff and Peterson’s work analyzes the values attributed to the hand and the evolution of its use; similarly, this paper will examine the Straw Hat Pirates’ Jolly Roger as a symbol in opposition to other beliefs and groups, in line with this essay’s thesis.

Historical Context

In this analysis of the Gen Z protests, a majority of the news articles analyzed were published during the Gen Z protests, August 2025 to December 2025. These articles were produced by a variety of news outlets, but are mainly from organizations based in the United States of America and the United Kingdom; made with the intention of spreading information on the protest movements within Southeast Asia. A majority of the sources cited in this analysis were accessed through digital means; similarly, the protestors used a variety of digital resources to gather, organize, and distribute information.

The Gen Z protests were in part facilitated by social media and began in response to rampant corruption within national and local governments in countries such as Indonesia, Nepal, Madagascar, and other developing nations. The rise of these youth-led protests follows the trend of the Movement of the Squares and the 2011 Arab Spring.⁷ During these protests, youth utilized online forums and other forms of media to organize and spread information about their protests. The widespread usage of social media allowed individuals across the world to have access to the messages of these protestors, sparking protests within their own countries as the youth drew parallels to their own experiences. The usage of social media also facilitated protestors’ ability to spread their messages in short-form content and use common words to voice their complaints, such as calling for the rise of “the people” and the “99%”; tactics similarly used in the Gen Z protests, serving as an outline.⁸ We also know that in the past, within

⁷ Clara Fong, “How Global Gen Z Protests Have Shocked and Transformed Governments,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 20, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-global-gen-z-protests-have-shocked-and-transformed-governments>.

⁸ Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 147.

countries such as Indonesia, where the recent 2025 Gen Z Protests started, there was already a history of the use of social media in past protest movements.⁹ The motivations behind the Movement of the Squares protests and the Gen Z protests are also similar, as both movements were a result of young individuals' discontent with their government systems.

I'm Luffy. The Man Who's Gonna Be King of the Pirates!

Born in Japan in 1975, Eiichiro Oda decided to become a manga artist at age four¹⁰. By age seventeen, Oda earned several awards as a manga artist and got hired by Weekly Shōnen Jump magazine. In 1996, Oda created his idea for a manga called “Romance Dawn”, starring Monkey D. Luffy as the protagonist. This later became *One*



Fig. 4. Cover of *One Piece* Volume 1. By Eiichiro Oda, 1997.

Piece, which began in 1997 as part of Weekly Shōnen Jump magazine. By 1999, Toei Animation began production of an anime (cartoon) version of it. Currently, the manga has sold over 500 million copies of volumes, separate from its inclusion in Jump magazine, making the series the most sold comic series in history.¹¹ The popularity of *One Piece* across the globe in both manga and anime form has allowed millions of individuals all over the world to resonate with the stories and characters within the story of *One Piece*. Its widespread popularity has also made the Jolly Roger a widely known symbol that individuals would immediately connect to the series, even if they had not personally read or

⁹ Bernardus H. Nugroho, “Digital Activism and Youth Participation in Indonesia: A Qualitative Study of Social Media’s Role in Contemporary Social Movements.” *Priviet Social Sciences Journal* 5, no. 10 (2025):91-105. <https://doi.org/10.55942/pssj.v5i10.603>.

¹⁰ Eiichiro Oda, “One Piece Blue: Grand Data File” (Shueisha, 2002).

¹¹ Rafael Antonio Pineda, “One Piece Manga Sets Guinness World Record With Over 500 Million Published,” *Anime News Network*, August 4, 2022. <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2022-08-04/one-piece-manga-sets-guinness-world-record-with-over-500-million-published/.188352>.

watched it. The story of *One Piece* has a simple preface. Gol D. Roger, King of the Pirates, found a treasure called the “One Piece”, which he left for the next generation to find, kicking off an age of pirates.¹² Among those who take to the seas is Monkey D. Luffy, born five years after the death of Gol D. Roger. He sets off at the age of seventeen to gather a crew of pirates to find the legendary “One Piece” and become the King of the Pirates.

To fundamentally understand the Straw Hat Pirates’ Jolly Roger, we should understand who Monkey D. Luffy is and why his story resonates with protestors. Monkey D. Luffy, since the beginning of the series, has had one goal: to become the King of the Pirates by finding the island that holds the legendary treasure called the “One Piece”. His dream is not for power or fame but rather because he believes that “the one who is the most free is the Pirate King.”¹³ The theme of freedom and the desire to be free has thus become a fundamental value associated with his flag. Another theme associated with his Jolly Roger is friendship, as every major conflict in the comic is initiated due to antagonists hurting Luffy's companions or acquaintances. For example, after the crew gains its first five members and crosses into the Grand Line, they befriend a girl, Princess Vivi. Together, they stop a civil war in her home kingdom started by a Pirate funded by the “World Government”, the governing body that controls all the kingdoms within the story.¹⁴ This event begins a pattern of the Straw Hat Pirates befriend someone, then fighting corruption. Later in the story, they must rescue a crewmate from the World Government, causing them to break into and decimate a heavily armed military base, burn the flag of the World Government, and declare war on the world.¹⁵ This event marks a strong anti-government message, which has become associated with the Straw Hat Pirates. The usage of the flag by protestors reflects these anti-government sentiments, as Gen Z protestors have similarly burned down government buildings and

¹² Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece*, Volume 1: Romance Dawn (2003). Fig 4, is from this book.

¹³ Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece*, Volume 61: Romance Dawn For The New World (VIZ Media LLC, 2012). The treasure known as the One Piece does not have a known description. Luffy conflates being a pirate with freedom, so he believes traveling the whole world and finding the treasure will make him the most free (The King of The Pirates).

¹⁴ Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece*, Volume 22: HOPE!! (VIZ Media LLC, 2007). The Grand Line is a part of the Ocean which the Straw Hat Pirates need to sail in to find the One Piece. The World Government is a governing body that has control over all of the kingdoms in the world of *One Piece*. Each kingdom is at most one island.

¹⁵ Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece*, Volume 41: Declaration of War (VIZ Media LLC, 2010). It should be noted that this anti-government message persists throughout *One Piece*, as the crew deposes multiple corrupt rulers.

have come into direct conflict with their governments.¹⁶ The Jolly Roger usage in protests has only been widespread in recent years, and this may be due in part to the revelation that Straw Hat Luffy is the reincarnation of the Warrior of Liberation in 2022.¹⁷ The explicit identification of Luffy as a pirate who fights for liberation, in turn, makes his flag a symbol of liberation. Thus, his Jolly Roger is a symbol that represents the freedom the pirates seek, the strength of their bonds, the fight against corruption, and the dreams of liberation.

Set Sail!

In August 2025, Indonesian truck drivers began to fly the Straw Hat Jolly Roger on their trucks in protest of the Indonesian government, in anticipation of August 17, the Indonesian Day of Independence.¹⁸ The flying of the flag was still beneath that of the Indonesian flag and served as a small act of protest, but not an outright objection to the ruling Government. Indonesian people began flying the flag in opposition to the rich lifestyles of the elite, as the majority of those in Indonesia lived in poverty, and truck drivers began attaching the flag to their vehicles in response to the Over Dimension Over Loading Bill (ODOL Bill). The bill would restrict the load that truck drivers could haul and increase criminal punishments against violators, which would reduce truck drivers' income, as shipping companies pay according to load; thus, drivers argued that the corporations should be punished for incentivizing overloading.¹⁹ Aside from the bill,



Fig. 5 Protestor carrying Indonesian National Flag and Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger, August 29, 2025.

¹⁶ Lex Harvey, "Gen Z protesters are uniting behind a manga pirate flag," Cable News Network, September 19, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/19/asia/one-piece-flag-indonesia-nepal-protesters-intl-hnk-dst>.

¹⁷ Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece*, Volume 103: Warrior of Liberation (VIZ Media LLC, 2023).

¹⁸ Rebecca Ratcliffe, "'A symbol of liberation': how the One Piece manga flag became the symbol of Asia's gen Z protest movement," *The Guardian*, September 23, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/24/how-one-piece-manga-flag-became-symbol-asia-gen-z-protest-movement-liberation>.

¹⁹ Gede Arga Adrian, "Overloaded Trucks Put Drivers at Legal Risk." E.d. Genis Dwi Gustati, Trans. Farizal Luqman Majid. *Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta*, July 3, 2025. <https://www.ums.ac.id/en/news/global-pulse/overloaded-trucks-put-drivers-at-legal-risk>.

protestors were upset over rising prices, budget cuts, and rising unemployment rates.²⁰ As one truck driver stated, the Straw Hat's Jolly Roger was "a symbol of my disappointment and resistance".²¹ This flag symbolizes both Indonesians' complaints about and resistance to the government. As the symbol began to spread from truck drivers to people protesting on the streets, the symbol was spray-painted on walls and flown by those marching. In a larger study of Indonesian protestors by Indonesian researcher Dina Nurul Fathiya, she found the flag served three functions: (1) it acted as a neutral unifying symbol, (2) allowed easy accessibility and effective exchange online, and (3) appeared as non-confrontational.²² The Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger, serving as a more neutral symbol, seems to imply that many of the protestors who raised the flag did not associate the flag with the manga but rather learned of the symbol by seeing it as part of the protest movement itself. The flag also served to unite the protestors in part due to its recognizability and quickly understood symbolic values, allowing it to spread easily. The Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger was seen as non-confrontational by Indonesian protestors unfamiliar with the flag, as the protests were not violent, the flag was always under Indonesia's national flag when flown, and the flag was seen as a cartoon flag. Despite the Indonesian public viewing the symbol as non-confrontational, police began cracking down on those displaying the flag, as some members of the Indonesian government saw the flag as an act of treason.²³ The violent reaction by law enforcement to protestors waving the Jolly Roger gave legitimacy to the flag as a symbol of protest and led to more individuals waving the flag as Indonesian citizens realized that the government feared a cartoon flag. Thus, the Straw Hat Jolly Roger in Indonesia took on the ideas of unity and anti-corruption, which the flag represents in *One Piece*.

²⁰ "Indonesians raise anime pirate flag in protest as nation marks independence," *Al Jazeera*, August 16 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/16/indonesians-raise-anime-pirate-flag-in-protest-as-nation-marks-independence>.

²¹ "Indonesians raise anime pirate flag in protest as nation marks independence," *Al Jazeera*, August 16 2025.

²² Dina Nurul Fathiya, "Pop Culture Protest Symbol: One Piece Flag in Non-Violent Political Expression in Indonesia." *Insight: International Journal of Social Research* 3, no. 1 (2025): 12–22, doi: 10.59888/insight.v3i1.73

²³ Chad de Guzman, "In Indonesia, Authorities Are Divided on How to React to People Flying the 'One Piece' Flag," *TIME Magazine*, August 15, 2025. <https://time.com/7309534/indonesia-one-piece-pirate-flag-protest-prabowo-free-speech-criticism/>

Shoot Down That Flag!

As the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger flew in the streets of Indonesia, it spread over to Nepal, where the people had similar gripes with the corruption in their government. Youth began spreading images online of the children of the wealthy political elites and tagged these images with

#nepokids.²⁴ The youth of Nepal condemned these wealthy elites as they enriched themselves while around

a quarter of Nepalis lived below the national poverty line. As outrage spread online, protests began to spread through the streets. In Kathmandu, on September 9, protestors took to the streets arguing against corruption, as they tore down cameras and fought back against police, eventually culminating in the protestors burning down the parliamentary building.²⁵ During this protest, we can see the flag flown by a variety of individuals, and see a stronger anti-government message as the protestors burn down the Nepali Parliament. Bikhayat Khatri, an organizer of this protest, states that the flag "symbolizes aggression and determination to push anything that comes in its way".²⁶ In this way, the flag in Nepal symbolizes not just the protestors' fight against corruption, but also their drive to keep fighting no matter the odds. This reflects the attitudes of the Straw Hat Pirates perfectly, as the crew often fights against entire governments with only a few allies and ten actual members.



Fig. 6 Singha Durbar Palace on fire. From Prabin Ranabhat, September 9, 2025.

²⁴ Pranav Baskar, "For Nepal's Protesters, Wealthy 'Nepo Kids' Are a Source of Outrage," *New York Times*, September 9, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/09/world/asia/nepal-protests-nepo-kids-social-media.html/>.

²⁵ Harry Jackson, "The side of Nepal the media won't show you NP" wehatethecold, September 9, 2025, Blog, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyxSqeFrIp0&t=276s/>. Harry Jackson has been riding his bike across Asia and stumbled on the protest movement in Nepal.

²⁶ Lex Harvey, "Gen Z protesters are uniting behind a manga pirate flag," *Cable News Network*, September 19, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/19/asia/one-piece-flag-indonesia-nepal-protesters-intl-hnk-dst/>. This is the article fig. 5 is from.

The Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger also begins to transform in the real world from a symbol of showing non-confrontational disappointment in the government, as it did in Indonesia, to a symbol that took on more of the Straw Hat Pirates' values, such as taking direct action and camaraderie. This is not only exemplified in the large-scale protests and the destruction of the Nepali Parliament, but also in the protestors' ability to pressure Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli to resign from her position as the Prime Minister of Nepal.²⁷ The Nepali protestors, in contrast to the Indonesian protestors, are directly creating change in their government, which became associated with the Jolly Roger as they flew the flag while they marched into Parliament. After the downfall of the Nepali government, ten key protestors met to decide the next Prime Minister of Nepal.²⁸ These protestors had been organizing using an online platform called Discord²⁹, and used this platform to create a poll to choose their next Prime Minister, chosen by all of those who had joined in the protests. This moment shows that the leaders of these protests exemplified the camaraderie of the Straw Hat Pirates as they decided that the power of choosing the next leader did not lie with them, but rather with the people. Utilizing this Discord server, the protestors elected former Supreme Court judge Sushila Karki as Nepal's new Prime Minister and had her sworn in on September 12, 2025.³⁰ The protestors' ability to fully elect and place a new leader in a position of power further shows how the protestors actively instigated change, which was projected onto their protest's symbols, such as the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger. Yet despite the calls for radical change, the protestors in Nepal still called for non-violence against people when possible. In the protestors' Discord servers, individuals were told not to give in to violence, and individuals who instigated violence were often pointed out by organizers.³¹ These calls for non-violence against individuals show that the values of the Jolly Roger,

²⁷ Adil Bhat, "Nepal's Gen Z Protesters Look to The Future," *DW News*, September 28, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/nepals-gen-z-protesters-look-to-the-future/a-74134471>.

²⁸ Tulsi Rauniyar, "The Inside Story of How Gen Z Toppled Nepal's Leader and Chose a New One on Discord," *Wired*, November 4, 2025. <https://www.wired.com/story/nepal-discord-gen-z-protests-vote-prime-minister-election/>. Fig 6. Is from this article.

²⁹ Discord is an online messaging platform that features voice and video calls along with text messaging. The platform allows for millions of users to organize through servers, which contain group chats and message boards.

³⁰ Benjamin Hader, "A Discord-Led Democracy," *Brown Political Review*, November 12, 2025. <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/a-discord-led-democracy/>.

³¹ Tulsi Rauniyar, "The Inside Story of How Gen Z Toppled Nepal's Leader and Chose a New One on Discord," *Wired*, November 4, 2025. <https://www.wired.com/story/nepal-discord-gen-z-protests-vote-prime-minister-election/>.

of violent anti-government sentiment, were only somewhat accepted by protestors. Rather, the protestors did everything in their power to fight the corruption that they saw while still avoiding direct injury to people, but still destroying and defaming property. The symbol of the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger took on more of the values, which are associated with the flag in the manga, such as the Pirates' unwavering persistence to achieve their goals, and their need to directly challenge opposition, despite the protestors' non-violent rhetoric.

I Can Hear The Drums of Liberation!

As the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger continues to spread outside of Indonesia, the symbol takes on more of the values that the Straw Hat Pirates exemplify. In Nepal, one protestor noted how "the Straw Hat pirates symbolize freedom, liberty - the spirit that you have to oppose the unjust authority."³² This further acknowledgement of who the Straw Hat Pirates are marks a shift in the usage of the flag from just a cartoon flag with neutral connotations to a symbol that takes on the values of *One Piece*. The symbol continued to spread to Morocco, where the protestors are fighting against corruption in their healthcare systems. One protestor acknowledged that many people within Gen Z have grown up with Luffy, and they saw the parallels between the book and the real world. In both, the real villains are not the pirates, but rather the navy and government, which only serve their own interests, and the good guys are those who fight for the good of the people.³³ For this protestor and many others in Morocco, the Jolly Roger represents not only the values the Straw Hat Pirates hold, but also the mentality that those who are self-serving are immoral and that those who fight for the good of others are moral. These values can be best seen in Luffy freeing the Land of Wano from a foreign power as Luffy fought to ensure that everyone in that country had access to food, was free from slavery, and could live in peace once more.³⁴ The values of desiring a quality life for everyone, along with being dedicated to serving others, are exemplified in

³² Kate Bartlett, "Why Gen Z protesters worldwide are flying an anime pirate flag," *National Public Radio*, October 5, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/10/05/nx-s1-5560980/gen-z-protesters-one-piece-pirate-flag>.

³³ "How the 'One Piece' manga has become a global symbol of Gen Z revolt" *France 24*, October 6, 2025. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/3257459829?pq-origsite=primo&sourcetype=Other%20Sources#quick-search-wrapper>.

³⁴ Eiichiro Oda, *One Piece*, Volume 103: Warrior of Liberation (2023).

Luffy's actions, as in the story, he and his crew risk their lives to liberate people and create a place where they can eat until they are full. It should also be noted that protestors have organized themselves in a similar fashion as the Straw Hat Pirates; with no clear leadership, they had individuals filling different roles as a result of protestors utilizing social media to plan protests.³⁵ The fact that the protestors organized similarly to the Straw Hat Pirates reflects the protestors' values of camaraderie and equality, as the protestors were able to rely on each other to fulfill their roles without a clear command structure. As the flag spreads, not only does it take on the ideals of fighting for the people and equality, which the Straw Hat Pirates exemplify, but the flag also continues to take on new meanings.

With the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger continuing to spread across countries, the symbol begins to take on new meanings beyond those presented in *One Piece*. In the Philippines, the Jolly Roger was being used to protest the government's inactivity in finding the billions of dollars in funds which were supposed to go to flood mitigation, with over 650,000 protesting in the city of Manila.³⁶ Within the protests in the Philippines, the flag was a symbol of their anger towards the corruption of their government and those who would profit at the expense of others' lives, especially since hundreds died each year due to typhoons. In Madagascar, protests begin to erupt against corruption, and some Madagascans replace the straw hat with a satroka bucket hat, a hat native to Madagascar.³⁷ The changes that the Madagascan protestors added to the symbol show the adaptability of the symbol as different groups can assert their own personal customizations onto the flag, while still retaining the key aspects that make the symbol recognizable. The flag was also flown during the No Kings protests in the United States of America on October 18. The protestors of the United States shared a similar sentiment to those using the symbol before them, that the symbol united young people

³⁵ "Hoist the Jolly Manga: Gen Z Protesters Rally to One Piece Pirate Flag," *France 24*, October 3, 2025. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20251003-hoist-the-jolly-manga-gen-z-protesters-rally-to-one-piece-pirate-flag>. It should be noted that although Luffy is the captain of the Straw Hat Pirates the crew often discusses decisions with each member playing a different role and giving different perspectives.

³⁶ Tess McClure, "'There is so Much Corruption': Hundreds of Thousands Protest in Manila Over Missing Flood Funds," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/17/manila-philippines-corruption-protest-flood-funds>

³⁷ Kate Bartlett, "Why Gen Z protestors worldwide are flying an anime pirate flag," *National Public Radio*, October 5, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/10/05/nx-s1-5560980/gen-z-protesters-one-piece-pirate-flag>.

and that the flag showed their frustrations with the government and their hopes for the future.³⁸ In Mexico, the symbol has been flown in protest of crime and corruption within their government, with some Mexican protestors angry that they live in a country where they could be murdered and nothing would be done.³⁹ In this case, the flag serves as a call against the corruption in the government, but also takes on a new value, which is that of safety. This value of safety is somewhat already inherent in the symbol, as the Straw Hat Pirates tell their allies to fly their flag to claim that they are under the protection of the Straw Hat Pirates.⁴⁰ As the symbol continued to spread across the globe, we can see how the Jolly Roger became a symbol of unity between not just those within a country but also for all those who sought freedom from oppression and corruption.

The Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger is inherently a symbol of outlawry, but beyond that, it is a symbol of the generational call to arms against corruption. The usage of the Jolly Roger has gone from the streets of Indonesia to the cities of America. Similar to the Raised Fist and the Guy Fawkes mask, the symbol has become a widespread symbol of resistance to power. The values of the Jolly Roger have even been changed by protestors to one that reflects their own values, evolving from a neutral symbol of unity to a symbol emphasizing the need for liberation against the corruption of lawmakers who only serve themselves. The drums of liberation continue to reverberate as more protestors across the world fly their own variations of the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger in search of their own freedom, just like Monkey D. Luffy and his friends.

³⁸ Eiji Honma, "'One Piece' Pirate Flag Takes on New Role in Global Protests," *Japan Forward*, November 4, 2025. <https://japan-forward.com/one-piece-pirate-flag-takes-on-new-role-in-global-protests/>.

³⁹ "Thousands protest crime and corruption in Mexico City as 'Gen Z' protests gain momentum," *National Broadcasting Company*, November 16, 2025. <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/mexico/thousands-protest-crime-corruption-mexico-city-gen-z-protests-rcna244172>

⁴⁰ This can be seen in how the Ryugu Kingdom and the Land of Wano fly the Straw Hat flag.

Bibliography

- “Hoist the Jolly Manga: Gen Z Protesters Rally to One Piece Pirate Flag,” *France 24*, October 3, 2025. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20251003-hoist-the-jolly-manga-gen-z-protesters-rally-to-one-piece-pirate-flag>.
- “How the ‘One Piece’ manga has become a global symbol of Gen Z revolt.” *France 24*, October 6, 2025. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/3257459829?pq-origsite=primo&sourcetype=Other%20Sources#quick-search-wrapper>.
- “Indonesians raise anime pirate flag in protest as nation marks independence.” *Al Jazeera*, August 16, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/16/indonesians-raise-anime-pirate-flag-in-protest-as-nation-marks-independence>.
- “Thousands Protest Crime and Corruption in Mexico City as ‘Gen Z’ Protests Gain Momentum,” *National Broadcasting Company*, November 16, 2025. <https://www.nbcnews.com/world/mexico/thousands-protest-crime-corruption-mexico-city-gen-z-protests-rcna244172>.
- Adrian, Gede A. “Overloaded Trucks Put Drivers at Legal Risk.” Edited by Genis Dwi Gustati, Translated by Farizal Luqman Majid. *Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta*, July 3, 2025. <https://www.ums.ac.id/en/news/global-pulse/overloaded-trucks-put-drivers-at-legal-risk>.
- Bartlett, Kate. “Why Gen Z protesters worldwide are flying an anime pirate flag.” *National Public Radio*, October 5, 2025. <https://www.npr.org/2025/10/05/nx-s1-5560980/gen-z-protesters-one-piece-pirate-flag>.
- Baskar, Pranav. “For Nepal’s Protesters, Wealthy ‘Nepo Kids’ Are a Source of Outrage.” *New York Times*, September 9, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/09/world/asia/nepal-protests-nepo-kids-social-media.html>.
- Bhat, Adil. “Nepal’s Gen Z Protesters Look to The Future,” DW News, September 28, 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/nepals-gen-z-protesters-look-to-the-future/a-74134471>.
- Fathiya, Dina N. “Pop Culture Protest Symbol: Raising the ‘One Piece’ Flag in Non-Violent Political Expression in Indonesia.” *International Journal of Social Research* 3, no. 1 (2025): 12-22. <https://doi.org/10.59888/insight.v3i1.73>.
- Fong, Clara. “How Global Gen Z Protests Have Shocked and Transformed Governments.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 20, 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-global-gen-z-protests-have-shocked-and-transformed-governments>.
- Gerbaudo, Paolo. *The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest*. New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Guzman, Chad de. “In Indonesia, Authorities Are Divided on How to React to People Flying the ‘One Piece’ Flag.” *TIME Magazine*, August 15, 2025. <https://time.com/7309534/indonesia-one-piece-pirate-flag-protest-prabowo-free-speech-criticism/>.
- Hader, Benjamin. “A Discord-Led Democracy,” *Brown Political Review*, November 12, 2025. <https://brownpoliticalreview.org/a-discord-led-democracy/>.
- Harvey, Lex. “Gen Z protesters are uniting behind a manga pirate flag.” *Cable News Network*, September 19, 2025. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/09/19/asia/one-piece-flag-indonesia-nepal-protesters-intl-hnk-dst>.
- Honma, Eiji. “‘One Piece’ Pirate Flag Takes on New Role in Global Protests.” *Japan Forward*, November 4, 2025. <https://japan-forward.com/one-piece-pirate-flag-takes-on-new-role-in-global-protests/>.
- Jackson, Harry. “The side of Nepal the media won’t show you NP.” *wehatethecold*, September 9, 2025, Blog, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyxSqeFrlp0&t=276s>.

- Korff, Gottfried, and Peterson, Larry. "From Brotherly Handshake to Militant Clenched Fist: On Political Metaphors for the Worker's Hand." *International Labor and Working Class History*, no. 42 (1992): 70–81. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27672022>.
- McClure, Tess. "'There is so Much Corruption': Hundreds of Thousands Protest in Manila Over Missing Flood Funds," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/17/manila-philippines-corruption-protest-flood-funds>.
- Nugroho, Bernardus H. "Digital Activism and Youth Participation in Indonesia: A Qualitative Study of Social Media's Role in Contemporary Social Movements." *Priviet Social Sciences Journal* 5, no. 10 (2025): 91-105. <https://doi.org/10.55942/pssj.v5i10.603>.
- Oda, Eiichiro. "One Piece Blue: Grand Data File." Shueisha, 2002.
- Oda, Eiichiro. "One Piece, Volume 1: Romance Dawn" VIZ Media LLC, 2003.
- Oda, Eiichiro. "One Piece, Volume 103: Warrior of Liberation." VIZ Media LLC, 2023.
- Oda, Eiichiro. "One Piece, Volume 22: HOPE!!" VIZ Media LLC, 2007.
- Oda, Eiichiro. "One Piece, Volume 41: Declaration of War." VIZ Media LLC, 2010.
- Oda, Eiichiro. "One Piece, Volume 61: Romance Dawn For The New World." VIZ Media LLC, 2012.
- Pineda, Rafael A. "One Piece Manga Sets Guinness World Record With Over 500 Million Published." *Anime News Network*, August 4, 2022. <https://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2022-08-04/one-piece-manga-sets-guinness-world-record-with-over-500-million-published/.188352>.
- Ratcliffe, Rebecca. "'A symbol of liberation': how the One Piece manga flag became the symbol of Asia's Gen Z protest movement." *The Guardian*, September 23, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/24/how-one-piece-manga-flag-became-symbol-asia-gen-z-protest-movement-liberation>.
- Rauniyar, Tulsi. "The Inside Story of How Gen Z Toppled Nepal's Leader and Chose a New One on Discord." *Wired*, November 4, 2025. <https://www.wired.com/story/nepal-discord-gen-z-protests-vote-prime-minister-election/>.
- Simmons, Sherwin. "'Hand to the Friend, Fist to the Foe': The Struggle of Signs in the Weimar Republic." *Journal of Design History* 13, no. 4 (2000): 319–39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3527066>.

When Indonesia Looks Like America: How Jakarta's Suburbs Reflect the Influence of American Cultural Supremacy

Mitra Nourbakhsh

Northwestern University

Abstract

Sprawled across the outskirts of Jakarta are American-style gated communities: neighborhoods named after Orlando, San Francisco, and Vancouver that represent a striking artifact of U.S. cultural influence. This paper argues that while the United States helped set the conditions for their emergence, the fundamental demand for these developments came from within Indonesia. Drawing on urban planning scholarship, declassified diplomatic records, and real estate history, this paper traces the forces behind Jakarta's new town boom of the 1970s–1990s: U.S.-backed regime change that installed a neoliberal government under Suharto, Sino-Indonesian developers who deliberately recruited American architects and branding, and Indonesian consumers who equated suburban life with modernity and status. Beyond the political economy, the paper argues that American suburbia functioned as an accidental but potent form of cultural diplomacy — a lifestyle exported through television, consumer culture, and aspiration rather than formal policy. Finally, it examines how this emulation reproduced American-style spatial segregation and inequality, with gated communities functioning as private governments insulated from the urban poor. The paper concludes with a look forward at Nusantara, Indonesia's new capital city that is currently under construction, framing it as a contemporary echo of these same dynamics and suggesting that the Americanization of the built environment may no longer require much American initiative at all.

Introduction and Approach

If you drive about thirty minutes out of downtown Jakarta, get off the highway and go down a palm tree-lined street, you may find yourself in Orlando — or to be more specific, in front of a Disney World-esque castle that serves as the entrance to a gated community called “Cluster Orlando.” Drive five minutes more in any direction and you may find yourself in Nebraska, Mississippi, San Francisco, or Vancouver. For a wealthy or upper middle-class Indonesian, the possibilities are endless: pick a state, pick a city, and there is a house next to rows of other identical houses in a neighborhood named and designed after it. Cluster Orlando is part of Kota Wisata, a planned town near Jakarta, Indonesia. Kota Wisata, which translates to “Tourist Town,” is unique among Jakarta’s gated communities for copying American cities so closely, but the general concept is a ubiquitous feature of Indonesia’s urban landscape. As of 1997, there were 86 of these residential projects in the Tangerang regency, a 370 square mile region outside the city of Jakarta, alone.¹ Many of the communities have their own quirks, but all share a common style of urban design: American suburbia.



Figure 1: A Google Street View screenshot of the entrance to Cluster Orlando in Kota Wisata, Indonesia (March 2024).

¹, Winarso, Haryo, “Residential Land Developers’ Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia,” PhD diss., (University College London, 2000), 165.

The sheer number of American-style planned towns — master-designed communities built around the private automobile, single-family housing, and commercial sprawl — is a symptom of the ubiquity of U.S. influence on the built environment, making them a fascinating form of foreign relations. Suburbia represents a distinctly American version of rampant consumerism, spatial segregation, and orderly perfection.² It is a key part of the lifestyle the United States has made its mission to push upon other countries, often through cultural diplomacy. Cold War tactics ranging from peace corps missions to sending jazz musicians to the Soviet Union attacked the perceived Communist threat by showing citizens of Global South countries the wonders of a capitalistic life.³ It has been an effective form of foreign relations, even more so when paired with involvement in other countries' politics.⁴ Indonesia's planned towns are a product of both versions of foreign policy: involvement in the country's politics and a unique kind of cultural diplomacy. From the United States' point of view, Indonesia is a Cold War success story: a socialist president replaced by a fiercely capitalist one, creating an unthreatening, stable country friendly to foreign investment and global trade.⁵ Examining the influence of that economic success story on Indonesia's built environment allows for an understanding of the social and societal forces that are powerful purveyors of America's cause.

In this paper, I aim to analyze the forces that led to the development of Indonesia's planned communities. I argue that while the United States certainly helped set the stage for them to be built, the fundamental demand for these developments and the lifestyle that could be lived within them largely came from inside Indonesia. Wealthy Indonesians and those in positions of power chased the enchantment of suburbia as a cultural phenomenon, purposefully creating a very American form of economic

² Knox, Paul, "Vulgaria: The Re-Enchantment of Suburbia," *Opolis* 1, no. 2 (June 30, 2005), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5392f4vq.pdf>.

³ Von Eschen, Penny. *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. United Kingdom: Harvard University Press, 2009.

⁴ Immerwahr, Daniel February 16, 2024

⁵ Scott, Peter Dale. "The United States and the Overthrow of Sukarno, 1965-1967." *Pacific Affairs* 58, no. 2 (1985): 239–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2758262>.

inequality and spatial segregation. I will begin by presenting the evidence that on a surface level, development of Jakarta's planned towns was driven by Indonesian developers and buyers who made the conscious and independent decision to emulate American suburbia. I will detail the role that the United States did play — financially and politically — in encouraging this kind of development, to support my thesis that both the economic incentive and the conceptual pull of the suburbs largely came from within. I will then argue that the deeper impetus was a vision of suburbia as the means to a lifestyle; that a psychological attachment to an American version of modernization was an impactful, if accidental, form of foreign relations. I will go on to examine how inequality through spatial segregation was perhaps the most basic impulse and encapsulates the attraction of American urban design.

The economic and political dynamics making it all possible

To understand how the Indonesia's planned town development played out, one must understand exactly who was responsible for it. In answering that question, there is one name that will inevitably appear. Depending on who you ask, Ciputra — Tjieu Tjin Hoan until he started going by a mononym at age 25 — was a philanthropist or an exploiter, a beacon of hope for Indonesia or the crony of a corrupt government.⁶ Everyone can agree, however, that he was an incredibly successful capitalist. Born in 1931 to a Chinese shopkeeper, Ciputra managed to rise through the ranks and become one of the richest people in Indonesia. He founded three real estate conglomerates that are responsible for many of the biggest planned communities in the country. From Pondok Indah, a planned town built on 720 hectares in 1977, to 6,000-hectare Bumi Serpong Damai (BSD), which the Ciputra Group developed in the 1980s, Ciputra was a grandmaster of the Indonesian gated community.⁷ He was, however, just one among many similar Indonesian businessmen turned real estate moguls. According to research conducted for a University of London PhD thesis on the economic forces behind Jakarta's planned town development, 80.1% of the top 300 Indonesian development

⁶ Leaf, Michael, "Exporting Indonesian Urbanism: Ciputra and the Developmental Vision of Market Modernism," *South East Asia Research* 23, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 169–86, <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2015.0260>, 171.

⁷ Winarso, "Residential Land Developers' Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia," 80.

conglomerates as of the year 2000 were owned by Sino-Indonesian businesspeople just like Ciputra, meaning very few of Jakarta's planned towns were direct products of foreign real estate developers.⁸ On the most basic level, that statistic reveals that it was Indonesians themselves who were at the forefront of this trend.

Not only were they responsible for the investment and creation of planned towns, but developers like Ciputra also made the very conscious decision to create suburbs that could be as at home in Minneapolis as Jakarta. One American reporter visiting Lippo Karawaci in 1996 remarked that the town reflected "a familiarity with the landscape of suburban America. The tract houses with bay windows and tiny, manicured lawns could be in Los Angeles. At the shopping mall, Walmart and JC Penney compete with outlets of Indonesia's Matahari grocery and department store chain."⁹ The observed familiarity was very purposeful -- 20 out of the 27 developers that were interviewed in the UCL thesis hired foreign designers. They said they hoped that the foreigners' fame would "contribute to building an image for their projects."¹⁰ American architect Paul Rudolph, for example, planned several towns including Pantai Timur, a community near Surabaya City (see Figure 2).¹¹ California firm Klages Carter Vail & Partners designed Royal Sentul, a planned town complete with an amusement park and golf courses.¹² Three major companies, including the Lippo Group and Ciputra's BSD, used the consultant's name when advertising their projects, as putting an American name on the sign reinforced the image they were crafting.¹³ Their choice to utilize American firms that were often unfamiliar with the materials and methods of Indonesian construction revealed developers' commitment to the conscious choice of emulating America's urban landscape in these small islands of Westernization.

⁸ Ibid, 180

⁹ McDonald, Joe, "Business tycoon gives shape to a model city in Indonesia," *Associated Press*, Dec 29, 1996.

¹⁰ Ibid, 214

¹¹ Rudolph, Paul, Architect. Pantai Timur Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia. Site plan. Development sketch, 1990. [or 1991] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004675280/>.

¹² Firman, Tommy, "New Town Development in Jakarta Metropolitan Region: A Perspective of Spatial Segregation," *Habitat International* 28, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 349–68, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-3975\(03\)00037-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-3975(03)00037-7), 14.

¹³ Winarso, "Residential Land Developers' Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia," 215.

Communists.”¹⁶ The threat was likely overblown.¹⁷ Nevertheless, U.S. spokespeople and officials publicly and covertly helped bring military leader Suharto to power by staging a botched Communist party coup and stoking paranoia in the aftermath, leading to the killing of anywhere from 200,000 to over a million members or suspected members of the Communist party. A former CIA officer, Ralph McGehee, compared the CIA’s involvement in the overthrow of Chile’s Salvador Allende to its involvement in Indonesia’s coup.¹⁸ Declassified documents have revealed that the CIA played a key role in engineering paranoia and even in staging the coup — having journalists start a rumor that a CIA-backed “Council of Generals” was plotting to suppress the Communist party and using its proxies to deliver pamphlets that stoked fear of an impending showdown between two political groups.¹⁹ That interference was part of the United States’ broader Cold War strategy, and it was a success in that Suharto proved to be a much more market-oriented leader than Sukarno was.

Known as the “Father of Development,” Suharto made neoliberal economic policies the center of his governance and shepherded in 35 years of rapid growth and structural change in Jakarta.²⁰ Those policies made Indonesia more attractive to foreign investment, and as a result Jakarta saw an influx of international hotels and banking. Foreign money also flowed into housing developments; housing developer PT Putra Alvita Pratama, for example, secured a “soft foreign loan” from the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund for approximately \$1.24 million. Another \$106 million was lent from a syndication of banks, but due to their lower interest rates, foreign loans were more attractive to developers.²¹ A 1971 article in Australian newspaper *The Age* extolled the virtues of this new system, saying “President Suharto has given Indonesia the political stability it needs to attract foreign capital. Private and public funds from the US, Japan,

¹⁶ “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXVI, Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines - Office of the Historian,” August 20, 1964, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v26/d62>.

¹⁷ Hauswedell, “Sukarno: Radical or Conservative? Indonesian Politics 1964-5,” 11.

¹⁸ Scott, Peter Dale. “The United States and the Overthrow of Sukarno, 1965-1967.” *Pacific Affairs* 58, no. 2 (1985): 239–64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2758262>.

¹⁹ Scott, “The United States and the Overthrow of Sukarno, 1965-1967,” 260.

²⁰ Leaf, “Exporting Indonesian Urbanism: Ciputra and the Developmental Vision of Market Modernism,” 173

²¹ Winarso, “Residential Land Developers’ Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia,” 128, 221.

Western Germany and Australia have more than filled the vacuum caused by the hasty exit of Russian capital and know-how following the abortive Communist coup in 1967.”²² It was in these years that, largely due to rapid deregulation (the National Land Agency granted developers uncontrolled land permits) and a lack of housing in the city proper, developers began buying land on the outskirts of the city and developing entire towns; modeled, as we have seen, after American suburbs. Ciputra’s Pondok Indah was the first large planned residential area for middle and high-income people created by a private developer, and the numbers skyrocketed after that.²³

This story has dual purposes. It makes clear that the United States had economic and strategic interest in Indonesia’s political and economic system but shows that it was interested at a very high level. I was unable to find evidence that the United States directly supported planned town development or realized it could be an important aspect of foreign policy. Instead, that development was an inevitable product of the economic system the United States endorsed.²⁴ Fundamentally, Indonesia’s new government chose to implement deregulation, and Indonesian housing developers themselves created the planned towns and chose to model them after American suburbs.

Tracing the enchantment of American suburbia through its influence on Indonesian consumers

A thorough examination of this relationship must not stop at the United States’ direct influence through financial and political means. Suburbia is not just physical rows of tract houses and wide streets; In America and abroad, it is a lifestyle that has become captivating and almost mythical. The previous section has made clear that the development of American-style gated communities near Jakarta was supported by the United States but fundamentally driven by Indonesian developers and government policies themselves. However, there was a more undercover version of foreign relations at work: America’s cultural influence on Indonesia through the enchantment of American suburbia. This was not necessarily an intentional initiative by the US

²² Flint, Barry, “Now the money rolls in — but Indonesia needs millions more,” *The Age*, Sep 8, 1971.

²³ Winarso, “Residential Land Developers’ Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia,” 135.

²⁴ Firman, “New Town Development in Jakarta Metropolitan Region: A Perspective of Spatial Segregation,” 24

government in the same way that Peace Corps missions and jazz diplomacy were. Its impact was largely a product of Indonesian consumers' demand, but it is a form of foreign relations, nonetheless.

According to Virginia Tech professor Paul Knox, America's suburbia is a product of abundant, cheap land in combination with cheap transportation and lax regulation. It is a product of consumer society replacing a manufacturing society. Suburbia sells because it has given material products "positive symbolic meaning," he writes, to make it more appealing to consumers.²⁵ Jakarta's planned towns sold consumers on not just a house to live in, but a *way* to live — an American way to live. Their names, for example, were often chosen to cultivate that image. Bumi Serpong Damai translates to "A Self-contained City"; Kota Nuansa Seni, "The City of the Art"; Kota Taman, "The Garden City"; and Kota Wisata, of course, means "Tourist Town." These anglicized translations add a whimsical sense of place, a Western touch. The Ciputra Group is particularly forward about the fact that they are selling a lifestyle — to this day, they distribute a quarterly magazine to residents called *Ciputra Lifestyle*.²⁶ For buyers, the modern, western lifestyle of suburbia was a symbol of social status. Emulating the American lifestyle was the goal.

Through interviews with residents of planned communities, the UCL thesis concluded that many of them did not take distance to their workplace into account when choosing where to live. Many made hour-plus commutes to live in a suburb, suggesting that the promised lifestyle was more important than convenience. While not an official source, anecdotal perusal of the internet turned up a Quora post saying that American TV shows like like "Dawson's Creek," "Friends," and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" were popular in 1990s Indonesia.²⁷ "Dawson's Creek" is set in the fictional Capeside, Massachusetts, and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" in Sunnydale, California. While on opposite coasts, both have all the trappings of American suburban life — the tranquility, orderliness, consumerism, and car-centricity; the slightly nostalgic Americana. Author Juliet Schor writes that "many of us are continually comparing our own lifestyle and

²⁵ Knox, "Vulgaria: The Re-Enchantment of Suburbia."

²⁶ Winarso, "Residential Land Developers' Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia," 215.

²⁷ <https://www.quora.com/What-was-it-like-to-grow-up-in-Indonesia-in-the-90s>

possessions to those of a select group of people we respect and want to be like, people whose sense of what's important.”²⁸ To many Indonesians, the lifestyle of American suburbia was that “select group,” so it is unsurprising that the development of Indonesian suburbia was catered toward that impulse. It was not just that developers took advantage of an economic opportunity, or that suburban homes were the best economic choice for buyers. A much more deep-seated pattern of Americanization drove the development.

Economic inequality as the true impetus

Most of Indonesia's wealthy planned towns have one feature in common: walls. Often, they are not only suburban communities, but gated communities.²⁹ This exclusionary nature is entirely purposeful, and in fact caters to and reveals the base impulse that made planned towns so attractive to Indonesian buyers. Fundamental to the American lifestyle which consumers bought into is deep-seated inequality and exclusion; that is what makes the system work. According to Knox, suburbia is appealing because consumers have innate exclusionary impulses. Suburbs give them the ability to regulate their environment and provide privacy, autonomy, stability, security, and partition — spatial segregation from those who cannot afford to live there or are systemically pushed out.³⁰ In the same vein, Indonesian planned towns have polarized the upper and middle classes and created scattered, exclusive pockets of perceived safety and wealth. They are a symptom of middle- or upper-class people trying to control their environment by “insulating themselves from the uncertainties of casual social interaction with the poor.”³¹ That concept of safety means segregation: by space, by highways, or by walls. Indonesia's gated communities are separated from Jakarta's urban slums — *Kampungs* — by all three, creating a kind of self-inflicted socio-economic dualism. That dualism not only affects the psyche of people within the planned

²⁸ Schor, Juliet B. *The Overspent American : Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer*, 1998. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA42809759>, 3.

²⁹ Firman, “New Town Development in Jakarta Metropolitan Region: A Perspective of Spatial Segregation,” 2

³⁰ Knox, “Vulgaria: The Re-Enchantment of Suburbia,” 37.

³¹ Dick, Howard, and Rimmer, Peter J., “Beyond the Third World City: The New Urban Geography of South-east Asia.” *Urban Studies* 35, no. 12 (December 1, 1998): 2303–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098983890>, 2317.

communities, but has negative repercussions on those outside of it, and is still ultimately a recreation of America's unique form of inequality through spatial segregation.

Indonesia's system of wealthy, safe suburbs separated from the "urban ghetto" very much mirrors the United States' spatial environment in the second half of the 20th century. Suburbs were reserved for whites, as Black Americans in particular were excluded by systemic and individual discrimination. As cities became more homogeneously Black and suburbs more homogeneously white, redlining and disinvestment in cities made the built environment decay, with many homes being abandoned and becoming uninhabitable.³² Indonesia has experienced a very similar phenomenon, although more along economic than racial lines. Many residents of Jakarta's gated communities pay not only for an American lifestyle but for a whole different government. Development companies control the delivery of basic services and infrastructure within their borders, creating a form of private government. As Michael Leaf argues, "In the more than three decades that this arrangement has been in place at Bintaro [Java], the idea that the government has, in a sense, ceded control of territory to a private concern has never been considered a problem."³³ The system seems like a win-win for everyone; the local government's responsibilities are reduced, residents benefit from higher-quality services, and the developer can keep prices up. Unsurprisingly, however, the system has created stark inequalities between access to even the most basic services in wealthy suburbs and in the city center. Some countries, like the Netherlands, have attempted to abate spatial segregation and the problems it creates by restructuring urban neighborhoods and creating mixed communities, but Indonesia's system of private developers makes that impossible.³⁴

³² Massey, Douglas S., and Jonathan Tannen. "Suburbanization and Segregation in the United States: 1970–2010." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 9 (April 26, 2017): 1594–1611. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1312010>.

³³ Leaf, "Exporting Indonesian Urbanism: Ciputra and the Developmental Vision of Market Modernism," 173

³⁴ Firman, "New Town Development in Jakarta Metropolitan Region: A Perspective of Spatial Segregation," 7

Most lower income Indonesians had no stake in housing developments, yet in addition to creating passive inequality, the developments have directly impacted lower-income people living in the city proper. A housing development called Kota Bunga (Flower City), was built in a water catchment area in violation of its spatial plan. It is suspected to have contributed to Jakarta's severe flooding in 2002.³⁵ The development of these communities has also displaced the people who were previously living there. Planned town Tigraksa, for example, led to the eviction of about 140 land-owning agricultural households from the area.³⁶ In central Jakarta, Kampung were demolished to make room for condominiums, hotels, and offices. From an economic perspective, too, the development of planned towns has negatively affected Jakartans not living in them. In the mid to late 1990s Indonesia experienced a serious economic crisis caused in large part by the overinvestment in these developments, and the nation as a whole ended up shouldering the burden created by a few large conglomerates.³⁷

For the most part, settlement of planned towns has been lauded as a positive contribution to Indonesians' quality of life, and Suharto's development-focused economic policies as an economic success. It is true that Suharto's neoliberalism led to a decline in Indonesia's overall poverty levels; according to World Bank statistics, in 1970 about 50% of the urban population lived below the poverty line, while in 1996, that number had fallen to only about 10%.³⁸ While it is important to consider such metrics, changes in the built environment over this period reveal that while poverty decreased, inequality grew and evolved. By allowing the wealthiest Jakartans to leave the city proper behind and move into small American-style oases, planned town developments reinforced a uniquely American kind of economic inequality. We tend to understand America as the ultimate destination and assume that to emulate it is a success. But becoming more like the United States, physically and societally, also means taking on the fundamental inequality that plagues it. It means unsustainability and consumerism,

³⁵ Ibid, 14

³⁶ Ibid, 10

³⁷ Ibid, 11

³⁸ Rock, Michael T., "The Politics of Development Policy and Development Policy Reform in New Order Indonesia," Social Science Research Network, January 1, 2003, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.470082>, 2.

the very things that have created the environmental crisis we now find ourselves in. To emulate the United States is not without its consequences.

Conclusion: Nusanatara and the future of urbanization

In 2022, the Indonesian government began construction on a brand new city: Nusanatara, meant to replace Jakarta as the capital. If the planned town housing developments outside Jakarta were partially a reaction to less-than-ideal living conditions within the city proper itself, the creation of Nusanatara is the same thing on a much larger scale. Jakarta is sinking; it is rife with overpopulation, flooding, hazardous pollution, and drinking water shortages. The government's solution is to leave behind it and its 30 million residents, 60% of whom live in *Kampungs*, and to move, instead, to a brand-new oasis rising out of the jungle.³⁹ Nusanatara's creation is a recent continuation and expansion of the exact same social and economic dynamics that I have explored in this paper, and has similar class consequences. It is meant to be a walkable city of the future powered by sustainable energy and filled with green space.⁴⁰ But while it is an improvement in many ways upon Jakarta's suburbs, and leaves behind many of American urban designs' most problematic components, it is still created under the auspices of shiny, new modernization. The mockups of Paul Rudolph's *Pantai Timur* and Nusanatara (see Figures 1 and 3) could depict the same town, even though they were created over thirty years apart. Nusanatara still has the potential to harm the environment: it is being developed atop previously untouched, biodiverse jungle, and it is further reinforcing spatial segregation and inequality.⁴¹ Nusanatara represents an updated version of the Westernization I have discussed in this paper.

³⁹ Marwa, "Situating the Urban Poor in Informal Settlement Within Jakarta's Water Governance Shift to Remunicipalisation," *Geoforum* 148 (January 1, 2024): 103920, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103920>.

⁴⁰ Beech, Hannah, "Indonesia Plans on Building Nusantara, a New Capital City," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/16/headway/indonesia-nusantara-jakarta.html>.

⁴¹ NASA Earth Observatory, "Nusantara: A New Capital City in the Forest," n.d., <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/152471/nusantara-a-new-capital-city-in-the-forest>.



Figure 3: A recent mockup of Nusantara, as designed by Indonesian firm Urbanplus.⁴²

Even today, a modernized built environment often means an Americanized one, and the United States' perceived cultural and physical supremacy has led to the adoption of its urban design in the Global South. This paper has attempted to explain how that adoption took place. I acknowledge that it is not an examination of every factor that contributed, and it is challenging to quantify the impact of each one. However, it has made it clear that Indonesians themselves played a key role in the creation of planned towns, often due to the cultural pull of suburbia. The implications of that finding are vast. The United States is most comfortable in a world that looks like it, economically, culturally, and physically, through the built environment. Indonesia's planned towns reveal that it has put that goal on autopilot by creating a world in which English is the language of choice, the dollar is the currency of global trade, and the

⁴² "Nagara Rimba Nusa, Ibu Kota Negara Indonesia - URBAN+," URBAN+, August 23, 2022, <https://www.urbanplus.co.id/project/nagara-rimba-nusa-ibu-kota-negara-indonesia/>.

American lifestyle is pumped into televisions around the world. No longer does it necessarily need to engage in Cold War era governmental interference. Perhaps, along the lines of what Francis Fukuyama argues in *The End of History and the Last Man*, the world is inevitably going to look more and more like America.⁴³ Perhaps our neoliberal version of capitalism is the end stage, and Indonesia's development is just a symptom of that trend. You can already find Orlando halfway across the world from Florida; perhaps, at some point, Orlando will be found everywhere.

⁴³ Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA14011847>.

Bibliography

- "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XXVI, Indonesia; Malaysia-Singapore; Philippines - Office of the Historian," n.d.
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v26/d62>.
- "Residential Land Developers' Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia." *N/A*, 2000.
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1348854/1/326084.pdf>.
- Barry, Flint, "Now the money rolls in — but Indonesia needs millions more," *The Age*, Sep 8, 1971.
- Beech, Hannah. "Indonesia Plans on Building Nusantara, a New Capital City." *The New York Times*, November 14, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/16/headway/indonesia-nusantara-jakarta.html>.
- Dick, Howard, and Rimmer, Peter J., "Beyond the Third World City: The New Urban Geography of South-east Asia." *Urban Studies* 35, no. 12 (December 1, 1998): 2303–21.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0042098983890>.
- Firman, Tommy. "New Town Development in Jakarta Metropolitan Region: A Perspective of Spatial Segregation." *Habitat International* 28, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 349–68.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-3975\(03\)00037-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0197-3975(03)00037-7).
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA14011847>.
- Immerwahr, Daniel. "History of U.S. Foreign Relations." Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 2024.
- Knox, Paul. "Vulgaria: The Re-Enchantment of Suburbia." *Opolis* 1, no. 2 (June 30, 2005).
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5392f4vq.pdf>.
- Leaf, Michael. "Exporting Indonesian Urbanism: Ciputra and the Developmental Vision of Market Modernism." *South East Asia Research* 23, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 169–86.
<https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2015.0260>.
- Marwa. "Situating the Urban Poor in Informal Settlement Within Jakarta's Water Governance Shift to Remunicipalisation." *Geoforum* 148 (January 1, 2024): 103920.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103920>.
- Massey, Douglas S., and Tannen, Jonathan. "Suburbanization and Segregation in the United States: 1970–2010." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 9 (April 26, 2017): 1594–1611.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1312010>.
- McDonald, Joe, "Business tycoon gives shape to a model city in Indonesia," Associated Press, Dec 29, 1996.
- NASA Earth Observatory. "Nusantara: A New Capital City in the Forest," n.d.
<https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/152471/nusantara-a-new-capital-city-in-the-forest>.
- Rock, Michael T. "The Politics of Development Policy and Development Policy Reform in New Order Indonesia." *Social Science Research Network*, January 1, 2003.
<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.470082>.
- Schor, Juliet B. *The Overspent American : Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer*, 1998.
<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA42809759>.
- URBAN+. "Nagara Rimba Nusa, Ibu Kota Negara Indonesia - URBAN+," August 23, 2022.
<https://www.urbanplus.co.id/project/nagara-rimba-nusa-ibu-kota-negara-indonesia/>.

Von Eschen, Penny. *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*. United Kingdom, Harvard University Press, 2009.

Winarso ,Haryo, “Residential Land Developers’ Behaviour in Jabotabek, Indonesia,” PhD diss., (University College London, 2000).

Examining LGBTQ+ Identity and Shame in Indian Film through the lens of Cobalt Blue

Ria Patel

University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

This paper examines how Cobalt Blue, a film adapted from Sachin Kundalkar's novel, reflects the LGBTQ+ experience in India's current conservative setting. Although India has made strides in decriminalizing homosexuality, public attitudes are rooted in religion and the expectations of heteronormativity. Through the story of Tanay and his relationship with the paying guest, viewers experience the emotional trauma and secrecy that LGBTQ+ individuals face in India. This analysis argues that the film's lack of explicit labels, references to Indian laws, and the use of metaphors symbolize the stigma surrounding LGBTQ+ identities, arguing that in more conservative countries like India, the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community in film reflects heightened homophobia and marginalization. This paper encourages filmmakers and directors to promote more open and representative portrayals of LGBTQ+ experiences.

Introduction

LGBTQ+ is a common acronym referring to the community of non-heterosexual sexual orientations, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and other non-heterosexual sexualities.¹ Although Americans have become increasingly accepting of homosexuality (72% of survey respondents in the United States report positive attitudes), views remain more negative in other regions such as Asia and Africa, where in countries like South Korea and Kenya many people still believe that queer individuals are socially deviant.² Particularly, India maintains conservative values; between 2002 and 2019, there has only been a slight jump in acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community from 15% to 37%.³ Part of the issue stems from the fact that religion is a fundamental aspect of Indian identity. 64% of Hindus say it is very important to be Hindu to be a “true Indian.”⁴ Being a “true Indian” for men means getting an education, having a stable, professional job, and marrying a woman. This helps explain why many Hindus and Indians, as a whole, hold the belief that Hinduism and homosexuality are fundamentally incompatible.

Yet, Hinduism has no official stance on LGBTQ+ activities. Activists often quote scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita or the Vedas, which have gods and goddesses who have both male and female characteristics, suggesting the concept of a “third gender”. However, others cite ancient Hindu texts like the Kama Sutra that seem to condone homosexual behavior.⁵ Because Hinduism does not explicitly approve of same-sex relationships, people’s interpretations of religious texts vary widely, allowing for cultural and regional attitudes, often shaped by political and societal norms, to actively shape how Indian households perceive LGBTQ+ individuals. This contradiction in religious interpretation segues into how platforms like the media can become a

¹ Duarte et al., eds., *Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia: A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Transformation*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363590>.

² Jacob Poushter and Nicholas Kent, “Views of Homosexuality Around the World,” Pew Research Center, June 25, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persist/>.

³ Poushter and Kent, “Views of Homosexuality Around the World.”

⁴ “India Is a Tolerant, Largely Conservative Country: A Political Reading of the Pew Survey,” Times of India, July 26, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/india-is-a-tolerant-largely-conservative-country-a-political-reading-of-the-pew-survey/>, accessed April 22, 2025.

⁵ “Religious Groups’ Official Positions on Same-Sex Marriage,” Pew Research Center, December 7, 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/07/religious-groups-official-positions-on-same-sex-marriage/>, accessed April 22, 2025.

crucial space for navigating queer identity in India. Films like Cobalt Blue help illustrate the variances in public attitudes and offer a platform where societal struggles around queer identity can be explored and challenged to go beyond religious and cultural norms. In doing so, such films reshape public discourse by normalizing queer experiences in a way that makes the community feel visible, understood, and accepted in everyday life.

Cobalt Blue, although released in April 2022, is set in 1996 and focuses on a traditional Marathi family that has immigrated to Fort Kochi, Kerala. From the film's start, the audience meets Tanay, a quiet, sensitive young man who wants to be a writer. He lives in a conservative household where his family expects him to follow the typical "true Indian" lifestyle. His parents do not know about his sexuality and assume that he will marry a woman one day, like any "normal" son. In the film, after Tanay's grandparents pass away, his family rents the extra room to a paying guest. The film portrays the paying guest as a mysterious figure, his name, background, and social status are unknown. Even when Tanay asks him questions to learn more about him, the paying guest ignores him. As they spend more time together, Tanay learns that the paying guest has a passion for photography and sells handmade lampshades. Their bond deepens, and they eventually share intimate moments and become physically involved. Tanay and the paying guest have what modern-day would call a "situationship." They spend time together, are intimately involved, and emotionally embrace each other, and they do all this without using any labels. This kind of unlabeled intimacy contrasts sharply with the expectations of being a "true Indian", where masculinity is often tiring to clear social milestones such as marriage and family responsibilities.

One night, the paying guest asks Tanay to spend some time alone. Tanay agrees, but the guest unexpectedly disappears soon after, leaving without a word. Around the same time, Tanay's sister Anuja also runs away, and he assumes it's because their family never supported her passion for hockey. However, Anuja later reveals that she had run away with the paying guest, whom she had fallen in love with, but he ended up leaving her too. Anuja is unaware of Tanay's relationship with the paying guest till the end of the film, where she finds pictures of Tanay and the paying guest nude in her bag, revealing that she was in a love triangle with her brother and the guest (Cobalt Blue). This moment reveals an atypical love triangle, as both Anuja and her brother

Tanay share romantic encounters with the same man, introducing a queer dimension that complicates traditional heterosexual relationship dynamics.

Although quite the rollercoaster, Cobalt Blue demonstrated some of the intricacies that LGBTQ+ individuals faced in the 1990s in India and, specifically, the secrecy surrounding queer identities. The film showcases how, at the time, queerness is not necessarily understood as a distinct “identity” or can be categorized like race or class, as the “mysterious man” has a “situationship” with both siblings.

Review of Literature

Search Strategies

Sources were found by viewing peer-reviewed databases and papers to ensure both credibility and validity. The keywords used in the research process were: LGBTQ+, Cobalt Blue, Film, Indian Laws, and Film Industry.

Legalization of the LGBTQ+ community in India

LGBTQ+ discrimination laws have been in place since British colonial rule, with outdated laws like Section 377 allowing discrimination for years before being challenged and overturned. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was introduced in 1861 during the British rule of India and it referred to unnatural offences in which “whoever voluntarily [had] carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman, or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall be liable to fine.”⁶ Although the law did not directly state that sodomy is illegal, the vague language of “unnatural offenses” allowed for discriminatory interpretations that disproportionately target homosexual relationships. As a consequence, many same-sex relationships and physical expressions of intimacy faced punishment due to this law, and even those advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, like Arif Jafar, were imprisoned under Section 377.⁷

⁶ Alok Gupta, “Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 46 (2006): 4815–23, accessed April 8, 2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418926>.

⁷ Swati Mathur, “Why Social Activists Fear Section 377,” *The Times of India*, December 15, 2013, 24, accessed via ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/why-social-activists-fear-section-377/docview/3177476429/se-2>.

The legal journey for LGBTQ+ acceptance in India has been marked by a cycle of progress and setbacks, beginning with the challenge to Section 377 made by the Naz Foundation in 2001. The Naz Foundation argued that the British colonial Government enacted this law based on Victorian morality. As a non-governmental organization working in the field of sexual health, Naz Foundation argued that this law violated the rights to dignity and health.⁸ The case of *Naz Foundation v Govt of Delhi* (2009) ruled that Section 377 “violates articles 14,15, and 21” of the Indian Constitution, which guarantee the right to equality, protection against discrimination, and the right to personal liberty. The judgment stated that Section 377 “criminalized consensual acts between adults in private”⁹, thereby infringing upon these fundamental rights. This case illustrates how the law’s ambiguity not only perpetuated systemic bias but also delayed justice, as years of legal challenge were needed before the court acknowledged how Section 377 violated constitutional rights for LGBTQ+ individuals.

However, individual and faith-based groups appealed the High Court verdict and in 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that Section 377 was constitutionally valid, effectively re-criminalizing same-sex relations.¹⁰ The submissions that denied that Section 377 was unconstitutional were that the documentary evidence in place was not a basis for singling out homosexuals for discriminatory treatment and that the section was entirely gender neutral. Furthermore, Section 377 did not violate the right to privacy and dignity under Article 21 and that India’s social structure and the institution of marriage would be detrimentally affected as it would “cause young people to become tempted towards homosexual activities.”¹¹ This judgment faced severe backlash both within India and from the international community where many joined in research and debates to decriminalize non-heterosexual activities. In the meantime, a petition was filed challenging the constitutionality of 377 of the Indian Penal Code claiming it to be direct discrimination. While the petition was pending, *K.S Puttaswamy v Union of India* confirmed that

⁸ Sathyanarayana Rao, “The Reversal on Gay Rights in India,” PubMed Central, accessed April 8, 2025, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3927237/>.

⁹ Rao, “The Reversal on Gay Rights in India.”

¹⁰ Rao, “The Reversal on Gay Rights in India.”

¹¹ Case Summary: Suresh Kumar Koushal and Another v. NAZ Foundation and Others, Supreme Court of India, Civil Appeal No. 10972 of 2013, Equal Rights Trust, December 11, 2013, <https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Case%20Summary%20Suresh%20Kumar%20Koushal%20and%20another%20v%20NAZ%20Foundation%20and%20others.pdf>, accessed April 22, 2025.

privacy was a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution.¹² This case was used as a precedent of Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India case. On September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court unanimously struck down the parts of Section 377 that criminalized consensual same-sex relations between adults. The main premise of the argument was that because the Indian Penal Code was primarily used against adult homosexuals, the “stigma created by the provision meant that adults from the LGBTQ+ community could never use it to seek criminal sanction for rape.”¹³ Additionally, the right to love whoever you want is considered a private matter, protected under Amendment 21, which further undermines the legitimacy of a law that criminalizes consensual same-sex relations between adults.

Public Attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ Community

It is valuable to note that as these laws fluctuated, people’s societal views of the LGBTQ+ community became increasingly shaped by the law’s instability and many were vocal about the consequences of such an ambivalent social structure. In the midst of overturning the initial decision of IPC 377, Gul Panag, an Indian actress and model, reacted to the ongoing controversy saying that “Tomorrow, I might just decide what time and place I can have sex” and that that the government “should have simply let this matter go when the 377 Act got a reprieve from the Delhi High Court.”¹⁴ She further argues that “Laws that are outdated and don’t serve their purpose anymore should simply be scrapped.”¹⁵ Panag’s vocalization of the laws highlights the belief that India’s laws no longer reflect the values of a modern society and that continuing to uphold them only serves to preserve oppressive legacies rather than protect the rights of all citizens. As an influential person in India, Panag demonstrated that speaking out against injustice is essential to challenging outdated norms. Her example shows how public figures, including those in the film industry, can use their platform to shift public attitudes towards greater acceptance.

¹² Saptarshi Mandal Chaudhary, “Queer Rights and the Triad: Reading Section 377 with Down Syndrome,” NUJS Law Review 12, nos. 3–4 (2019): 445–60, <https://nujslawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/12-3-4-Chaudhary.pdf>.

¹³ Chaudhary, “Queer Rights and the Triad.”

¹⁴ Tushar Joshi, “‘I Am Appalled!’: Gul Panag Reacts to the Ongoing Gay Rights Controversy in the Country,” The Times of India, February 25, 2012, 1, accessed via ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/i-am-appalled/docview/3128004408/se-2>.

¹⁵ Joshi, “‘I Am Appalled!’”

Although IPC 377 has been overturned, the public attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ communities in India remain far from sympathetic. Due to systematic marginalization and years of legal and societal discrimination, deep-rooted bias continues to shape how queer individuals are perceived. The term “shame culture” is often used to describe India and its stance on homosexuality. The shame doesn’t just extend to the homosexual himself, but to the entire extended family consisting of parents, children, siblings, and relatives.

Homosexuality in India is primarily frowned upon “only if a person chooses to come out of the closet and lead a gay lifestyle.”¹⁶ However, if a homosexual person performs their “duty” by getting married and starting a family, Hindu society seems to have no issues with a closeted homosexual.¹⁷ So, although homosexuality is no longer criminalized, society continues to uphold heterosexual expectations of marriage and the stereotypical lifestyle of an Indian: getting married, having an education, and raising children. Furthermore, research shows that fathers are more accepting of their gay son if they are performing “hegemonic masculinity” behaviors, such as watching or playing football.¹⁸ These patterns reveal that public attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals in India are not necessarily shaped by the acceptance of sexual orientation itself, but rather by the extent to which individuals conform to the traditional heteronormative lifestyle.

Homosexuality and Homophobia On the Screen

Even in the film industry, it is evident that a stigma exists in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters. Actor Yuvraaj Parasher, the lead of the 2010 film *Dunno Y... Na Janne Kyun*, which had India’s first gay kissing scene, was disowned by his family for playing gay on screen. Even though at the time the Delhi High Court was in favor of homosexuals, the actor’s father expressed that “people will make fun of us and we won’t be able to live peacefully ever again.”¹⁹ Even though his son had the success of being a lead actor and eventually receiving an award from the Deputy Chief Minister Chahagan Bhujbal, portraying a gay man on screen was enough

¹⁶ R. Raj Rao, *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2017), accessed via EBSCOhost, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d1028b8e-7335-3d2b-9ed3-b55cf5427e1f>.

¹⁷ Rao, *Criminal Love?*

¹⁸ Apoorva Ghosh, *After Coming Out: Parental Acceptance of Gay Men in India and the United States* (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2020), accessed via ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/after-coming-out-parental-acceptance-gay-men/docview/2472189990/se-2>.

¹⁹ GAY ABANDONED, 1

to bring shame to his family. Parashar exemplifies the disconnect between legal processes and public attitudes- despite legal support for homosexuality at the time this movie was filmed, societal expectations remained deeply intolerant of its portrayal.

Similarly, National Award-winning director Onir talks about his experience with homophobia in the film industry. Even though he himself is gay and not ashamed of being so, he said he doesn't want to be called a gay director, exemplifying how in India, he does not want to be reduced to that single aspect of his identity. Furthermore, he was in an argument with the Censor Board of Film, where one of the employees said that in this film "There is a scene where Rahul Rose and this other guy look at each other romantically- it will make the audience uncomfortable". Onir responded to the employee, saying, "It makes you uncomfortable, so say that."²⁰ When people ask him why he displays these homosexual scenes, he argues that "If I don't talk about it, I am wasting the little power I have" and that his film helped many come out to their parents.²¹ Choosing to include scenes that can make other people in India "feel uncomfortable", Onir exemplifies how art can challenge societal norms. His use of film has a real-world impact in queer representation: To help individuals come out to their families. Thus, Onir displays how queer media can lead to personal empowerment and societal progress. All in all, although there is rooted prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community in India, individuals like Gul Panag and Onir highlight the growing resistance to societal conformity. These heavily influential people illustrate how the media can help grow acceptance of a taboo topic and how the film industry has the power to spark conversation.

Analysis of Cobalt Blue

The purpose of this paper is to examine how conservative regions like India portray the LGBTQ+ experience. Films like *Cobalt Blue* illustrate how the LGBTQ+ community is presented with an elevated social stigma, due to the constant legal uncertainty and fluctuating public views, and how the film industry has the opportunity to display non-heterosexual individuals with pride, rather than silence.

²⁰ Jyothi Prabhakar, "I'm Gay, but Not a 'Gay Director,' Says My Brother Nikhil's Maker Onir," The Times of India, December 9, 2012, 2, accessed via ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/im-gay-not-director-says-my-brother-nikhils-maker/docview/3154419460/se-2>

²¹ Prabhakar, "I'm Gay, but Not a 'Gay Director.'"

One way that this silence is displayed in *Cobalt Blue* is through the lack of explicit labels for queer characters. Unlike Western media in which many characters openly identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and more, the characters in *Cobalt Blue* remain ambiguous, relying more on emotional expression than explicit declarations of identity. Based on the subtext that Tanay had a romantic relationship only with the paying guest, Tanay can be seen as representing the gay community, while the paying guest represents bisexuality, as he had romantic encounters with both Tanay and Anuja. In the film, Tanay's relationship with the paying guest was never uncovered by his family, while Anuja's was. The audience knows of Tanay's relationship but the director specifically did not want the family to figure out which shows how queerness is always masked by the heteronormative even when discussing deviance. This lack of labelling and secrecy surrounding Tanay's relationship highlights the broader societal public attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community in India. It reflects the discomfort with queerness, especially with male homosexuality, which remains unspoken due to fear of familial rejection and social alienation. Tanay's silent homosexuality illustrates how India does not have issues with a "clostod homosexual"²²; rather, it is the open visibility of queerness that becomes problematic. After all, his parents had no issue with Tanay as he was on track to be a writer, and they were thinking of arranging his marriage.

Furthermore, after Tanay finds out that the paying guest was cheating on him with his sister, he copes with the pain by having sexual intercourse with his teacher, implying that Tanay was seeking "sexual guidance" after heartbreak. After the encounter, his teacher yearns for friendship with Tanay, stating that he was often treated like an outcast due to his sexuality. The teacher specifically says to Tanay that "You and I are criminals in this country" and that when he was younger, he was caught with an American tourist and his father and doctor administered electric shocks to cure him of this "illness."²³ As the time period of the movie was in 1996, the criminal activity that Tanay's teacher was vocalizing about referred to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Tanay's professor's experience reflects the state of India in the late 1990s and the emotional trauma that individuals at the time faced with the Indian Penal Code in action. By receiving electric shocks to cure homosexual activities, the film illustrates how people in India

²² Rao, Criminal Love?

²³ Cobalt Blue, 01:25:43

did not have much education on the queer community but developed a sense that it was “wrong”. The film displayed how those who identified as homosexual were punished because their identity deviated from the typical Indian standard.

Throughout *Cobalt Blue*, Tanay visits a pond to meet his pet turtle, Pablo. Tanay uses his pond visits as a way to explicitly say his interpersonal thoughts and accomplishments out loud. The pond symbolizes the nature of Tanay’s hidden queerness. The pond that Tanay visits isn’t just a literal escape from his home but one where he can express his true self, free from societal constraints. Tanay even brings the paying guest to the pond to meet Pablo, highlighting his trust in him and the intimacy of sharing such a personal part of his life. However, at the end of the film, Tanay vocalizes that “Everyone thought a tortoise lived in the pond. But in reality, there was no tortoise. I was the tortoise.”²⁴ Like the turtle that never came up to the surface of the pond, Tanay kept his true identity hidden from the world, buried beneath layers of fear and societal expectation. This metaphor created by Sachin Kundalkar highlights that the queer community in India exists in the background, where self-protection means staying hidden.

The lack of explicit labels, references to the Indian Penal Code, and symbolism Kundalkar uses exemplifies that the experience for the LGBTQ+ community in India is often hidden and quiet, shaped by the pressure to stay silent. Although the film was exemplifying the state of the 1990s, the media has such an influence on modern day viewers and portraying LGBTQ+ individuals with heightened homophobia defeats its purpose. The film could have taken the opportunity to challenge these societal norms more directly. Its subtlety-while perhaps realistic to the 1990s- risks reinforcing silence. For example, at the ending in which Tanay realizes that he was Pablo, the film could have directly stated Tanay’s identity, in order to boldly affirm LGBTQ+ representation. All in all, the queer community in films like *Cobalt Blue* offers a perspective that although India has made strides for the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in the legal realm, the experience of such individuals is not yet fully reflected in mainstream cinema.

Conclusion

²⁴ Cobalt Blue, 1:49:07

Cobalt Blue offers an exploration of the LGBTQ+ experience within a conservative Indian context. Through its emotional nuances and symbolism, the film captures the shame that has historically shaped queer individuals in India. Tanay's story with the paying guest mirrors the real-world impact of laws like Section 377 and reflects the public attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community and how cultural norms continue to suppress open expression of queer identity. The film's depiction of familial expectations and emotional isolation reflects how the law alone cannot shift deeply ingrained societal beliefs. Films like *Cobalt Blue* can be powerful tools for educating the public, especially conservative countries like India, about the LGBTQ community and the internalized shame queer individuals face. Especially when films depict queer characters with depth and complexity, rather than side characters or with stereotypes, like in *Cobalt Blue*, it allows for a more authentic portrayal of the LGBTQ+ experience. Yet, the information presented in this analysis showcased how sometimes conservative regions like India present closeted homosexuality in the media and that open queerness is frowned upon. Thus, the film industry could use this analysis to encourage more authentic and visible narratives that resonate with the queer lives in India. In doing so, films can move beyond stigmatized representation and create a space for more honest conversations about identity and belonging.

Bibliography

- "India Is a Tolerant, Largely Conservative Country: A Political Reading of the Pew Survey." Times of India, 26 July 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/india-is-a-tolerant-largely-conservative-country-a-political-reading-of-the-pew-survey/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2025.
- "Religious Groups' Official Positions on Same-Sex Marriage." Pew Research Center, 7 Dec. 2012, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/07/religious-groups-official-positions-on-same-sex-marriage/>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2025.
- Case Summary: Suresh Kumar Koushal and Another v. NAZ Foundation and Others, Supreme Court of India, Civil Appeal No. 10972 of 2013, Equal Rights Trust, 11 Dec. 2013, <https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/Case%20Summary%20Suresh%20Kumar%20Koushal%20and%20another%20v%20NAZ%20Foundation%20and%20othe rs.pdf>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2025.
- Chaudhary, Saptarshi Mandal. "Queer Rights and the Triad: Reading Section 377 with Down Syndrome." NUJS Law Review, vol. 12, no. 3–4, 2019, pp. 445–460, <https://nujlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/12-3-4-Chaudhary.pdf>.
- Duarte, M., K. Losleben, and K. Fjortoft, editors. Gender Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Academia: A Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Transformation. 1st ed., Routledge, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003363590>.
- Ghosh, Apoorva. After Coming Out: Parental Acceptance of Gay Men in India and the United States. University of California, Irvine, 2020. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/after-coming-out-parental-acceptance-gay-men/docview/2472189990/se-2>.
- Gupta, Alok. "Section 377 and the Dignity of Indian Homosexuals." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 41, no. 46, 2006, pp. 4815–23. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418926>. Accessed 8 Apr. 2025.
- Joshi, Tushar. "I Am Appalled!': Gul Panag Reacts to the Ongoing Gay Rights Controversy in the Country." The Times of India, 25 Feb. 2012, p. 1. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/i-am-appalled/docview/3128004408/se-2>.
- Kundalkar, Sachin, director. Cobalt Blue. Netflix, 2022.
- Mathur, Swati. "Why Social Activists Fear Section 377." The Times of India, 15 Dec. 2013, p. 24. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/why-social-activists-fear-section-377/docview/3177476429/se-2>.
- Narrain, Arvind. "Unnatural Love: Love's Unrecognized Claim in the Indian Penal Code." Indian Journal of Law and Justice, vol. 2, 2008, pp. 27–45. HeinOnline, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/injlolw2&id=5589>.
- PG. "'Gay' Abandoned!': Family Disowns Actor for Playing Gay on Screen." The Times of India. 26 Sept. 2010, p. 1. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/gay-abandon-ed/docview/2857458784/se-2>.
- Poushter, Jacob, and Nicholas Kent. "Views of Homosexuality Around the World." Pew Research Center, 25 June 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persist/>.

- Prabhakar, Jyothi. "I'm Gay, but Not a 'Gay Director', Says My Brother Nikhil's Maker Onir." The Times of India, 9 Dec. 2012, p. 2. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/im-gay-not-director-says-my-brother-nikhils-maker/docview/3154419460/se-2>.
- Rao, R. Raj. Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India. Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd, 2017. EBSCOhost, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=d1028b8e-7335-3d2b-9ed3-b55cf5427e1f>.
- Rao, Sathyanarayana. "The Reversal on Gay Rights in India." PubMed Central, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3927237/>. Accessed 8 Apr. 2025.
- Shaikh, Sameera. "Homosexuality and Indian Cinema: A Study of Select Films." ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, vol. 3, no. 1, 2022, pp. 100–107, <https://www.granthaalayahpublication.org/Arts-Journal/ShodhKosh/article/download/426/448/4153>.

The Grand Canal as an Ecological Agent: Environmental Consequences of Ming- Qing China's Grand Canal Restoration Efforts

Sydney Robinson

UNC Chapel Hill

Abstract

This paper examines the Grand Canal of Ming-Qing China as an ecological agent whose construction, maintenance, and expansion reshaped regional environments in lasting ways. Drawing on frameworks from environmental history, the study argues that state-led hydraulic engineering generated self-reinforcing cycles of ecological disruption, including deforestation, sedimentation, and land reclamation. Through case studies of the Huai River Basin and the canal city of Jining, the paper demonstrates how infrastructural expansion altered hydrology, intensified flooding, fragmented wetlands, and accelerated resource extraction, ultimately harming the environment. The analysis shows how the Canal's engineered landscapes produced new ecological dependencies that demanded continual labor and state oversight. The Grand Canal thus emerges not simply as a conduit of political integration and engineering accomplishment, but as a dynamic socio-environmental system between nature and human society, whose legacy highlights the limits of imperial control over nature and the long-term consequences of large-scale environmental modification.

Introduction

The Grand Canal is the backbone of Ming-Qing China's hydraulic infrastructure. It not only unified regions politically and economically, but it also profoundly reshaped the environment and local ecologies. Through deforestation, sedimentation, and land reclamation, the Canal set in motion self-reinforcing cycles of environmental degradation, in which state-led attempts to stabilize water flow and ensure agricultural productivity instead accelerated flooding, erosion, and habitat loss. Examining case studies from the Huai River Basin and canal towns such as Jining reveals how human engineering produced enduring ecological transformations, offering insight into the unintended environmental consequences of imperial statecraft and early modern development.

While historians have often treated the Canal as a political or economic symbol, it should also be studied as an ecological agent, one that restructured landscapes and left permanent impacts on the environments it touched. An ecological agent can be defined as some component of a natural system that actively interacts with and/or modifies its surrounding environment. Scholarship on the human-environment relationship is essential to understanding the Canal's environmental impacts through a historical lens. The Canal is, after all, man-made, representing the belief that nature can be placed under human control. Early Modern China's relationship with nature is one of power imbalances, mismanagement, and consequence. From the overexploitation of timber for shipbuilding to the expansion of farmland into floodplains, attempts to "bring nature under control" often ended in ecological instability that, in turn, result in the destruction or disruption of human development¹.

Background of the Grand Canal

The construction of China's Grand Canal was a major, centuries-long endeavor that began in the 5th Century BC and was significantly expanded in the Sui Dynasty when it

¹ Ruth Mostern, "The Natural and Unnatural History of the Yellow River," in *The Yellow River: A Natural and Unnatural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 22-60.

was first connected as a unified waterway system². During the Ming-Qing period, many major segments of the Canal were built and restored, many of which still function or remain embedded in local water systems. The Grand Canal is over 1,700 kilometers long, crossing the four provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang³. The Grand Canal was built primarily to ease trade routes and to provide a direct path for the transportation of grain to the imperial capital in Beijing, which was unable to produce a significant amount of grain to support the bureaucracy. However, trade routes did exist before the construction of the Canal; goods were transported primarily via land and coastal routes.

Transportation and trade routes flourished over canals and rivers. Scholars point to many reasons why canal trade became the favored method of transportation, such as cheaper labor costs, faster travel times, predictable routes, and canal towns, that were all significant enough for coastal trade routes to become mostly obsolete during the Ming dynasty⁴. Additionally, the discontinuity of coastal trade routes was probably based on administrative concerns, as coastal military endeavors became prominent and pirates were common. However, although canals seemed to be the preferred method of transportation for merchants and government officials, the construction of the canal was a continuous, onerous task. The Grand Canal traverses changes in soil, topography, density, and climate, requiring constant planning and renovation to construct.

The Grand Canal represented a massive attempt to coordinate diverse hydrological systems under a single imperial vision. In the arid north, sustaining the canal's navigability required constant interventions, such as dams, locks, and diversions that often disrupted local ecosystems; wetlands were drained, lakes were lowered or redirected, and watercourses that once shifted according to seasonal rhythms were

² "Grand Canal," Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Accessed November 13, 2025, http://english.igsnrr.cas.cn/ecg/naturalscenery/rivers/202011/t20201119_251618.html.

³ Sui-wai Cheung, "Construction of the Grand Canal and Improvement in Transportation in Late Imperial China," *Asian Social Science* 4, no. 6 (June 2008): 11–22.

⁴ Cheung, "Construction of the Grand Canal," 11–22.

constrained into fixed channels.⁵ Rather than producing stability, these engineering efforts often triggered new problems. The canal thus created an engineered landscape that demanded constant attention and generated environmental consequences far beyond its immediate banks.

The canal demonstrated a fragile balance between human control and environmental resilience. The human-environment relationship is one of constant exchange. As humans sought to regulate the movement of water through engineering, the environment responded with floods, siltation, and ecological instability. Through cycles of deforestation, sedimentation, and land reclamation, the Canal became a part of a self-perpetuating cycle of degradation in which attempts at stabilization created new vulnerabilities.

Peter Perdue's framework helps contextualize this dynamic by portraying waterways like the Grand Canal as mediators between natural and political order. In *Nature and Power*, Perdue argues that large-scale hydraulic systems in imperial China reveal how environmental management was inseparable from the project of state authority⁶. The Ming-Qing state viewed control over rivers and canals as both a moral duty and a political necessity, seeing ecological harmony as a reflection of legitimate rule. Yet, as Perdue notes, such interventions often exposed the limits of human mastery, and each act of regulation required new adjustments as nature responded in unpredictable ways. The Grand Canal exemplifies this paradox: an infrastructure designed to assert political unity and environmental order that, in practice, magnified instability, forcing the state into a perpetual cycle of maintenance and response. This interplay between human activity and environmental response set the stage for the Canal's most tangible ecological consequences, beginning with the widespread deforestation and resource extraction that reshaped the surrounding landscape.

Deforestation and Resource Extraction

⁵ Edward Q. Wang, "The Grand Canal in China's Past and Present: A Reexamination—Editor's Introduction," *Chinese Studies in History* 58, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 91–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094633.2025.2501478>

⁶ Peter Perdue, "Nature and Power: China and the Wider World," *Social Science History* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2023): 373–391.

The construction and maintenance of the Grand Canal relied heavily on timber and other natural resources, producing significant ecological consequences along its route. Large-scale deforestation was required for the construction of locks, bridges, and canal embankments, as well as for fuel to support the labor force engaged in dredging and maintenance. Ian Miller's research highlights how such deforestation disrupted soil stability, reduced floodplain resilience, and accelerated sedimentation in river channels⁷. In regions like the Huai River basin and around canal towns such as Jining, the extraction of timber and other materials created cascading effects on both local ecosystems and agricultural productivity, illustrating the direct link between human labor, resource use, and environmental change.

Deforestation along canal construction and maintenance areas led to increased siltation and flooding of low-lying farmland and floodplains. Loss of soil nutrients and constant erosion contributed to declining arable land for crops and limited reforestation efforts⁸. Deforestation not only caused immense environmental consequences, but it also brought on a timber shortage, a critical resource for such an extensive maintenance project. From constructing embankments to the construction of the ships themselves, timber was essential for maintenance and was used in every aspect of the Grand Canal.

Timber, as a resource, is degradable, especially when subjected to constant harsh and wet conditions. Wood decay in canals can take anywhere from six months to several decades, depending on wood types, water conditions, and water-oxygen levels⁹. Depending on different environmental, climate, and governmental conditions, wood used for construction on embankments, locks, and ships needed consistent maintenance, increasing the demand for timber. Major temperature fluctuations, flooding, drought, monsoons, increased waves from ship movements, and more are all factors that can increase or decrease wood degradation. Large waves, warmer water

⁷ Ian Miller, *Fir and Empire: The Transformation of Forests in Early Modern China* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Pr. 2020), 21-76.

⁸ Robert B. Marks, *Ecological Degradation and Environmental Crisis in China, 1800-1950*, August 27, 2003, 16–38. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203220658-8>.

⁹ Jennifer M. Jones et al., “Wood Decomposition in Aquatic and Terrestrial Ecosystems in the Tropics: Contrasting Biotic and Abiotic Processes,” *FEMS Microbiology Ecology* 95, no. 1 (November 15, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1093/femsec/fiy223>.

temperatures, and harsh weather events may cause timber to degrade quickly, as during these instances, oxygen levels in the water increase¹⁰.

The Grand Canal traverses the four provinces of Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang, all of which are coastal provinces that experience seasonal monsoons and substantial climatic variability. Jiangsu and Zhejiang can be classified as humid subtropical climates, with hot summers and cold, dry winters¹¹. The Shandong and Hebei provinces are better classified as temperate and continental climates, respectively¹². As wood degradation is accelerated in warmer, wetter seasons, the sections of the Grand Canal located in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces typically decompose faster and required more frequent maintenance¹³. Warmer waters increase the speed at which wood decomposes through various deteriorating factors, such as microbial attacks, humidity, oxygen, chemical pollutants, increased pressure, and harsher underwater conditions, such as waves or floods¹⁴. Microbial and chemical pollutants thrive in warmer water, as frequent monsoons and floods carry them into waterways during the summer months. Additionally, ground runoff and land pollution are carried into the water, increasing the presence of pollutants that can quicken the wood degradation process and threaten the water health of the Canal as a whole. Though the Shandong and Hebei provinces are considered more temperate, they still experience harsh monsoon seasons and warm, rainy summers¹⁵.

Chinese silviculture during the Ming and Qing dynasties evolved significantly from previous years, driven by a massive increase in demand for timber and a need to manage widespread deforestation. Large-scale tree planting took place, primarily in the Yangzi River highlands, particularly in the Jiangxi, Hunan, and Guizhou provinces. Qing

¹⁰ Jones et al., “Wood Decomposition.”

¹¹ Frederick Fu Hung, “Jiangsu – Climate, Humid, Temperate, Rainy | Britannica,” Britannica, Accessed November 25, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Jiangsu/Climate>.

¹² Frederick Fu Hung, “Hebei - Climate, Temperate, Humid | Britannica,” Britannica, Accessed November 25, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hebei/Climate>.

¹³ Frederick Fu Hung, “Zhejiang Climate, Temperate, Humid | Britannica,” Britannica, Accessed November 25, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Zhejiang/Climate>.

¹⁴ Weiwei Yang, Wanrong Ma, and Xinyou Liu, “Evaluation of Deterioration Degree of Archaeological Wood from Luoyang Canal No. 1 Ancient Ship,” *Forests* 15, no. 6 (May 31, 2024): 963, <https://doi.org/10.3390/f15060963>.

¹⁵ Frederick Fu Hung, “Shandong Climate, Temperate, Humid | Britannica,” Britannica, Accessed November 25, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Shandong/Climate>.

silviculture primarily included the planting and harvesting of species valued for timber, including the China fir (*Cunninghamia lanceolata*), Chinese pine (*Pinus tabulaeformis*), and the Qinghai Spruce (*Picea crassifolia*)¹⁶.

The China Fir, in particular, was the main timber tree planted in southern China due to its straight, rapid growth and its resistance to rot. While local Canal maintenance of bridges and ports was more likely conducted with local materials, the China Fir and the Chinese Pine are the two wood species most predominantly used for Grand Canal construction and maintenance efforts during the Ming-Qing period.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, China Fir silviculture was primarily located in the areas of central and southern China in the Jiangxi, Fujian, Zhejiang, Hunan, and Guangdong regions¹⁷. These regions experienced significant deforestation driven primarily by agricultural expansion, commercial timber demand, and growing populations. China Fir trees were extremely valuable for timber and were often harvested before they could be replaced by limited cultivation efforts¹⁸. Additionally, as these regions are quite mountainous, local mining, smelting, and porcelain production also contributed to deforestation and heavy land erosion, exacerbating the difficulty of reforestation at this time. The extraction of timber and other materials from silviculture and mining practices created cascading effects on both local ecosystems and agricultural productivity. This system linked human exploitation and ecological depletion as a parallel process of state control. The state can be considered in constant competition with nature, fighting for control and exerting power over it whenever possible.

The overwhelming impact of human engineering on the environment can be clearly seen through the experience of Jining City, a canal town in the Shandong province. Each major canal adjustment throughout history reshaped local hydrology,

¹⁶ Xiaomin Zeng et al., “Qinghai Spruce (*Picea Crassifolia*) and Chinese Pine (*Pinus Tabulaeformis*) Show High Vulnerability and Similar Resilience to Early-Growing-Season Drought in the Helan Mountains, China,” *Ecological Indicators* 110 (March 2020): 105871. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2019.105871>.

¹⁷ Ian M. Miller, “The China Fir and the Plantation Age,” *Dialogue Earth*, May 15, 2024, <https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/the-china-fir-and-the-plantation-age/#:~:text=By%20the%20mid%201500s%20fir,the%20mountains%20by%20human%20porters>.

¹⁸ Elena Songster, “Cultivating the Nation in Fujian’s Forests: Forest Policies and Afforestation Efforts in China, 1911–1937,” *Environmental History* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 452–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3986204>.

leading to new tributaries, floodgates, and drainage systems¹⁹. These interventions stabilized transportation but disrupted the wetlands and flood basins that had previously moderated water levels. The ancient canal diverted water from the Wen and Si rivers to maintain water flow, increasing human intervention in river ecology.

As traffic increased during the Ming and Qing periods, Jining developed into a major commercial hub celebrated in local gazetteers as the “Canal Capital”²⁰. Yet this prosperity came at a high ecological cost. Urban expansion spread into former wetlands, transforming them into dense residential and industrial districts. This rapid conversion fragmented natural habitats, impeded fish migration, and contributed to declining water quality across the Jining watershed²¹.

Jining thus illustrates the Canal’s broader environmental dynamic: efforts to impose hydraulic order intensified ecological vulnerability. The same engineering that enhanced the region’s commercial importance also replaced resilient wetland ecosystems with rigid infrastructure, creating landscapes that required constant maintenance and suffered from increased flooding, pollution, and habitat loss. In this way, Jining reflects the broader pattern of environmental instability produced by the Canal’s hydraulic engineering.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, official policies regarding the Grand Canal prioritized centralized control and reliable grain transport over local environmental sustainability. In fact, Ming-Qing governments even designated specific areas, notably the Huaibei area north of the Huai River, as “sacrificial zones,” where lakes were drained, and local springs were rerouted to feed the canal system²². This deprived agricultural communities of essential irrigation and led to intensified droughts and

¹⁹ Yiran Sun, Xuesong Xi, and Ning Lyu, “Research on the Route Selection Method of the Grand Canal National Trails for Central Urban Areas: A Case Study of the Grand Canal, the Old Town of Jining City Section, China.” *Land* 14, no. 5 (May 13, 2025): 1053. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14051053>

²⁰ Liu et al., *The Canal Culture of Jining*; China Literature and History Publishing House: Beijing, China, 2001; pp. 7-38.

²¹ Han, Zhaoxing, et al., “The Ecological Effect of Ship Canals on Wetlands.” *Water* 16, no. 22 (November 19, 2024): 3324 <https://doi.org/10.3390/w16223324>.

²² Ma Junya and Tim Wright, “Sacrificing Local Interests: Water Control Policies of the Ming and Qing Governments and the Local Economy of Huaibei, 1495–1949,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (March 12, 2013): 1348–76. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x12000583>.

erosion in those areas. Similar to this idea is the concept of resource frontiers as described by Ian Miller²³. Miller discusses forests as contested zones between imperial extraction and local subsistence use; an area where previously unexploited environments are increasingly targeted for extraction or regulation, often driven by state or imperial powers. Forests as contested zones become sites of political conflict; the state wants to standardize and extract through surveying and taxation, while local communities want to maintain flexible access to forests for fuel, grazing, hunting, or spiritual practices. This system of forests as contested land linked human exploitation and ecological depletion as parallel processes of state control.

Deforestation was not merely a byproduct of canal construction; it was a catalyst for wider ecological instability that reshaped entire watersheds. The removal of trees accelerated siltation, intensified flooding cycles, and depleted natural resources at a rate that outpaced state-led efforts at restoration. In trying to stabilize the Canal and maintain hydraulic control, the Ming-Qing state inadvertently deepened environmental vulnerability, reinforcing the very problems it sought to fix. The Grand Canal must be understood not only as a symbol of political unity and economic integration, but as a transformative ecological force. Most critically, the consequences of deforestation did not simply remain confined to the forests, they moved downstream as well. The loss of tree cover fueled sedimentation, erosion, and shifting riverbeds, setting the stage for the Canal's most pervasive environmental challenger: the management of unstable and constantly moving sediment.

Sedimentation, Flooding, and Hydrological Transformation

While deforestation destabilized upland ecological systems, its effects did not end there. The loss of tree cover and root structures ultimately migrated downstream as silt, eroding soils, reshaping riverbeds, and intensifying flooding cycles²⁴. In this sense, deforestation set the stage for the Canal's most complex and persistent environmental

²³ Ian M. Miller, "The China Fir and the Plantation Age," *Dialogue Earth*, May 15, 2024, <https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/the-china-fir-and-the-plantation-age/#:~:text=By%20the%20mid%201500s%20fir,the%20mountains%20by%20human%20porters>.

²⁴ Partners, Climate Impact, "The Effects of Deforestation." Climate Impact Partners, November 28, 2024, <https://www.climateimpact.com/news-insights/insights/effects-of-deforestation/>.

challenge: the management of moving sediment. As Mostern argues, the Yellow River's unusually high loess content made its flow uniquely volatile; it was not simply a conduit of water but of earth itself, and any hydraulic system interacting with it would be forced to engage in continuous negotiation with sediment rather than water alone²⁵. The Grand Canal was thus compelled to operate not only as a transportation artery but as a channel for the river's unstable geological burden.

The Yellow River's diversion into the Huai River basin during the mid-17th century marked a turning point in the Canal's environmental history. The breaching of the dikes in 1642 redirected enormous volumes of sediment-laden water downstream²⁶. Contemporary reports describe the Huai River basin as rapidly transformed, its channels full of silt and its floodplain progressively elevated, making routine inundation an inherent part of the landscape²⁷. What followed was a cycle of hydraulic intervention: dredging, redirection, dike construction, and emergency labor mobilization. Dredging became a constant feature of Canal maintenance, described in state documents as a seasonal routine rather than on an irregular basis, an indication that sedimentation has been normalized as a structural condition of canal life rather than an episodic catastrophe²⁸.

The Kangxi Emperor's personal inspection scrolls from the Southern Inspection Tours provide a visual register of this hydraulic instability²⁹. In several sections depicting the Shanyang and Huai River regions, bands of brown sediment are visibly marked against the water's surface, alongside illustrations of labor teams engaged in dredging and embankment repair³⁰. The scrolls commemorate imperial authority and document the material demands of managing a river whose sediments continually

²⁵ Mostern, *Yellow River*, 22-60.

²⁶ Maxwell H. Hearn, "Recording the Imperial Southern Inspection Tours," *The Grandeur of the Qing | Asia for Educators*, accessed November 25, 2025. <https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/tours.html>.

²⁷ Yueting Guo et al., "Space-Time Indicators in Interdependent Urban-Environmental Systems: A Study on the Huai River Basin in China." *Habitat International* 45 (January 2015): 135-46 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2014.06.030>.

²⁸ Cheung, "Construction of the Grand Canal," 11-22.

²⁹ Wang Hui, "Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll 7, Wuxi to Suzhou," University of Alberta Museums, 1632 <https://search.museums.ualberta.ca/21-20555>.

³⁰ Meredith Hindley et al., "Imperial Scrolls of China." National Endowment for the Humanities, Accessed November 25, 2025, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2009/novemberdecember/feature/imperial-scrolls-china>.

threaten to overrun its channels³¹. Even in these state-sponsored representations, imperial legitimacy is tied to the labor of sediment control.



Detail from the Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll Three. Handscroll; ink and color on silk³².

The Canal's interventions were not corrective; they were generative. Each attempt to clear sediment exposed fresh soil along banks and floodplains, leaving them vulnerable to further erosion. As a result, silt loads increased rather than diminished. This cycle can be described as a "human-environment acceleration," in which intervention amplified the very forces it sought to control³³. Cheung highlights that by the early Qing period, certain stretches of the Canal had risen higher than the surrounding land, creating elevated waterways whose walls required perpetual reinforcement³⁴. In effect, hydraulic engineering produced its own conditions of crisis,

³¹ Christine Native, "Reading a Hand Scroll: The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour," AFE: East Asia, 2009, https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/neh/course3/naitove_lesson_plan.pdf.

³² Hindley et al., "Imperial Scrolls of China."

³³ Xuming Tan et al, "The Natural Conditions of the Grand Canal," In *The Technical History of China's Grand Canal* (Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing Corporation, 2020), 2–18,

³⁴ Cheung, "Construction of the Grand Canal," 11–22.

revealing sedimentation as a feedback loop in the environmental process linked to human intervention.

For communities along the Huai River Basin, the ecological consequences of sedimentation were inseparable from social disruption. Marks documents the enormous labor mobilization required for dredging, often carried out by *corvée* labor or relocated communities who were conscripted as a hydraulic workforce³⁵. Seasonal flooding destroyed arable land and displaced farmers, and harvest failures became common in areas where riverbeds had risen above farmland³⁶. Local gazetteers record repeated reconstruction efforts, sometimes rebuilding the same embankments year after year³⁷. This suggests both the scale of hydraulic commitment and the limits of environmental control. The Canal's promise of order and connection was sustained by ongoing ecological disturbance.

Sedimentation can be considered a human-amplified process created through the Canal's own ecological footprint. Each hydraulic intervention intensified the need for another, making maintenance itself an environmental force. Attempts at controlling nature became acts of generating it anew. The Grand Canal, designed as a symbol of order, thus reveals the environmental cost of hydraulic mastery: the state could command the waterways, but only by constantly reshaping and destabilizing the land beneath them.

Land Reclamation, Labor, and Environmental Governance

The ecological pressures produced by sedimentation did not merely prompt hydraulic reaction; they prompted territorial expansion. As riverbeds rose and floodplains broadened, the Ming-Qing state adopted extensive land reclamation as a strategy of control, treating environmental change as an opportunity for extraction³⁸.

³⁵ Marks, "Ecological Degradation," 16–38.

³⁶ Michael Storozum et al., "Geoarchaeological Evidence of the Ad 1642 Yellow River Flood That Destroyed Kaifeng, a Former Capital of Dynastic China," *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1 (February 28, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-60169-1>.

³⁷ Donald Sturgeon, "淮安府志：四 - 中國哲學書電子化計劃," Chinese Text Project, Accessed November 25, 2025, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=303701&remap=gb#建置志一山阳县>.

³⁸ John E. Herman, "From Land Reclamation to Land Grab: Settler Colonialism in Southwest China, 1680–1735," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 78, no. 1 (June 2018): 91–123, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jas.2018.0005>.

Reclamation acted as a social and ideological project, requiring labor mobilization, bureaucratic oversight, and an environmental worldview in which mastery over landscape was construed as both practical governance and moral duty. Marks shows that canal maintenance and land reclamation demanded enormous quantities of human labor and material resources, making them among the most significant forms of state-driven environmental intervention in the early modern world³⁹. In practice, reclamation deepened ecological instability, transforming wetlands, rerouting watercourses, and placing new stress on local ecologies already strained by dredging and sedimentation. What emerged was not a system of balance, but one of perpetual disturbance sustained by labor and justified by ideology.

If sedimentation revealed the destructive consequences of hydraulic intervention, land reclamation exposed the social and ideological structures behind that process. In many stretches of the canal, particularly in the Huai River Basin and around Jining City flooding triggered state-led strategies to regain control through reclamation, forced labor, and intensification of environmental engineering⁴⁰. Yet the very attempt to convert wetlands into productive land often brought new ecological instability, accelerating the very problems it sought to contain via the feedback loop.

Marks offers a crucial perspective by quantifying human labor and material extraction as environmental agents in their own right⁴¹. Canal maintenance requires tens of thousands of laborers every year. The labor force itself became a hydraulic system, mobilized, redirected, and deployed as a means of environmental control. State reports from the Huai River Basin emphasized the need to “open new fields” and “restore fertility through cultivation,” revealing both ecological ambition and desperation⁴². In many cases, workers were assigned to settlements on reclaimed land; in this way, the Canal did not simply rely on human labor; it reorganized human geography.

³⁹ Marks, “Ecological Degradation,” 16-38.

⁴⁰ Sun, Xi, and Lyu, “Route Selection,” 1053.

⁴¹ Marks, “Ecological Degradation,” 16-38.

⁴² Bryan Lohmar et al., *China’s Agricultural Water Policy Reforms: Increasing Investment, Resolving Conflicts, and Revising Incentives*, Washington DC: USDA, 2003.

This labor regime was underwritten by ideology. As Peter Perdue notes, Ming-Qing water management invoked the Confucian idea of moral duty, or the emperor's responsibility to guarantee order by "harmonizing water and humanity"⁴³. Hydraulic repair thus became a rhetorical performance of virtue. Reclamation projects were framed as benevolent acts restoring productivity to regions afflicted by natural disasters. But this moral framework ignored the material cost of such interventions. Repeated dredging emptied hillsides of soil, forests were cleared to produce timber for embankments, and new farmland appeared only on land already stripped of ecological resilience and soil nutrients.

The town of Jining once sat within a dynamic wetland system where seasonal flooding shaped both agricultural cycles and ecological diversity⁴⁴. Yet Jining was often treated as a hydraulic laboratory, a place where the potential of engineered order could be tried and tested. Embankments, diverted tributaries, and artificial drainage corridors gradually replaced natural wetlands with engineered water grids⁴⁵. Jining's environmental landscape became one of management, as flood basins transformed into canal ports, and low wetlands became commercial corridors.

Urbanization followed quickly. As canal traffic intensified, Jining grew into a major commercial hub, its prosperity celebrated in local gazetteers as proof of hydraulic success⁴⁶. Yet this success had ecological costs. Fragmented wetlands disrupted animal migration, village settlements expanded into flood zones, and urban waste increasingly polluted canal waters.

The ideological underpinnings of this transformation were complex. While imperial authority emphasized control and regulation, other cultural currents hinted at a growing awareness of ecological limits. Vincent Goossaert's work traces a quiet shift in late Ming and Qing religious culture – the rise of vegetarianism, localized conservation

⁴³ Perdue, "Nature and Power," 373-91.

⁴⁴ Feng Li et al., "Measurement Indicators and an Evaluation Approach for Assessing Urban Sustainable Development: A Case Study for China's Jining City," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 90, no. 3-4 (April 30, 2009): 134-42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2008.10.022>.

⁴⁵ Sun, Xi, and Lyu, "Route Selection," 1053.

⁴⁶ Feng Li et al., "Measurement Indicators and an Evaluation Approach for Assessing Urban Sustainable Development: A Case Study for China's Jining City," 134-42.

initiatives, and new temple-based efforts to protect forests and rivers⁴⁷. These trends reflected a moral recognition that nature was not an inert resource but a living system.

However, despite this recognition of nature as a living system, Ming-Qing dynastic policies overexploited natural resources on every front. The rhetoric of harmony with nature appeared even as forests were cleared for canal maintenance, wetlands were drained for farmland, and communities were displaced in the name of order. These contradictions reveal the underlying paradox of imperial governance. Environmental management was framed as restorative but functioned as extraction. The reclamation of land was inseparable from the reclamation of authority.

The Canal's Long-Term Environmental Legacy

The ecological shifts initiated along the Grand Canal did not diminish with the end of Ming-Qing governance; rather, they became embedded in the physical landscape itself. Regions most altered by hydraulic engineering continued to experience heightened flooding, unstable soil conditions, and compromised wetlands into the twentieth century. The “sacrificial zones” once targeted for drainage and diversion remained ecologically fragile long after imperial authority had disappeared⁴⁸. When modern engineers attempted to manage these landscapes, they often faced the same challenges that Ming-Qing officials had encountered, revealing the extent to which earlier hydraulic interventions had redefined environmental baselines⁴⁹.

This continuity is visible in recent efforts to preserve and reinterpret the Canal. In 2014, the Grand Canal received UNESCO World Heritage status, a designation that cemented its historical and cultural value⁵⁰. Yet in the process of restoring canal paths, dredging waterways, and preserving historic towns, conservationists consistently encountered the environmental consequences of past human exploitation engineering:

⁴⁷ Vincent Goossaert, trans. by Barbara R. Ambros, “Animals, Meat, and Sacrifice in China” and “Chinese Cattle as Political Animals,” in *The Beef Taboo: Agricultural, Ethics, Sacrifice* (Univ. of Hawaii Pr. 2025), 13-78.

⁴⁸ Ma Junya and Tim Wright, “Sacrificing Local Interests: Water Control Policies of the Ming and Qing Governments and the Local Economy of Huaibei, 1495–1949,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (March 12, 2013): 1348–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x12000583>.

⁴⁹ J.P. Conti, “The New Grand Canal,” *Engineering and Technology* 9, no. 9 (October 2014), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1049/et.2014.0923>.

⁵⁰ “The Grand Canal - UNESCO World Heritage Centre,” UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Accessed November 26, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1443/>.

sediment-heavy rivers, compressed floodplains, and watercourses that defied accurate historical mapping because their flows had been altered⁵¹. The canal cannot be restored to its original ecological state because that state no longer exists. What remains is a hybrid landscape both impacted and independent from human engineering, shaped by centuries of human intervention and environmental response.

Perdue's argument about the parallel development of state power and environmental history is crucial⁵². The Canal acted as a hydraulic expression of imperial ideology as well as an economic corridor. It made state control visible, but it also exposed the limits of that control. The Canal embodies what historians describe as a hydro-social system, a space where politics, labor, ideology, and ecology became inseparable. Mostern's framework reinforces this point by showing how waterways should not be understood as passive infrastructure but as evolving systems of interaction⁵³.

These themes remain urgently relevant. Modern China continues to pursue ambitious hydraulic projects, from the South-to-North Water Transfer Scheme to the management of the Three Gorges reservoir⁵⁴. Official rhetoric echoes the Ming-Qing language of harmony, productivity, and control, yet history suggests that large-scale environmental engineering often produces long-term consequences that outlast the political regimes that initiate them. The Canal shows how interventions meant to impose order can generate new ecological dependencies requiring constant maintenance and initiating cycles of ecological vulnerability.

The Grand Canal's history demonstrates that the imperial infrastructure operated as both a tool of governance and a force of environmental transformation. Through deforestation, sedimentation, land reclamation, and labor mobilization, the Canal altered river behavior, reshaped local ecologies, and redefined relationships between humans and nature. Rather than stabilizing the landscape, these interventions often

⁵¹ Xinhua, "China Completes 2025 Grand Canal Replenishment Project," The State Council the People's Republic of China, July 9, 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202507/09/content_WS686e5fa3c6d0868f4e8f4013.html.

⁵² Perdue, "Nature and Power," 373-91.

⁵³ Mostern, *Yellow River*, 22-60.

⁵⁴ Wang, "The Grand Canal in China's Past and Present," 91-95

intensified ecological stress. The canal must be understood as an ecological agent as it restructured landscapes and left permanent impacts on the environment.

To study the Grand Canal through environmental history is to recognize that human ambition has long-lasting consequences. The Canal moved more than just goods; it moved water, soil, forests, and people. It offers not just a model of imperial engineering but a record of nature's resistance. Ming-Qing China's attempts to "bring nature under control" emphasized the human-environment relationship through its feedback cycle of humane engineering and environmental vulnerability.

Bibliography

- “Grand Canal.” Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research, CAS. Accessed November 13, 2025. http://english.igsnrr.cas.cn/ecg/naturalscenery/rivers/202011/t20201119_251618.html.
- “The Grand Canal - UNESCO World Heritage Centre.” UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Accessed November 26, 2025. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1443/>.
- Marks, Robert B. *Ecological Degradation and Environmental Crisis in China, 1800-1950*, August 27, 2003, 16–38. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203220658-8>.
- Marks, Robert B. *Ecological Degradation and Environmental Crisis in China, 1800-1950*, August 27, 2003, 16–38. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203220658-8>.
- Cheung, Sui-wai. “Construction of the Grand Canal and Improvement in Transportation in Late Imperial China.” *Asian Social Science* 4, no. 6 (June 2008): 11–22.
- Cheung, Sui-wai. “Construction of the Grand Canal and Improvement in Transportation in Late Imperial China.” *Asian Social Science* 4, no. 6 (June 2008): 11–22.
- Cheung, Sui-wai. “Construction of the Grand Canal and Improvement in Transportation in Late Imperial China.” *Asian Social Science* 4, no. 6 (June 2008): 11–22.
- Cheung, Sui-wai. “Construction of the Grand Canal and Improvement in Transportation in Late Imperial China.” *Asian Social Science* 4, no. 6 (June 2008): 11–22.
- Conti, J.P. “The New Grand Canal.” *Engineering and Technology* 9, no. 9 (October 2014). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1049/et.2014.0923>.
- Elena Songster, E. “Cultivating the Nation in Fujian’s Forests: Forest Policies and Afforestation Efforts in China, 111–1937.” *Environmental History* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 452–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3986204>.
- Guo, YueTing, HengWei Wang, Peter Nijkamp, and JianGang Xu. “Space–Time Indicators in Interdependent Urban–Environmental Systems: A Study on the Huai River Basin in China.” *Habitat International* 45 (January 2015): 135–46. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2014.06.030>.
- Han, Zhaoxing, Dingkun Yin, Ruixue Zhao, Zijing Liu, Runhe Cheng, Guanwei Lin, and Haifeng Jia. “The Ecological Effect of Ship Canals on Wetlands.” *Water* 16, no. 22 (November 19, 2024): 3324. <https://doi.org/10.3390/w16223324>.
- Hearn, Maxwell H. “Recording the Imperial Southern Inspection Tours.” *The Grandeur of the Qing | Asia for Educators*. Accessed November 25, 2025. <https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/qing/tours.html>.
- Herman, John E. “From Land Reclamation to Land Grab: Settler Colonialism in Southwest China, 1680–1735.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 78, no. 1 (June 2018): 91–123. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jas.2018.0005>.
- Hindley, Meredith, Frederic E. Wakeman Jr., James Williford, Steve Moyer, and Lauren Viera. “Imperial Scrolls of China.” National Endowment for the Humanities. Accessed November 25, 2025. <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2009/novemberdecember/feature/imperial-scrolls-china>.
- Hindley, Meredith, Frederic E. Wakeman Jr., James Williford, Steve Moyer, and Lauren Viera. “Imperial Scrolls of China.” National Endowment for the Humanities. Accessed November 26, 2025. <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2009/novemberdecember/feature/imperial-scrolls-china>.
- Hui, Wang. “Kangxi Emperor’s Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll 7, Wuxi to Suzhou.” University of Alberta Museums, 1632. <https://search.museums.ualberta.ca/21-20555>.

- Hung, Frederick Fu. "Hebei - Climate, Temperate, Humid | Britannica." Britannica. Accessed November 25, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Hebei/Climate>.
- Hung, Frederick Fu. "Jiangsu - Humid, Temperate, Rainy | Britannica." Britannica, November 25, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Jiangsu/Climate>.
- Hung, Frederick Fu. "Shandong Climate, Temperate, Humid | Britannica." Britannica. Accessed November 25, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Shandong/Climate>.
- Hung, Frederick Fu. "Zhejiang Climate, Temperate, Humid | Britannica." Britannica. Accessed November 25, 2025. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Zhejiang/Climate>.
- Ian Miller, "The End of Abundance," "Boundaries, Taxes, and Property Rights," and "Hunting Households and Sojourners Families," in *Fir and Empire: The Transformation of Forests in Early Modern China* (Univ. of Washington Pr. 2020), 21-76.
- Jones, Jennifer M, Katy D Heath, Astrid Ferrer, Shawn P Brown, Thomas Canam, and James W Dalling. "Wood Decomposition in Aquatic and Terrestrial Ecosystems in the Tropics: Contrasting Biotic and Abiotic Processes." *FEMS Microbiology Ecology* 95, no. 1 (November 15, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1093/femsec/fiy223>.
- Jones, Jennifer M, Katy D Heath, Astrid Ferrer, Shawn P Brown, Thomas Canam, and James W Dalling. "Wood Decomposition in Aquatic and Terrestrial Ecosystems in the Tropics: Contrasting Biotic and Abiotic Processes." *FEMS Microbiology Ecology* 95, no. 1 (November 15, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1093/femsec/fiy223>.
- Junya, Ma, and Tim Wright. "Sacrificing Local Interests: Water Control Policies of the Ming and Qing Governments and the Local Economy of Huaibei, 1495–1949." *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (March 12, 2013): 1348–76. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000583>.
- Junya, Ma, and Tim Wright. "Sacrificing Local Interests: Water Control Policies of the Ming and Qing Governments and the Local Economy of Huaibei, 1495–1949." *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (March 12, 2013): 1348–76. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000583>.
- Li, Feng, Xusheng Liu, Dan Hu, Rusong Wang, Wenrui Yang, Dong Li, and Dan Zhao. "Measurement Indicators and an Evaluation Approach for Assessing Urban Sustainable Development: A Case Study for China's Jining City." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 90, no. 3–4 (April 30, 2009): 134–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2008.10.022>.
- Li, Feng, Xusheng Liu, Dan Hu, Rusong Wang, Wenrui Yang, Dong Li, and Dan Zhao. "Measurement Indicators and an Evaluation Approach for Assessing Urban Sustainable Development: A Case Study for China's Jining City." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 90, no. 3–4 (April 30, 2009): 134–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2008.10.022>.
- Liu, Y.; Zhang, Z.; Gao, J.; Feng, G.; He, W.; Zhao, M.; Liu, G.; Xu, Q.; Zhang, Y.; Duan, C.; et al. *The Canal Culture of Jining*; China Literature and History Publishing House: Beijing, China, 2001; pp. 7-38.
- Lohmar, Bryan, Jinxia Wang, Scott Rozelle, Jikun Huang, and David Dawe. Rep. *China's Agricultural Water Policy Reforms: Increasing Investment, Resolving Conflicts, and Revising Incentives*. Washington DC: USDA, 2003.
- Marks, Robert B. *Ecological Degradation and Environmental Crisis in China, 1800-1950*, August 27, 2003, 16–38. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203220658-8>.
- Marks, Robert B. *Ecological Degradation and Environmental Crisis in China, 1800-1950*, August 27, 2003, 16–38. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203220658-8>.
- Miller, Ian M. "The China Fir and the Plantation Age." *Dialogue Earth*, May 15, 2024. <https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/the-china-fir-and-the-plantation->

age/#:~:text=By%20the%20mid%201500s%20ofir,the%20mountains%20by%20human%20porte
rs.

Miller, Ian M. "The China Fir and the Plantation Age." *Dialogue Earth*, May 15, 2024.

<https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/the-china-fir-and-the-plantation->

age/#:~:text=By%20the%20mid%201500s%20of%20fir,the%20mountains%20by%20human%20poor
rs.

Native, Christine. "Reading a Hand Scroll: The Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour." AFE: East Asia, 2009. https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/neh/course3/naitove_lesson_plan.pdf.

Partners, Climate Impact. "The Effects of Deforestation." Climate Impact Partners, November 28, 2024. <https://www.climateimpact.com/news-insights/insights/effects-of-deforestation/>.

Peter Perdue, "Nature and Power: China and the Wider World," *Social Science History* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2023): 373-391.

Peter Perdue, "Nature and Power: China and the Wider World," *Social Science History* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2023): 373-391.

Peter Perdue, "Nature and Power: China and the Wider World," *Social Science History* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2023): 373-391.

Ruth Mostern, "The Natural and Unnatural History of the Yellow River" in *The Yellow River: A Natural and Unnatural History* (Yale UP 2021), 22-60.

Ruth Mostern, "The Natural and Unnatural History of the Yellow River" and "Before It Was Yellow," in *The Yellow River: A Natural and Unnatural History* (Yale UP 2021), 22-120.

Ruth Mostern, "The Natural and Unnatural History of the Yellow River" and "Before It Was Yellow," in *The Yellow River: A Natural and Unnatural History* (Yale UP 2021), 22-120

Storozum, Michael, Peng Lu, Sanying Wang, Panpan Chen, Ruixia Yang, Qifeng Ge, Jinping Cao, et al. "Geoarchaeological Evidence of the Ad 1642 Yellow River Flood That Destroyed Kaifeng, a Former Capital of Dynastic China." *Scientific Reports* 10, no. 1 (February 28, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-60169-1>.

Sturgeon, Donald. “淮安府志：四 - 中國哲學書電子化計劃.” Chinese Text Project. Accessed November 25, 2025. <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=303701&remap=gb#建置志一山阳县>.

Sun, Yiran, Xuesong Xi, and Ning Lyu. "Research on the Route Selection Method of the Grand Canal National Trails for Central Urban Areas: A Case Study of the Grand Canal, the Old Town of Jining City Section, China." *Land* 14, no. 5 (May 13, 2025): 1053. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14051053>

Sun, Yiran, Xuesong Xi, and Ning Lyu. "Research on the Route Selection Method of the Grand Canal National Trails for Central Urban Areas: A Case Study of the Grand Canal, the Old Town of Jining City Section, China." *Land* 14, no. 5 (May 13, 2025): 1053. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14051053>

Sun, Yiran, Xuesong Xi, and Ning Lyu. "Research on the Route Selection Method of the Grand Canal National Trails for Central Urban Areas: A Case Study of the Grand Canal, the Old Town of Jining City Section, China." *Land* 14, no. 5 (May 13, 2025): 1053. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land14051053>

Tan, Xuming, Yunpeng Li, Jun Deng, Jinhong Wan, and Jiangang Liu. "The Natural Conditions of the Grand Canal." Essay. In *The Technical History of China's Grand Canal*, 2–18. Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing Corporation, 2020.

Vincent Goossaert, trans. by Barbara R. Ambros, "Animals, Meat, and Sacrifice in China" and "Chinese Cattle as Political Animals," in *The Beef Taboo: Agricultural, Ethics, Sacrifice* (Univ. of Hawaii Pr. 2025), 13-78.

- Wang, Q. Edward. "The Grand Canal in China's Past and Present: A Reexamination—Editor's Introduction." *Chinese Studies in History* 58, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 91–95.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00094633.2025.2501478>
- Wang, Q. Edward. "The Grand Canal in China's Past and Present: A Reexamination—Editor's Introduction." *Chinese Studies in History* 58, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 91–95.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00094633.2025.2501478>
- Xinhua. "China Completes 2025 Grand Canal Replenishment Project." The State Council the People's Republic of China, July 9, 2025.
https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202507/09/content_WS686e5fa3c6do868f4e8f4013.html.
- Yang, Weiwei, Wanrong Ma, and Xinyou Liu. "Evaluation of Deterioration Degree of Archaeological Wood from Luoyang Canal No. 1 Ancient Ship." *Forests* 15, no. 6 (May 31, 2024): 963.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/f15060963>.
- Zeng, Xiaomin, Chunfei Wei, Xiaohong Liu, and Lingnan Zhang. "Qinghai Spruce (*Picea Crassifolia*) and Chinese Pine (*Pinus Tabuliformis*) Show High Vulnerability and Similar Resilience to Early-Growing-Season Drought in the Helan Mountains, China." *Ecological Indicators* 110 (March 2020): 105871. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolind.2019.105871>.

The Power of Printed Propaganda: Redefining the Cultural Revolution

Mia Jasmine Kanchanapoomi

University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

The Chinese Cultural Revolution was a defining event of Mao Zedong's last decade of rule, as it transformed China entirely, especially its sociocultural environment. It was not a revolution in the traditional sense of overthrowing a government; it was a revolution against ideas and culture. Prevailing historical perspectives paint the Cultural Revolution as a failure as it was unable to achieve its stated goals of completely ridding China of capitalistic influences to make it a total communist society. It left China's economy devastated, its education system broken, and its society in chaos. Yet, scholars often overlook an implicit goal of the Revolution in that it sought to amass support for both the movement and Mao Zedong. This paper explores a different perspective of the Cultural Revolution, one that does not completely paint it as a failure. Through the effective use of printed propaganda, the Chinese Cultural Revolution succeeded ideologically in establishing a cult of personality around Mao Zedong and devoting citizens entirely to the movement. In my paper, I hope to highlight the complexity of the movement with its multifaceted goals and offer a new perspective on the power of printed propaganda.

Introduction

In his book, *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature*, Robert Darnton states that “the power of print could be as threatening as cyberwarfare.”¹ While he writes this in the context of why governments censored print, it emphasizes how potent print can be. Printed items are accessible to most people, if not all, in a society, which is why people have used printed propaganda throughout history to spread ideas and influence public opinion. One significant example was the Chinese Cultural Revolution – a sociopolitical movement in the 1960s and 1970s that was characterized by violence, chaos, and transformation. During this era, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) produced various forms of propaganda: art, songs, writing, and more. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution was marked by the publication of a document. In 1966, the CCP published the “Decision of the CCP Central Committee Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” This document established the purpose and goals of the Cultural Revolution.² The CCP portrayed the movement as a battle between the proletariat and bourgeoisie citizens. The proletariat citizens were instructed to resist against the “Four Olds” which were “the old ideas, culture, customs, and habits left over by all the exploiting classes over thousands of years.”³ Mao wanted to erase them from China.

Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution because he feared that China and the CCP were leaning towards capitalistic tendencies.⁴ Thus, most Cultural Revolution propaganda warned against this infiltration of capitalism into the political and social spheres of China. This affected the social atmosphere as family and friends turned on each other, leading to widespread upheaval. When Mao Zedong died in 1976, the Cultural Revolution lost much of its original vigor and ended shortly after his death.

¹ Robert Darnton, *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature* (UK: The British Library, 2014), 14.

² Xun Xu, “Interpreting Modern China: The Rise and Fall of the Cultural Revolution in China 1966-76” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Albany, 1995), 3, ProQuest (9604499).

³ “Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), 1.

⁴ Spice Stanford, “Introduction to the Cultural Revolution,” *Spice Digest*, Fall 2007, <https://fsi9-prod.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/CRintro.pdf>.

Ironically, the effects of the Cultural Revolution were the opposite of its stated goals as China eventually transitioned into a more capitalistic society.

The outcome of the Cultural Revolution framed its historiographical analysis. Many historians who have written about the Cultural Revolution deemed it an overall failure because its goals were never achieved. For example, Jonathan D. Spence stated that “neither Mao nor the CCP seemed to know how or where the nation should be heading.”⁵ In other words, the Cultural Revolution represented the continued disorder within the Chinese government. However, this paper offers a reassessment of this long-standing view. While the main goal of the Cultural Revolution was to transform China into a fully communist society, Mao Zedong and the CCP pursued additional objectives. Among these were increasing support for Mao and the Cultural Revolution amongst the citizenry. Printed propaganda was extremely effective in influencing the ideologies and actions of citizens. A cult of personality was established around Mao, meaning that people embraced his leadership wholeheartedly and greatly elevated him to a heroic and god-like status. Despite its political failures, the Cultural Revolution succeeded ideologically through the widespread dissemination of printed propaganda. This paper will look at two types of printed propaganda that were especially prevalent during this era - books and art - and analyze their different components. These components include their producers, their intended audience, the message, and how citizens reacted to the work. Thus, the “visual experience”⁶ of the Cultural Revolution lent to its ideological success.

Textual Propaganda and its Impact: *Little Red Book*

Although there were many types of written propaganda published during the Cultural Revolution, the most significant work was the *Little Red Book*. The book’s formal title was *Quotations from Chairman Mao-Tsetung* but was more widely known as the *Little Red Book* because of its appearance. Its size was convenient for people to carry around which contributed to its large-scale distribution and influence. It contained

⁵ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (W.W.Norton & Company, 1990), 617.

⁶ Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 260.

quotes and speeches by Mao Zedong from before and during his time as leader of the CCP. Although Mao Zedong was credited as the author of this book, he never wrote it. It was actually one of his closest officials, Lin Biao, who doctored the idea behind compiling the book.⁷ His intention was to promote loyalty among the military and originally distributed the book to soldiers.

However, it was eventually made available to the general public. The government decided that every citizen should know Mao's ideas and quotations, and it became an unofficial requirement to not only own a copy but to constantly study it. The CR/10 Project, established by the University of Pittsburgh, includes interviews of those who either lived through the Cultural Revolution or learned about it from their parents or grandparents. The purpose of this project was to gain insight into people's unique experiences. In her interview, one woman confirmed this societal expectation, as she stated that her mother stopped learning school material to solely focus on studying the book and its ideas.⁸ Because there was a higher demand for the *Little Red Book* by both the government and citizens, most of China's resources were dedicated to printing out copies of the book. The *Little Red Book* was "printed just over one billion times between 1966 and 1971, and in terms of print circulation ranks second only to the Bible."⁹ By 1968, it was believed that statistically every Chinese citizen owned a copy of the *Little Red Book*.¹⁰ The book was also distributed globally due to the efforts of the Peking Foreign Languages Press to translate it into various languages.

The vast distribution of this book contributed to its large-scale effects on citizens. Citizens absorbed its contents, applying Mao's ideas to their behavior and worldview. In the *Little Red Book*, Mao's quotations covered a wide variety of topics such as the Communist Party, the societal cultural environments, foreign policy, and the Cultural

⁷ Alexander C. Cook, "Introduction: The Spiritual Atom Bomb and its Global Fallout," in *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, ed. Alexander C. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

⁸ Anonymous, "My mom said they only went to school up to third grade...and started reciting Quotations from Chairman Mao," interview by Zhang Haihui, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project*, August 1, 2017

⁹ Daniel Leese, "A Single Spark: Origins and Spread of the Little Red Book in China," in *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, ed. Alexander C. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 23.

¹⁰ Leese, 36.

Revolution.¹¹ Most of Mao's messages were directed towards the common people, his primary audience for propaganda materials. Often, his messages urged the common people to protect themselves from the bourgeoisie, and he advised them on how to do so. For example, he stated that "the revolutionary war is a war of the masses; it can be waged only by mobilizing the masses and relying on them."¹² He needed the support from the common people in order to sustain this large movement, and he achieved this goal.

Mao supported the idea of the People's Army in which citizens were encouraged to come together in response to the impending conflicts. They did just that and even amplified their commitment to Mao as seen by the violent acts committed by the Red Guards. The Red Guards were a group of students inspired by Mao's orders to purge China of its "Four Olds." They instigated many searches for "traitors" which often included teachers, intellectuals, and established authority figures such as policemen. These people were seen as capitalist infiltrators and counterrevolutionaries. Many verbal and physical conflicts broke out, especially during the summer of 1966 which became known as Red August. During Red August, "beating teachers was considered a 'revolutionary action', and as such was not restricted by law, regulation, or convention."¹³ It is heartbreaking that so many of these attacks were directed at teachers when education has historically been held to such a high standard throughout Chinese history. Yet, it reinforces the power of Mao's words on his citizens.

During these violent acts, Red Guards quoted the words of Mao from the *Little Red Book*.¹⁴ Mao's words functioned to give them motivation and a purpose to continue their attacks, making them feel empowered and justified in their actions. One revolutionary by the name of Li Shengpin wrote in a letter: "I often thought, if our country doesn't have a future, all talk about personal future is deceitful nonsense...The

¹¹ Mao Zedong, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* ('*The Little Red Book*') (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966).

¹² Mao Zedong, 47.

¹³ Youquin Wang, "Student Attacks Against Teachers: The Revolution of 1966," in *Issues and Studies* 37 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 26.

¹⁴ Guobin Yang, "Mao Quotations in Factional Battles and their Afterlives: Episodes from Chongqing," in *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, ed. Alexander C. Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 61.

question now is whether to carry the Cultural Revolution to the end or to let it die prematurely. We must exert ourselves, struggle hard and not fear death.”¹⁵ Li, like many others, was convinced by Mao’s speeches that there was a purpose in the Cultural Revolution for the future of China, so he became a Red Guard. He devoted himself so greatly to Mao’s goals that it led to his death. The Red Guards represented the more violent faction of the cult of personality that formed around Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution.

It is important to emphasize that the format of the *Little Red Book* contributed to its success and power over citizens. Many quotations were short and simple, making it easy for people to mindlessly recite them like slogans. Quotations were also often taken out of context because they were never explained. People were free to interpret them however they chose to justify their actions. One well-known quote by Mao Zedong was “A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.”¹⁶ It seems he was saying that a revolution required violence. In a scholarly article about the psychology of Red Guards, the author wrote that Red Guards understood the violence part as killing and maiming.¹⁷ It is not clarified in the quote about who the violence should be directed towards, but it is likely that Mao meant the bourgeoisie considering his definition of the Cultural Revolution. However, Red Guards interpreted the quote to refer to teachers, and as a result, many teachers were beaten and killed at the hands of their own students.

The actions that resulted from the *Little Red Book*, though negative, highlighted the success of this piece of propaganda. The significance and impact of the *Little Red Book* should not be underestimated. As Lin Biao described the book perfectly, the *Little Red Book* was “a weapon of mass instruction,” and “a spiritual atom bomb of infinite power.”¹⁸ It was dangerous in its effectiveness to manipulate people’s minds.

¹⁵ Yang, 67.

¹⁶ Mao Zedong, 14.

¹⁷ Min Yang, “The Symptoms of Perpetrator Trauma: Rethinking the Portrayal of Red Guards in Scar Literature,” *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 75, no. 1 (2021): 52.

¹⁸ Cook, 8.

Visual Propaganda and its Impact: Art

While textual propaganda mobilized citizens through the repetition of core beliefs, visual propaganda embedded these beliefs into daily life through imagery. Print aided in the production of propaganda posters that varied in design and message, but they all served a similar purpose of influencing people in mind and behavior. As stated before, the Cultural Revolution was a visual experience, and there was a large amount of visual propaganda during this time. Citizens saw posters everywhere from private spaces such as their home to public places such as the streets, restaurants, schools, and more. The prevalence of these posters aided in the internalization of their messages and Mao's status, whether consciously or unconsciously. On Cultural Revolution posters, the two most common images were those of Mao Zedong and revolutionaries.

In addition to the *Little Red Book*, posters of Mao Zedong contributed to the establishment of the cult of personality surrounding him. The elevation of his status as a divine figure was reinforced in posters. Posters often depicted Mao as a god in the sky overlooking the people. As seen in Figure 1, there is an image of the sun behind him, infusing his persona with the connotation of brilliance and Heaven's support. In another poster, people were represented as sunflowers who relied on the sun, Mao, and this portrayal served to highlight that the people depended on Mao for their livelihood and thus should honor him.



Figure 1. Anonymous, *Chairman Mao is the red sun in the hearts of people of the world*, political poster, UCSD Library Digital Collections, 1967.

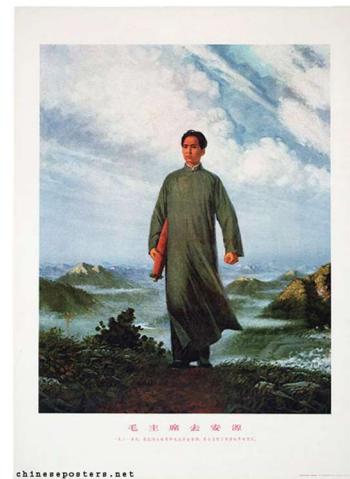


Figure 2, Liu Chunhua, *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan*, oil painting, Chinese Posters, July 1968.

Other posters showed Mao as an ally of the common people, befriending agricultural laborers and rallying workers. This appeal to the proletariat class was especially represented in a well-known portrait of Mao on his way to Anyuan. This portrait was originally painted by Liu Chunhua at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution but was reproduced many times in poster form. In the painting, young Mao is shown confidently walking to Anyuan which was the site of a miners' strike in 1922.¹⁹ This strike took place before Mao became the leader of the CCP. The imagery captivated many citizens because they saw him as a revolutionary leader. Ji-Li Jiang's memoir *Red Scarf Girl* captured her experience of the Cultural Revolution. In this memoir, she wrote about her experience of seeing this poster of Mao on the Propaganda Wall: a wall constantly decorated with propaganda imagery and messages during the Cultural Revolution. She stated, "I could not look at the painting without feeling inspired. I was ready to follow him everywhere."²⁰ This sentiment was not just hers; it was shared by many Chinese citizens at this time.

There was a classic portrait of Mao that was most prominent throughout China. The title under his picture wrote *The Great Mentor, the Great Leader, the Great Captain, the Great Steersman, Long Live Chairman Mao!* This standardized image of Mao was reprinted many times in print form as posters but also in the form of stamps, buttons, and even embellished in product advertisements such as his face on the mascot of Quaker Oats cans sold in China. He was everywhere, so much so that "statistics show



Figure 3, Anonymous, *The Great Leader and Teacher Chairman Mao Zedong*, portrait, Chinese Posters, October 1977.

¹⁹ Mittler, 278.

²⁰ Ji-Li Jiang, *Red Scarf Girl* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 148.

that Mao's portrait is the single most reproduced portrait in human history."²¹ The prevalence of his image ensured that he was always in the mind of his citizens. No matter where people went, Mao's presence was continuously felt. Barbara Mittler, author of the book *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*, conducted interviews of citizens who lived during the Cultural Revolution into her analyses of the propaganda art. An interviewee recollected an experience in which she saw a Red Guard slip and fall to the ground. The Mao button he wore also made contact with the ground during the fall and when he realized it happened, he cried because he truly believed that he hurt Mao.²²



Figure 4, Mo Shuzi, *Read revolutionary books, study revolutionary persons, to become revolutionary successors*, political poster, Chinese Posters, June 1974.

In other interviews by Mittler and those part of the CR/10 project, citizens expressed the ideological effects these posters of Mao had on them. One stated, “I thought I genuinely loved Chairman Mao, and often yelled out the slogan ‘Long live Chairman Mao.’”²³ A woman referred to as Aunt Chou remembered that she used to talk with the classic portrait of Mao displayed in her home. She said, “I must say what’s on my mind. With Chairman Mao supporting us, there is nothing in the world we need fear.”²⁴ In her eyes, Mao was someone who could protect her. Taxi drivers also had Mao’s picture in their cars because they believed he could save them from car accidents. Like a god with powers from Heaven, the amount of reverence for him was extraordinary, reinforcing the success of Cultural Revolution propaganda. Mao Zedong

²¹ Mittler, 303.

²² Mittler, 258.

²³ Anonymous, “‘Long live Chairman Mao; good health to Vice Chairman Lin!’: Vivid Memories from the Countryside,” interview by Zhang Haihui, *China’s Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project*, March 27, 2017.

²⁴ Mittler, 261.

was not just the leader of China; people genuinely saw him as a divine being, and this cemented his image permanently as an important figure in Chinese history.

Propaganda posters served to empower citizens to take action in the Cultural Revolution. They incorporated images of peasants and workers in revolutionary action. The powerful and vivid imagery in these posters appealed to the emotions of citizens, stirring up nationalistic attitudes. For example, a 1974 poster depicts a young girl during the movement. She holds a book authored by a revolutionary hero with other heroes behind her in the sky. The girl wears a determined look on her face as she gazes into the distance, possibly thinking of the future. She became a symbol of the revolution to young girls. In Mittler's book, an interviewee named Anchee Min reminisced that she longed to become that girl in the poster because she represented devotion to Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Her actions after seeing the poster were driven by the desire to emulate the girl, even stating that she was willing to die for the revolution and Mao.²⁵ Revolutionary heroes were established throughout the Cultural Revolution and displayed on various posters. People sought to learn from these heroes, who all represented Mao's ideas, by mimicking their actions of sacrifice and dedication. As these heroes were often from proletarian backgrounds that people could relate to, they were convinced that they could become like them. These posters explain why the Cultural Revolution had so many participants who took part in working towards its goals, which demonstrates the success of the propaganda.



Figure 5, Anonymous, *We are Determined to Liberate Taiwan!*, political poster, UCSD Library Digital Collections, 1967.

Propaganda posters also had a unifying effect among citizens from different backgrounds by promoting collectivism. It was not necessarily the unification of

²⁵ Mittler, 261.

different social classes, considering that the movement pitted the common people against the elite classes, but of different occupations and laborers. Posters showed different types of workers working together in revolutionary action such as soldiers, farmers, steel workers, and pilots. There was also a mix of men, women, elderly, and children, showing that everyone could take part in the revolution. In these posters, there was often an individual holding the *Little Red Book* in the air, demonstrating its status as an icon of the Cultural Revolution. This type of unifying imagery reinforced Mao's emphasis on the common people coming together as the "People's Army." As an CR/10 interviewee quoted, "People at the time didn't speak of rewards. They only spoke of contributions, for fear they themselves would do a little less than others. The masses - everything depended on the masses, the power of the masses."²⁶ People came together under a single purpose and ideology, abandoning their past differences.

An article written by Eric A. Hyer, an associate BYU professor specializing in Chinese history, stated that during this period, artists were instructed to paint in a style known as "revolutionary romanticism."²⁷ One could argue that all Cultural Revolution propaganda embodied this style as revolutionary action was glorified in many posters. There were few, if any, posters that depicted the violent side of the revolution with the search for communist infiltrators and traitors. Artists were ordered to only portray the positive aspects of the Cultural Revolution. If they did not, they were imprisoned and subjected to brutal punishments as seen in the case of Jin Zhilin, an oil painter. He recalled, "we [painted] whatever was politically required regardless of how one felt."²⁸ Individualism and free thinking was not allowed during this era. After his imprisonment, his art shifted to focusing more on the political masses. Though his work was not printed as posters like other artists, his experience represents the overall shift in culture as artists were forced to adhere to the government's goal of producing propaganda. The government took precautions over every aspect of culture to ensure

²⁶ Anonymous, "The Cultural Revolution had its good points," interview by Zhang Haibo, *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project*, January 18, 2018.

²⁷ Eric A. Hyer, "Art and Politics in Mao's China," *Divine Coincidence* (Kennedy Center: Bridges Alumni Magazine, 2005).

²⁸ Hyer.

that each piece of work was consistent with Mao's ideas and did not go against the government, ensuring that citizens only saw what the government wanted them to see.

Conclusion

The historical portrayal of the Cultural Revolution has not been rooted in much debate, but this paper sought to raise a perspective that has often been overlooked by other scholars. The Cultural Revolution may not have resulted in Mao's stated goals of ridding China of its "Four Olds" and capitalistic influences in order to establish his ideal China. That is why people have deemed it as a failure. Yet, it is clear that Mao and the CCP wanted to increase citizen support for the Cultural Revolution and its goals, which was achieved through propaganda. Propaganda served the needs of every citizen because it was not limited to just print; it came in the form of plays, paintings, and more. This diversity contributed to the success of the propaganda. Specifically, this paper analyzed the ideological success of printed propaganda: books and poster art. These two forms had a huge impact on the minds and actions of citizens as they absorbed Mao's ideas and applied them to their daily behavior. They became followers under the leadership of Mao, whom they came to see as a god. They did whatever it took to try and achieve Mao's stated goals of the Cultural Revolution. In the eyes of Mao and the CCP, wouldn't they have seen their work as a success because people supported their movement? The Cultural Revolution was complex. It was not a straightforward campaign with a singular objective but a multifaceted movement with many goals. They achieved at least one goal. That does not make the entire Cultural Revolution a failure. It is an overgeneralization.

Bibliography

- Anonymous. "[We] were all brainwashed." By Lily Kirkhoff. In *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project*, University of Pittsburgh, August 15, 2017.
- Anonymous. "Long live Chairman Mao; good health to Vice Chairman Lin!': Vivid Memories from the Countryside." By Zhang Haihui. In *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project*, University of Pittsburgh, March 27, 2017.
- Anonymous. "My mom said they only went to school up to third grade...and started reciting *Quotations from Chairman Mao*." By Zhang Haihui. In *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project*, University of Pittsburgh, August 1, 2017.
- Anonymous. "The Cultural Revolution had its good points." By Zhang Haibo. In *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR.10 Project*, University of Pittsburgh, January 18, 2018.
- Anonymous. *Chairman Mao is the red sun in the hearts of people of the world*. Political Poster. UCSD Library Digital Collections. 1967.
- Anonymous. *The Great Leader and Teacher Chairman Mao Zedong*. Portrait. Chinese Posters. October 1977.
- Anonymous. *We are Determined to Liberate Taiwan!*. Political Poster. UCSD Library Digital Collections. 1967.
- Chunhua, Liu. *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan*. Oil Painting. Chinese Posters. July 1968.
- Cook, Alexander C. "Introduction: The Spiritual Atom Bomb and its Global Fallout." In *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, edited by Alexander C. Cook, 1-22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Darnton, Robert. *Censors at Work: How States Shaped Literature*. UK: The British Library, 2014.
- Hyer, Eric A. "Art and Politics in Mao's China." In *Divine Coincidences*, Issue 2. Kennedy Center: Bridges Alumni Magazine, 2005.
- Jiang, Ji-Li. *Red Scarf Girl*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997.
- Leese, Daniel. "A Single Spark: Origins and Spread of the Little Red Book in China." In *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, edited by Alexander C. Cook, 23-42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Mittler, Barbara. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*. 1st ed. Vol. 343. Harvard University Asia Center, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1x07z47>. Mao
- Peking Foreign Languages Press. "Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." 1966.
- Shuzi, Mo. *Read revolutionary books, study revolutionary persons, to become revolutionary successors*. Political Poster. Chinese Posters. June 1974.
- Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China*. 1st ed. W. W. Norton & Company. 1990.
- Spice Stanford. "Introduction to the Cultural Revolution." Adapted from *The Search for Modern China* by Jonathan Spence. In *Spice Digest*, Fall 2007. <https://fsi9-prod.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/CRintro.pdf>.
- Wang, Youqin. "Student Attacks Against Teachers: The Revolution of 1966." *Issues & Studies* 37. No. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Xu, Xun. "Interpreting Modern China: The Rise and Fall of the Cultural Revolution in China 1966-76." Phd dissertation, State University of New York at Albany, 1995. ProQuest (9604499).

Yang, Guobin. "Mao Quotations in Factional Battles and their Afterlives: Episodes from Chongqing." In *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, edited by Alexander C. Cook, 61-75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Yang, Min. "The Symptoms of Perpetrator Trauma: Rethinking the Portrayal of Red Guards in Scar Literature." *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 75, no. 1 (2021): 45-69.

Zedong, Mao. *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung ('The Little Red Book')*. 2nd ed. Translated by Peking Foreign Languages Press, 1966.

