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# PRETTIER IN PINK:

*Identity Reconstruction Among Rural Migrant Women in Mary Kay China*

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## ABSTRACT

Rural migrant women in China commonly face abusive work conditions that exacerbate the hardships associated with social dislocation. Limited access to financial and social resources, coupled with China's stigmatization of migrant laborers, makes urban integration extremely difficult for many migrant women. However, Mary Kay China, the Chinese subsidiary of American-based cosmetics company Mary Kay Inc., presents a contrary case of empowerment through migrant labor. Comprising a vast majority of the beauty consultant workforce, female migrants act as entrepreneurs within Mary Kay's direct selling business model, marketing cosmetic products and services and managing their own client base. This article aims to examine how these women renegotiate their migrant identities and overcome marginalization through this participation in labor.

Based on interviews with migrant distributors and an analysis of an online network of beauty consultants, this article found that migrant women were able to construct and perform alternative selves through four main mediums: material gains, organizational aesthetics, a cohesive social network, and strong ideological mechanisms. These avenues serve both as pull factors for new distributors and as performance motivators in congruence with the economic interests of the firm. Additionally, some narratives indicate that these devices effectively retain consultants

in the business despite prolonged individual unprofitability.

## INTRODUCTION

While clothes may not make the woman, they certainly have a strong effect on her self-confidence—which, I believe, does make the woman.

Mary Kay Ash<sup>1</sup>

For migrant women in Mainland China, labor is often just another domain of social stigmatization. Abuse and discrimination are common realities for rural women joining the urban labor force, and many women have little recourse for social, financial, and physical security.<sup>ii</sup> Disparaging migrant labor conditions have a number of negative consequences for mental health in particular, and can induce emotional and psychological damage that affects key factors related to self-perception.<sup>iii</sup> However, for some migrant women the workplace may also serve as a vehicle for identity reconstruction whereby they may transcend the social labels that connote their position with inferiority. Drawing from the personal narratives of migrant beauty consultants in Mary Kay China, this article asserts that labor participation can be formative and constructive for some female migrant workers, and explores the ways in which employment facilitates the negotiation of selfhood.

Although much research has been conducted on the sociology of networking

and direct selling, this study is compelling due to the paucity of gendered analysis and the lack of consideration of rural migrants in the literature.<sup>iv</sup> Furthermore, the case enterprise is an American-based direct selling organization, characterized by a very different working dynamic, compensation system and organizational structure from companies in the textile, service and manufacturing industries in which Chinese migrant women are commonly employed.<sup>v</sup> Mary Kay's relationship-driven business model and Western origins also provide a unique set of angles from which to assess migrant women's labor participation. Its core branding of femininity and its nuclear, surrogate-family structure inspire new social possibilities for rural workers not commonly found in other companies in China.<sup>vi</sup> It is the aim of this study to contribute to the understanding of Chinese women's labor activities as it relates to their migrant status within this context.

The article proceeds in the following order. First, recent migration trends and common themes associated with the female migration experience, particularly with regards to migrant women, will be briefly outlined. Second, a profile of the Mary Kay Company will be presented followed by an analysis of beauty consultant interviews and profiles from an unofficial company website, Hicay.com, to develop a more nuanced interpretation of the migrant-enterprise relationship. Third, organizational social theories and ideas related to identity construction will be explored in an attempt to explain the subjects' motivations and methods of self-conceptualization in their particular social circumstances. The article closes with a discussion on possible implications beyond the study of gendered migration.

## CHINA'S RURAL MIGRANTS

Over the last quarter century, China's rapid economic development and urbanization have been inextricably involved with rural-urban migration on an unprecedented scale. Since the government reforms of the early 1980s, China's urban population has expanded by about 440 million to 622 million people in 2009; about 340 million of the 440 million were due to urban reclassification and net migration.<sup>vii</sup> Estimates from China's National Bureau of Statistics show the total migrant labor population has grown from approximately 30 million to over 250 million migrant workers between 1989 and 2011.<sup>viii</sup> In 2012, by the end of the third quarter alone, the number of rural migrant laborers exceeded 168 million, representing a 3 percent increase from the previous year.<sup>ix</sup> Although issues of statistical integrity continue to plague the study of migration trends, the significance of migrant labor in China is unquestionable.<sup>x</sup>

The influx of rural women into urban areas indicates a feminization of labor and migration, given the push-and-pull factors and segmented labor markets specifically encountered by women.<sup>xi</sup> Females comprise a substantial minority of China's floating population. In the early 2000s, women were estimated to comprise about 50 percent of the migrant population.<sup>xii</sup> This represents a considerable increase from various estimates during the 1990s, which range from 30 percent to 40 percent.<sup>xiii</sup> Many move from the countryside in search of employment opportunities and better wages, though motivations are not always purely economic.<sup>xiv</sup>

To position the migrant women as helpless victims undermines personal narratives in which, regardless of indicators of the contrary, they indeed feel

themselves to be more confident and self-aware.<sup>xv</sup> Certainly for many rural women, the transition to urban life is often wrought with social and institutional prejudice, and their subordination as “second-class” citizen is reinforced in their destination area. This extends to the corporate sphere, where many migrant women who are able to procure employment are exploited and abused by their employers. A lack of sufficient social capital pre-migration can undermine their ability to rebuild it once they have relocated: *guanxi*, for instance, a cultural form of social capital and one crucial in Chinese relationships, is an important tool for negotiating the migration process—preliminary jobs are often secured this way to ensure a source of income post-migration—but rural women tend to lack this kind of bargaining power, increasing their vulnerability.<sup>xvi</sup> At the same time, some arguments maintain that migration actually promotes female autonomy, and that the influences of urban culture are sustained when a woman returns to her rural hometown.<sup>xvii</sup> The present article reconciles these views by analyzing a kind of labor participation, motivated by the desire to address the residual effects of such negative experiences, as a way to achieve some self-determination.

Understanding the circumstances that surround the female migrant experience is crucial to understanding the context within which their identity reconstruction occurs. Each migratory experience is deeply subjective and diverse, and not all Chinese women encounter the same challenges. However, migration is not only characterized by the relocation of an individual migrant, but also involves the perturbation of local social groups in which the migrant attempts to integrate and form durable relationships. The hostility, intolerance and distrust of urban residents towards

rural migrant women demonstrate the dominant notions of acceptable identity within the urban environment. Migrant women are penalized for their incongruity of speech, dress, mannerisms, physical appearance, and other qualities. While urban residents typify characteristics of rural migrants that may not actually be part of an individual migrant’s identity (descriptors like “inferior,” “incapable,” and “violent” are not uncommon) this scheme of marginalization inadvertently makes rural women distinctly aware of their contrariness, which they then internalize as defects.<sup>xviii</sup> The idea of personal reconstruction explored here is closely related to the female migrant identified as a marginal subject, challenging and responding to the dominant social framework in which she creates and asserts her identity.

#### MARY KAY CHINA

Beneficiaries of the boom in the Chinese migrant labor population are not limited to domestic enterprises. As the Chinese economy has expanded, foreign companies have established a presence throughout the country to take advantage of the rapidly expanding consumer market and a large and inexpensive labor force. The trend of foreign enterprises operating in China has had significant economic and social implications for the country as new job opportunities open for migrant women.<sup>xix</sup> A majority of female migrants work in manufacturing or social service jobs, though occupational gender segregation pushes women more into unskilled, lower-paid, and labor-intensive industries.<sup>xx</sup>

The Mary Kay Cosmetics Company, known in China as 玫琳凯 (*meilinkai*), entered the Chinese market in 1994, more than 30 years after its inception in the United States. Their subsidiary was officially registered a year

later as the Mary Kay (China) Cosmetics Ltd. To comply with government regulations on consumer goods production, Mary Kay founded a manufacturing plant in Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang province.<sup>xxi</sup> Since its arrival, the company has been commercially successful and has invested over \$100 million in its business in China.<sup>xxii</sup> In 2010, the company boasted a 2.9 percent market share of China's total beauty and personal care market due to increased customer spending and considerable expansion in their sales force, comprising hundreds of thousands of independent distributors.<sup>xxiii</sup>

With the beneficent purpose of “Enriching women’s lives,” Mary Kay specializes in developing, manufacturing, and selling color cosmetics, skin care, fragrances, and other beauty products for women and men. The company is a well-recognized and long-established member of the direct selling business (also known as “network direct selling,” “multilevel marketing,” or “network marketing”), an industry started in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the direct selling platform, individuals are recruited to be “independent distributors”—or in the case of Mary Kay, beauty consultants (美容顾问 *meirongguwen*)—and must rely solely on personal networks and face-to-face interaction to develop their business and recruit new members. In terms of compensation, older distributors receive a percentage of the commissions earned by the younger, less experienced distributors they hire and train.<sup>xxiv</sup>

For the most part, this business model has been transplanted successfully into China, though products and marketing strategies have been adjusted to fit the Chinese market. In line with the cultural beauty standard of young, pale skin, there is more emphasis on anti-aging and skin whitening products as opposed

to color cosmetics. In the United States, Mary Kay’s corporate motto is “God first, family second, career third,” but was changed to replace “God” with “Principle” when the company expanded into China, an officially atheist nation. Besides these modifications, the operating structure and emotionally oriented company culture have remained in the Chinese subsidiary.<sup>xxv</sup>

Mary Kay has greatly benefited from China’s booming beauty industry and the substantial increase in demand for cosmetic products. Within the past few decades, the rapid expansion of the Chinese economy has created many new opportunities for buyers and suppliers. As domestic and international cosmetics firms innovate for and adapt to the Chinese market, a growing number of consumers, particularly Chinese women, spend increasingly large amounts of disposable income on cosmetics products, amounting to an estimated \$23.6 billion for China’s beauty business in 2011.<sup>xxvi</sup> The pursuit of beauty in China is not a new phenomenon, but under the Mao regime in the 1960s and 1970s cosmetics and other personal adornments were condemned as “bourgeoisie” and banned from Communist society.<sup>xxvii</sup> The reforms enacted following this period had drastic implications not only for economic development, but also societal exposure to globalization and Western-style consumer capitalism. The subsequent “million-dollar boom” of the beauty industry has brought new and attractive opportunities for rural women looking for jobs in the cities.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Multiple sources indicated that rural migrant women comprise a considerable majority of Mary Kay China’s consultant sales force,<sup>xxix</sup> an unexpected statistic given the company’s distinctly Western culture and business principles.<sup>xxx</sup> As one journalist amusingly summarized, Mary Kay is “part down-

home faith...part New Agey, Oprah-esque self-realization, and part good old American hucksterism/optimism,” hardly the characteristics of a company one would expect to attract so many migrant workers.<sup>xxxii</sup> The direct selling business model it operates additionally demands considerable network construction and management, which would expectedly pose unfamiliar challenges to a migrant distributor.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Findings of this article suggest that the company provides these employees with more than just income, and so the factors for joining and staying at the firm go beyond financial reasons. In their interviews, a number of women voiced the sensibility that a job at Mary Kay was more than a job—it was a way to enhance one’s life by enhancing the lives of other women.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The company and its aesthetic, commercial, and operational dimensions create an environment in which identity transformation becomes the *raison d'être* of a beauty consultant, both for herself and her clients. The highly visual and social nature of the cosmetics business moreover provides a migrant consultant with avenues of affirmation and confirmation of her transformed identity. Becoming a Mary Kay consultant is then a way to become an approved, and even esteemed, member of urban society.

### The Migrant Self

The migratory experience does not just involve spatial reorientation. Dialogues between the self and others are disturbed as a migrant moves from one location to another. This change of social and physical place results in a change in how one’s identity is understood by the self and others; the familiar framework in which the self had been performed no longer exists.<sup>xxxv</sup> In the process of migration, most prominently where there is a transition in environment from the

lower to the higher end of the economic spectrum, a migrant takes on the distinction of a marginalized, out-of-place and subordinated “other.” For migrant women, this manifests in a range of forms, from gender discrimination and sexual exploitation to institutional restrictions and government control. The tools one might use to actively renegotiate one’s own identity, such as financial resources or durable relationships, are often out of reach for migrant women.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In this article, identity refers to a multifarious medium by which intra- and interpersonal interactions are interpreted and reacted to.<sup>xxxvii</sup> In the construction of identity, alterations in meanings and categorizations associated with the person are implicit in alterations of the person’s identity. Construction is both an internalizing and externalizing process in which the self is conveyed to others from within and draws its distinctions from the outside world, though the interrelationship between the self and external social structures is multifaceted and indefinite.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Identity, self-conceptualization, and self-perception are used here interchangeably.

It is the focus of this article, using the beauty consultants of Mary Kay China, to explore how migrant women utilize their occupation as a vehicle for identity negotiation to rectify the “otherness” imposed on them. The presentation and operation of an identity depend heavily on its social context. As migration is essentially a change of contexts, including changes in employment and labor conditions, migrant women invariably find themselves in a situation of identity reconstruction.<sup>xxxix</sup> Scholarship suggests that not much research on the sociology of organizations and identities deals directly with the contribution of a professional environment to the

development of personal biography.<sup>xxxix</sup> However, to neglect the workplace as an institutional source of the self discounts the clearly collaborative process by which one's self-identity is established.<sup>xl</sup> An attempt will be made to articulate the significance of this phenomenon for the success of the enterprise itself, principally to underscore the give-and-take nature of selfhood creation, though a thorough dialogue on this counterpoint is beyond the aims of this work.

## METHODOLOGY

Five Mary Kay China beauty consultants were interviewed for this study from September 2012 to November 2012. All women were rural migrants and had worked or were working as beauty consultants at the time of their interviews (see Appendix A for participants' background information). A sixth woman, who was not a rural migrant, was interviewed for her extensive experience managing and training rural migrant women for the company. Participants were contacted through professional profiles published online, and interview materials were sent via email.

Angela BeiBei Bao, who had conducted fieldwork on Mary Kay China for an unrelated project, collected the other interviews cited in 2009. She provided transcripts of her interviews with migrant beauty consultants, and also took part in this research as an interview subject. Some of the transcripts were in both Chinese and English; the content incorporated here is the result of my own translation efforts. Including these sources, a total of 13 interviews were consulted.

All written correspondence with Mary Kay employees was conducted in Chinese and supplemented with English translations to counter any

misinterpretations. Upon approval by the participant, a questionnaire would be emailed for completion and returned the same way (see Appendix B for interview questions). External translation assistance was used to construct the surveys, though all translations from Chinese to English, and any errors therein, are mine.

## DEVICES OF IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

Migrant women utilize the following devices of identity reconstruction to organize, verify and execute the changes involved in personal transformation. On the other hand, the company uses these implements to promote commercially successful behaviors and to cohere its workforce under a normative corporate identity. In the case of Mary Kay China, each of the points presented is a nexus of interaction involved in identity construction that has been identified between the company and its consultants. These items were also expressed in interviews as primary motivators or points of attraction for one seeking a career as a beauty consultant. As will be discussed in more detail later, the organization thus provides both method and means by which a migrant woman may assume a new and improved self. The points are as follows: Material gains, organizational aesthetics, cohesive social network, and strong ideological mechanisms.

**Material gains:** Earnings potential is a frequently cited motivator for joining Mary Kay as a beauty consultant. While this comes as no surprise, the commission-based compensation structure for distributors presents an interesting dynamic. Although the goal is to generate revenue from direct product sales to clients, management heavily emphasizes the recruitment of other women. All the interviewees recalled

starting at their jobs at the prompting of soliciting beauty consultants or their friends who were already active Mary Kay distributors. Recruitment is a fairly lucrative source of income due to the commissions that drives the compensation scheme. A consultant's monthly sales commission can reach up to 30 percent depending on whether the total order value for that month surpasses a minimum threshold.<sup>xli</sup> However, what remains of the proceeds is not always distributed in cash. Some consultants were frustrated to discover that a portion of their earnings was returned to them as cosmetics of equal value.<sup>xlii</sup>

Additionally, one of the crucial first steps to becoming a beauty consultant is the purchase of products for resale and use by the new hire. Depending on the number of items purchased, this initial investment can range anywhere from RMB1,000 to RMB5,000, or \$160 to \$800 US dollars.<sup>xliii,xliv</sup> New consultants are then encouraged to reach out to their immediate personal network as well as a small starting set of clients to begin their businesses. Mary Kay also requires consultants to attend regularly held company events for which they must pay for the associated fees and travel expenditures out-of-pocket. Some women have argued that despite promises to the contrary by senior members, these "investment" costs are prohibitive, particularly for women at the junior levels. Qiu Qin, a former consultant, remarked, "I quit Mary Kay a year ago because I can't make money from it. I cannot stay at the bottom of the pyramid."<sup>xlv</sup> As the beauty consultants are considered entrepreneurs within a semi-traditional company framework, their financial duties are entirely their own; the company does not provide a base salary or other assistance to support struggling individual

consultants, and this leads many women to quit early.<sup>xvi</sup>

Monthly income quotas are also a sore point for beauty consultants, especially due to the unpredictable nature of the business, though opinions vary on the topic. For junior consultants, aggregate monthly take-home pay can range from RMB1,000 to RMB3,000, roughly \$160 to \$480 US dollars, though this figure can fluctuate greatly depending on the success of the individual. "Sometimes people feel depressed because direct marketing is kind of unstable compared to other jobs, and they can't make regular pay," said a distributor named Hu Feihong, "but this is inevitable in direct marketing." As a senior, Hu was in a position to impose quotas on her subordinate consultants, and while she decided against it, she felt that tenacity was important in growing one's business: "[Consultants] should not complain about the quota (as some seniors do set them), or the necessary transportation fees needed to attend company lectures and salons. [The consultants] work for themselves."<sup>xlvii</sup>

In terms of material gains, money is not the only reward. Along the career route of a Mary Kay beauty consultant, the company provides various material incentives and positive reinforcements for top performers. Since it first came to China in 1996, the iconic pink car—the models of which have varied over time from a Cadillac to an Escalade to a Toyota Camry—has become one of the most, if not the most, coveted prizes for an independent distributor. When asked what motivates her to continue to work hard in the company in the face of difficulties, two interviewees simply replied, "to get the pink car."<sup>xlviii</sup> In order to receive this honor, a consultant's yearly sales must exceed at least 1 million yuan—a seemingly insurmountable feat for most

consultants considering the modest monthly incomes of juniors typically generate.<sup>18</sup>

While the pink car is ubiquitous in all Mary Kay locations around the world, its importance and prestige in this case is perhaps attributable to its stark visibility and the additional connotations it holds in China.<sup>1</sup> Though the number of vehicles manufactured and sold in the country is steadily rising, private car ownership is still a significant public indicator of affluence and status. The iconic pink color of the car adds an extra dimension of prominence to the owner as an emphatic expression of femininity. For a top performer, a pink car is the ultimate form of qualification, professionally and personally, to her peers and the general public.

This reward, seen by many as part of the last frontier of beauty consultancy, illustrates the importance of display, which is intimately connected to the idea of identity as an exogenous product. On Hicay.com, the commercial and social networking website for Chinese distributors, women post countless photos of the pink car, ranging from stock photos to personal photos of the vehicle. Few of the cars are actually owned by the posters: some of the vehicles often belong to senior colleagues while others are part of an expansive lot of pink cars waiting to be bestowed. Women pose sitting in the car, leaning against it, or preparing to enter the driver's seat, either alone or accompanied by friends or colleagues. Subjects are also often coiffed in the equally iconic corporate uniform to complete the image of an accomplished woman—the car is a well-recognized indicator of independent business savvy and affluence, both within and without the Mary Kay domain. A beauty consultant named Ruan Laoshi (Fig. 1) embodies the summit of success at Mary

Kay as she poses confidently in a black powersuit, a uniform reserved for the most senior distributors, in front of her pink Cadillac. The caption reads: “It was my dream when I reach 50 years old to become such a charming woman.”<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 1.** A senior consultant and her pink car



This kind of illustrative power is not as effectively exercised with monetary rewards. Migrant workers that perform well may see a boost in income, for instance, but a paycheck does not have the same visibility and recognition as a car. This performative quality maintains the desirability of rewards that may never be obtained as the women can actively visualize their “new” selves attaining and enjoying the pink car, regardless of where they stand within the Mary Kay hierarchy. Certainly not all may find this prospect enticing, but the pink car remains a highly coveted and highly effective incentive for many consultants.

Given these findings, cash alone is not a strong enough force to retain new consultants. Indeed, at least a few interviewees left the company for the reason that their earnings were not enough to cover even basic living expenses. Still, according to Shang Qun, one such former distributor, many migrant women remain drawn to the economic returns Mary Kay potentially

provides, and convince themselves of the promise of financial success:

Though Mary Kay teaches you manners and how to dress up, you can't earn much from the company. [For example] if my sales are 10,000 yuan, I only get several hundred back as income...Mary Kay has many "direct selling refugees" – they say Mary Kay can help you make big money but actually their own pockets are empty. I'm a relatively practical person, so if I'm not making money I'm not selling their products anymore.<sup>lii</sup>

Other rural migrant women, like Liu Shan, were less concerned about material gain as an incentive. Liu already had the economic resources to become beauty consultant with minimal investment:

I don't really care about the income. My husband will support our family...I just bore my baby 11 months ago, five months before I joined Mary Kay, [and] working for Mary Kay doesn't require me to go to the company. I can sell products at home...I don't care about the income.<sup>liii</sup>

Her circumstances allowed her to become a beauty consultant for the sake of other rewards. In this case and that of the "refugees" mentioned before, the irrelevance of material gains does not mean identity reconstruction does not take place for economically resourceful migrant women; rather, it underscores the durability of Mary Kay's intangible pull factors, like the possibilities to build self-

confidence and create a new professional image. For many consultants struggling with their business, near-impossible goals sustain the myths of achievement and economic empowerment and drive them to persevere.<sup>lv</sup>

**Organizational aesthetics:** For this section I consult heavily with Philip Hancock's work on the utility of a semiotic approach to the examination of organizational imagery, which is useful for considering the ways in which aesthetics may significantly contribute to identity formation as "meaning is aesthetically inscribed on and through organizational [artifacts]."<sup>lv</sup> Organizational aesthetics are the way in which an organization expresses certain corporate characteristics through the construction of brands, logos, architecture, merchandising, and other visual tools. This also includes the performance and behavior of employees, which are extensions of a broader corporate identity. This apparatus of institutional identity play an important role in the relationship between the employee and the enterprise as way of influencing identity construction.

As a cosmetics company, Mary Kay's core operations involve the commoditization of personal aesthetics. To convince consumers of the necessity and efficacy of their products, the company perpetuates normative ideas of beauty while promoting an ideal identity that reflects their holistic philosophy. One migrant consultant informed me that "women must not only polish their external dress, but also their mind and spirit,"<sup>lvii</sup> while another woman declared, "People always say a woman without makeup is like dry plastic flowers!"<sup>lviii</sup> These ideas of female identity seem to be at odds—one is not complete if her development is only internal, and vice versa—but are delivered as parts of the same value proposition. To inspire

commitment among consultants to deliver, and ultimately capitalize on, these messages, the company first ensures the consultants subscribe to the identity and beliefs of the organization.

An independent distributor is an active organizational artifact that exemplifies and promulgates the entity's interpretation of aesthetics.<sup>lviii</sup> The experiences of one interviewee characterizes this concept:

I made the decision [to join] after attending one of their beauty salons in Henan. I used to use their beauty products for years and found the effect amazing...One reason [why I chose Mary Kay] is I love their products and would like to introduce it to more people. Before, when I went out, people always praised my skin and said I didn't look like a woman having a baby. I think that is Mary Kay's effect.<sup>lix</sup>

The reality of cosmetic selling is augmented by the belief among consultants that they are providing much more than products; they are giving others tools essential for self-improvement. In a video article by the New York Times, a national sales manager from Mary Kay China described the responsibilities of consultant in such a way: "The job of Mary Kay's beauty consultant is to teach women how to find their own beauty. Once women become more beautiful and confident, they have the courage to do things they had never dreamed of doing."<sup>lx</sup> Beauty consultants also share a common vocabulary in reference to this work. The introductory section of personal profiles on Hicay.com, for example, feature boilerplate marketing text, which enforces

continuity and quality control among consultants' representation of the corporate image (e.g. three different women from different cities, Cao, Ruan, and Zhao all feature the exact same text in their "About this site" section).

As the commercial operations of the organization have been extended to the Internet, so too have its inherent mechanisms for identity construction. Many beauty consultants utilize their online presence as a way of increasing their visibility to attract clients. Hicay.com is an example of this on a national scale: According to the unofficial company website, at least 100,000 beauty consultants in China are registered and use the platform to display their personal brand to users of Mary Kay products and other consultants ("Guanyu women").

As a center of business where visitors can purchase products from specific distributors online, Hicay.com is foremost an extensive social network. It is difficult to say with certainty what proportion of the Mary Kay China salesforce is active online, the website nonetheless provides valuable clues in determining how a migrant woman is able to reinvent herself in this space. A consultant's page can be navigated through a directory from the homepage; certain individuals, usually those who have performed well or received positive reviews from website users, are also featured on the Hicay homepage.

**Figure 2.** A screenshot of the Hicay.com homepage



On the personal page, a consultant may display her basic contact information, personal photos, beauty news and advice, communication with Mary Kay clients, and other information. Some consultants also feature blog-like posts, where cosmetic practices and company virtues are common topics, as well as recruitment information for interested women. Visitors may contact an independent distributor through her webpage by submitting comments or questions or messaging her directly.

This electronic platform provides migrant women with a channel for representation, demonstration, and communication: by being visible online in their organizational context, they are able to independently qualify an identity created by and through their role as a consultant, and likewise receive affirmation from others. It is another method of framing and presenting their new selves for the public, which arguably represents the fulfillment of an identity negotiation effort.<sup>lxii</sup> Combined with the on-the-ground operations of a distributor, online activities contribute to a positive feedback loop in which good performance

leads to communal symbolic recognition, and thus reinforcement of her identity.<sup>lxiii</sup>

Beauty consultants are indoctrinated as complete members of the organization through systematic enforcement of corporate-cultural norms, and collective rejection of the pre-Mary Kay identity. A new hire is first required to take courses and simple tests on skincare and cosmetic products and practices to gauge their initial knowledge,<sup>lxiv</sup> though as senior woman explained, most importantly, “becoming a Mary Kay user and fan is necessary before you become a consultant.”<sup>lxv</sup> The rest of her career is populated with mandatory training sessions and salons, during which distributors congregate and learn best business practices from senior consultants. These educational meetings train beauty consultants how to assume the selfhood of a Mary Kay representative as well as how to help others do the same.

Acculturation posed as self-improvement inherently suggests that a consultant is defective prior to assuming her role, and this alienation of the extra-corporate identity strengthens the coherence of the organization’s aesthetics. This is illustrated by the prevalence of before-and-after photos as tools for motivation and instruction.

**Figure 3.** A comparative photo of a beauty consultant



**Figure 4.** Past photos of a senior consultant



**Figure 5.** A before-and-after photo displayed at a conference



As a migrant consultant undergoes this professional transformation, she invariably alters her identity as one who, upon taking up a new job or role, learns how to “become” that new concept of selfhood.<sup>lxv</sup> According to Naomi Na, a former sales development manager, the willingness to learn and the willingness to change are key attributes of an ideal consultant,<sup>lxvi</sup> which necessitates a rejection of the pre-hire self. The right side of figures 3, 4, and 5 personify the culmination of this change.<sup>lxvii</sup> Physical attributes include unblemished light skin, tasteful makeup, chic hairstyle, and diverse accessories. The bright smiles and assertive posture of the women suggest confidence and self-awareness. The dramatic change in appearance and poise across the consultants attractively demonstrates the

positive influence of Mary Kay. It should also be noted that all three women are senior in the firm, which promotes the idea of upward mobility as an added benefit of identity transformation. Figure 5 in fact depicts a single mother that achieved a national director status and was awarded a pink car; the admiring caption read: “No words can describe this single mother—at Mary Kay everyone can be as fantastic!”<sup>lxviii</sup>

This transformative process is an attractive means by which a migrant woman can gain more power in establishing her identity. As discussed previously, many women feel subordinate or inadequate compared to their urban peers. The transformation Mary Kay offers as cosmetic and spiritual improvements come across as a way to correct this dislocation in identity. Huang Juxian recalled how before she joined Mary Kay, she “was always turned down by people, [and because] I’m not pretty and my skin was bad, I always felt ashamed of myself.” But after joining the company and seeking guidance from a senior mentor, she learned the importance of internal change as a supplement to external change in completing this transformation of identity: “Gradually, I feel that I’m changing. Sometimes some pretty girls are also attracted by my way of thinking and speaking, as well as my passion.”<sup>lxix</sup> The transformation she experiences is the conformation required by the corporate aesthetic body, and because these overlap the resulting identity is qualified.

**Cohesive social network:** Relationship dynamics within the organization play a significant role in identity negotiation and construction at the individual level. The social aspects of the consultant network that reinforce a new sense of collectivism basically dictate permissible methods of identity

negotiation within the organization.<sup>lxx</sup> These dynamics also serve a practical management function for which the economic performance of the enterprise is paramount, regardless of more emotional aspirations espoused by senior members to motivate employees.<sup>lxxi</sup> This is to say that a migrant woman cannot simply join and then realize a new self-concept; complete subscription to the work culture and performance of its social conventions are necessary first before she can truly consummate identity negotiation. Otherwise, she remains in a liminal or outright rejected state of definition.<sup>lxxii</sup>

Internally, Mary Kay provides its consultants with a mentorship system whereby junior saleswomen defer to more senior members for sales requirements, feedback, wisdom, and other things to help them fulfill their responsibilities. This scheme is inherent in the commission-based system that incentivizes women to recruit other members and effectively take them under their wing. Workplace mentorship helps an inexperienced worker support their transition into a new and different selfhood. Mentors are both models for emulation and aspiration, as well as a type of policing mechanism to enforce adherence to organizational norms.<sup>lxxiii</sup>

These relationships are formally and informally structured. Commonly, new hires will become the mentees of the beauty consultants that screened and employed them; likewise, the new hire will also become an additional source of income for the hiring consultant. In congruence with the female-centric clientele and product focus of the company, and assisted by the all-female staff composition, internal relationships take on a sisterhood quality. Experienced consultants are often referred to with reverential names such as “older sister” or “teacher”, and peers refer to each other

with terms of endearment like “flower”, “treasure” or “gold”; the use of real names is actively discouraged.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Personal profiles on Hicay also exhibit the use of such pet names, referring to colleagues in their photos as “sisters” or “beauties.” Centered on the “golden rule” of mutual respect, friendship also parts of the company etiquette: “One thing that attracted me to Mary Kay the most is its golden rule: treat other people the way you want to be treated. Everyone I meet at Mary Kay smiles at me. In my former companies, colleagues were always serious.”<sup>lxxv</sup> This amicable atmosphere is conducive to the formation of meaningful, resourceful relationships within the company that many rural women tend to lack in urban areas.

Mass gatherings are an integral part of the consultancy system, and are intended to provide professional training and expertise enhancement for members. These events can vary in scale from local get-togethers to extraordinarily huge national conferences attended by thousands of beauty consultants around China, and serve to exemplify the collective institutional visual identity. Smaller-scale meetings are frequently conducted, during which consultants and consumers are encouraged to share their experiences, accomplishments, or grievances with others. Simultaneously, these venues are also used to single out and criticize underperforming consultants.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Invitations to larger regional conferences are often conferred as a reward for good performers, whereby a consultant gets the opportunity to travel abroad or domestically, meet other top saleswomen and receive additional prizes, all expenses paid. Among these women, the one with the best sales for the month is ceremoniously recognized for her achievement, and receives applause,

jewelry and flowers and bestowed with the title of “queen.”<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Many women find this congress to be enriching. “Mary Kay encouraged us to talk about our experiences in staff meetings, and after the speech we receive applause and flowers. Those are quite encouraging.”<sup>lxxviii</sup> Another migrant consultant echoed this sentiment: “Mary Kay is famous for its ‘recognition and encouragement’ talk. During weekly conferences, we encourage people regardless if they are doing great or feel depressed to talk in front of people. We give them applause.”<sup>lxxix</sup> “Some people never have such a chance in their lives, but Mary Kay girls are lucky. I appreciate my company.”<sup>lxxx</sup> Many women cited these commendatory platforms as one of the main reasons why they continue to work hard as a beauty consultant, and from a manager’s point of view, this “access to the stage” was also one of the reasons why rural women were drawn to work for the company.

Groups like Mary Kay use rituals to create and preserve a collective identity. By hosting special group activities like massive regional conferences, a cohesive identity is announced and affirmed and the values and beliefs of the group are promoted with renewed vigor. The affirmation that takes place “occurs when practices being celebrated are both customary and already invested with a high level of sacredness.”<sup>lxxxii</sup> In this way participants experience stronger social cohesion with each other and greater commitment to the goals of the enterprise. As a result, these effects of ritual warrant individual identity transformation in ways that are congruent with the identity of the group.

The social network in which a consultant creates and affirms her identity comprises a few major elements. Each is a key part of the organization’s

environment, and in general performs the same functions: establish internal hierarchies; provide venues for communal praise or chastisement; create a market for company products; proliferate information and advice to strengthen customer relationships; engage members in supportive dialogue to increase loyalty and encourage good performance; and showcase the success of distributors to attract more women to the network. This is of course not an exhaustive list, and different platforms do not fulfill exclusive purposes. By considering each part, not only do we get a broad overview of the company’s social structure, more importantly, we can better understand in what ways the organization is involved in the identity construction process for a migrant consultant.

**Strong ideological mechanisms:** Cited by many consultants as one of the principal attractions of their organization, Mary Kay’s people-oriented corporate culture is firmly grounded on the founding tenets of the company’s creator, Mary Kay Ash. Inspired by her desire to the counter gender-biased employment of her time, Mary Kay’s business ideologies continue to support women’s professional and personal development and empowerment.<sup>lxxxii</sup> These principles have resounded strongly with women around the world, particularly those who are disenfranchised and benefit the most from beauty consultancy financially and psychologically.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> One interviewee had been especially moved by her involvement with the company:

It’s changed my old impressions of women in the family and society. In fact, as long as a woman has the capacity to play leading roles, if she puts her heart to it she can adjust her weak identity

and give support to others. This is a mature state of mind and the independent spirit of performance.<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

This kind of organizational metanarrative strongly suggests positive contributions to participation, satisfaction and productivity by employees.<sup>lxxxv</sup> By incorporating the values and ideals of an individual into the mission of the organization, the worker feels more appreciated and perceives their work to be more meaningful and purposeful. The assignment of a beauty consultant is “to teach, not to sell”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> as a method of meeting the ultimate goal to help other women improve their own lives. A migrant consultant is therefore not just a seller of cosmetics—she is clearly identified, through her work, as someone with an enriched life and the expertise to guide others towards the same. Personal congruency with the gospel of the organization means that a migrant woman can achieve, or at least believe she can achieve, a concept of herself that is feminine, altruistic and competent, a far cry from the typical descriptors assigned to someone that has been marginalized by society.

In the context of the Mary Kay Company, esteemed business principles are echoed in the dialogue of women who adhere to them. When referencing their experience as beauty consultants, there are allusions to the overlap in personal and organizational values. One migrant woman’s description of a challenge she encountered early in her career illustrate how an individual change impacted her ability to serve clients: “[Starting out] my knowledge of cosmetics was really limited, so when helping clients with real problems I encountered many issues I didn’t understand. By continuing to study, I learned to come up with solutions.” On how her job has influenced her self-

perception, the sales agent continued: “Everyone can succeed! I learned how to really love<sup>lxxxvii</sup> [...] my favorite thing about doing Mary Kay is the ability to make money while changing my quality of life.”<sup>lxxxviii</sup> The consultant radiates the company’s principles to the client as an embodiment of what she purveys.

The ideological mechanisms of the company go beyond encouraging women to perform well professionally. As a consultant absorbs organizational lessons of externally- and internally- oriented self-improvement, it comes as no surprise that for some these changes influence other spaces of life, and thus she is able to utilize her transformed identity within other social contexts. Qiu Qin illustrated this idea in her response:

I joined [the company] because Mary Kay teaches women how to run a family. Before I had quite a bad relationship with my family, including parents-in-law as well as a child. But now I can run my family better; Mary Kay taught me communication and social skills. Also, I am better at matching clothes now.”<sup>lxxxix</sup>

In this case a migrant woman’s transformation has enabled her to have more agency in her life with the added benefit of an improved appearance. To her, the company has successfully helped her remedy the disharmonies in her life; furthermore, after quitting her job, she remarked that despite having been unable to make reasonable income, she learned things that are helpful in her new venture.

Then, although a beauty consultant leaves the company the influences of her experience are lasting: she does not leave behind the identity she has constructed, but carries the

impressions on her selfhood forward. Before moving on from consultancy to start her own business, Shang Qun had found it difficult to completely assume her role as a beauty consultant due to a severe facial scar and an extremely hard background. She wrote, “My favorite thing about Mary Kay was its learning environment, but I didn’t like selling cosmetics. Because my own appearance was incomplete, I couldn’t get out of my comfort zone.” But after consigning to the ideology of the company and its emphasis on internal fortitude and external beauty as a source of holistic attractiveness, she admitted her self-conceptualization had been transformed:

Mary Kay had changed a lot of my bad habits – I had been constantly on the move to survive, [so] I just simply wasn’t aware I was a woman; I didn’t know how to develop myself. Through the study of Mary Kay, I learned business etiquette and how to use self-confidence to my advantage in business.<sup>xc</sup>

Practical experience gained through her work and training is bolstered by a more personal internal development that occurs from her assimilation into a large, complex enterprise that is both corporate and ideological.

While the company’s messages of beauty and empowerment are attractive to women of all kinds of backgrounds, it is worth noting its particular appeal to disenfranchised women. Around the time Mary Kay entered China, a combination of sparse career opportunities for women and a large pool of unemployed women looking for work presented a viable market expansion opportunity. The network of independent distributors grew

quickly as the company allowed women to effect social change through unprecedented financial accomplishment. A news correspondent who had interviewed consultants in 2009 said that many had left the countryside not just to find more growth opportunities but also to escape patriarchal oppression, violence and abuse. Women that had been little more than “the property of their husband or their husband’s mother” fled to urban areas, where they were eventually drawn to the image of Mary Kay.<sup>xcii</sup> The practical and spiritual support the company provided these women became tools to exceed limitations in other parts of their lives and afford them greater freedom and negotiating power in domestic relationships.<sup>xciii</sup>

The process of “becoming” cannot be completely realized if an individual does not take in the operational and spiritual mission of the group; likewise, she must also be able to bring a part of herself into the organization.<sup>xciii</sup> Questions then arise surrounding the autonomy of identity construction: to what degree are migrant women able to negotiate this activity to their own specifications versus the requirements of the organization? As established earlier, the transformation of one’s self-concept in the workplace is in large part a function of the fulfillment of one’s functional role and assimilation into the broader organizational environment. If the worker cannot do this, repercussions include low productivity and job satisfaction, poor internal relationships or termination.<sup>xciv</sup> But even those who have failed to buy into the ideologies of Mary Kay still recognize the usefulness of company lessons after they have moved on. One migrant admitted, “What I learned from Mary Kay is also helpful in my current business.”<sup>xcv</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Based on a case study of beauty consultants in Mary Kay China, this paper examines the process of identity renegotiation among rural migrant women. My analysis has demonstrated key components of selfhood construction as it manifests within the organization. Material gains in the form of money and other commodities allow migrant women to visibly display their increase in personal wealth, and the economic advancement affords them greater independence and authority in other areas of their lives. Organizational aesthetics enforce normative discourses on appearance and deportment that beauty consultants are compelled to adhere to. The bodily alterations this necessitates, seen by most women as an “improvement” to their previous selves, externalizes their change in identity in a way that is verified and supported by clients and colleagues. A cohesive social network reinforces these changes as other distributors act as dynamic interlocutors to exemplify and guide the reconstruction process. Constituents of the network are bound together by strong ideological mechanisms that add legitimacy and rhetorical force to the formation of a new identity. Regardless to what degree each component is effective, it has been illustrated that the result for many of these migrant women is a lasting influence on how they perceive themselves.

This article contributes to understanding the post-migration identity management and workplace experiences of rural migrant women in China. I have discussed briefly the preliminary social conditions that set the framework for identity negotiation and explored the manifestations of these circumstances within a corporate context. Past research on migrant female laborers have focused

on the exploitation and subjugation commonly associated with their work experience, and psychological studies of rural migrants have substantiated claims regarding the mental and emotional consequences of social marginalization.<sup>xcvi</sup> The analysis presented in this article began with these prepositions to qualitatively assess the interrelationship between negative exogenous influences and identity reconstruction as a means of reconciling incompatibilities with a broader social group.

Beyond Chinese rural-urban migration, the findings presented have implications for matters related to organizational ethics and labor management. Academia, the media, and most pertinently the Chinese government have often charged direct selling organizations with using charismatic manipulation and counterfeit sacralization of commercial activities as means of exploiting distributors and aggressively expanding their sales (e.g., Barboza 2009; Hermanowicz and Morgan 1999; Lan 2002). In a country like China with a substantial population of vulnerable and disenfranchised people, should Mary Kay and other enterprises, domestic and international, be sensitive to such circumstances when forming human resource policies? For example, relatively well-off or resourceful independent distributors arguably have greater capacity to negotiate working terms without jeopardizing their employment or quality of life if current provisions are unsatisfactory. But in the more common case, rural migrant women may be discouraged from confronting workplace issues due to less fortunate socioeconomic circumstances, disempowering relationship dynamics, and other factors related to their migrancy.<sup>xcvii</sup> Consultant interviews suggest that migrant employees are not necessarily indentured servants

upon enlistment and are free to leave the company if work conditions are unfavorable. Still, for the many migrant women for whom Mary Kay is a primary source of income, when challenged by issues like unfair compensation, choosing between unemployment and a tenuous livelihood seems more ultimatum than optionality.

Certain limitations of this article are worth noting for future studies. First, the narrative analysis is based on a relatively small data set, so conclusions based on these accounts should not be viewed as representative. The scope of the interviews and surveys also focused on a participant's experience as a Mary Kay beauty consultant, and did not cover her personal history pre- and post-migration. For a broader evaluation of identity reconstruction among migrant women in China, it may be useful to examine their social environment and self-perception before and after relocation. Though it may be difficult to identify with some exactness the catalyst for identity reconstruction, given its complete subjectivity, this article has regarded employment in Mary Kay as a transformation stimulus. Additionally, questions remain whether these findings are limited to the migrant women of Mary Kay China, or are also reflected within other business entities and industries, geographies or marginalized social groups.

Nonetheless, this research sheds light on how Chinese migrant women reconcile self-perception with the messages of a society that explicitly and implicitly devalues them. This article principally focused on the features of an organization that influence the project of selfhood and the reactions of female laborers to those influences. As most rural women migrate to urban areas specifically for better work and income opportunities, it is important to examine the impact of

these work organizations on migrant identity. In this way we can understand and appreciate the personal experiences of migrant women in their efforts to achieve agency and progress in their lives.

## APPENDIX A

### **Additional background information on the interviewees**

The following is current as of when the interviews were conducted. Order of information, if available: name; age; marital status; role at Mary Kay China; length of employment; location; miscellaneous information.

#### Individuals interviewed by Angela BeiBei Bao:

##### Fang Lin

- Beauty consultant, active since 2008
- Originally from Liyang City, near Changzhou. Resides in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province.

##### Huang Juxian

- Beauty consultant, active since 2007
- Originally from a county town near Changzhou. Resides in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province.

##### Liu Shan

- Married
- Beauty consultant, active since May 2009
- From Henan. Works in a town in elsewhere in the province.
- Ran a small business with her husband before joining Mary Kay. Highest education achieved was high school.

##### Qiu Qin

- Former beauty consultant, active for 2.5 years

- Originally from the countryside, though did not specify location. Resides in Changzhou, Jiangsu Province.

Zhao Min

- Beauty consultant, active since 2006
- Originally from Suzhou. Resides in Shanghai.

Individuals interviewed by myself:

Li Min

- 36 years old, married
- Beauty consultant, active since 2008
- Originally from Anhui. Currently lives in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province and works in Qingyang City, Gansu province.

Ms. Lin

- 30 years old, unmarried
- Beauty consultant, 5 years
- Grew up in countryside. Resides in Guangzhou City.
- Highest education achieved was elementary school.

Ms. Wang

- 42 years old, unmarried
- Beauty Consultant, 9 years
- Migrant background, though origin not specified. Resides in Taiyuan City, Shaanxi Province.
- Started a factory, but joined Mary Kay after her venture later failed.

Ms. Yang

- 36 years old, unmarried
- Beauty consultant, 3 years
- Migrant background, though origin not specified. Resides in Beijing.
- Highest education achieved was junior high school. Previously

worked in a state-owned enterprise.

Naomi Na

- Former sales development manager, 4.5 years
- Originally from Harbin. Resides in Shanghai.
- Not a rural migrant but was interviewed for experience working with migrant beauty consultants.

Shang Qun\*

- 36 years old, married
- Former beauty consultant, 1 month
- Born in Jianzhong Town, Weng'an County, Guizhou Province. Currently resides in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province.

\*Shang Qun had been interviewed by Angela BeiBei Bao in 2009 for a project unrelated to this paper. I thank Ms. Bao for providing her contact information and the transcript of that initial interview, and thank Ms. Shang for generously allowing me to interview her again for this project.

## APPENDIX B

### Complete list of written survey questions

Questions appear as they were submitted to participants, in no particular order. Not all questionnaire respondents were presented with the same list of questions.

Name 姓名:

Age 年龄:

Marital status 婚姻状况:

Current location 当前位置 (省、市) :

How long you have been with Mary Kay?  
您在玫琳凯工作了多久? :

Please describe your background (include hometown, education level, etc.)  
请介绍一下您的背景 (包括家乡、受教育程度/学历等) :

How did you find out about Mary Kay?  
What made you want to work there?  
您是如何知道玫琳凯的? 您想在玫琳凯工作的主要原因有哪些?

How did you find out about Mary Kay?  
What made you want to work there? Why  
Mary Kay instead of another type of  
company?  
您是如何知道玫琳凯的? 您想在玫琳凯工作的主要原因有哪些? 为什么在玫琳凯而不是别种公司工作 (比如,一个工厂)?

What were the responses of your family  
and friends to your decision to work as a  
beauty consultant?  
您的家人和朋友对您做美容顾问的决定有什么看法?

What did you enjoy and did not enjoy  
about your work? Why was that so?  
您在美容顾问的工作中喜欢以及不喜欢哪些方面? 为什么了?

Describe some difficult situations or  
challenges you've encountered. How did  
you handle them?  
请描述一些您在美容顾问的工作中遇到的困难, 以及您是怎样解决的?

What kept you motivated to perform well  
within the company?  
(在玫琳凯工作的时候) 使您在公司中努力取得好业绩的动力有哪些了?

How did your job change the way you feel  
about yourself? How else has it influenced  
your life?

您作为美容顾问的工作在哪些方面改变了您对自己的看法? 这份工作又在哪些方面影响了您的生活?

Did you supplement your income from  
Mary Kay with other sources?  
除了在玫琳凯工作之外, 您是否还有其他的收入来源?

What was your relationship like with your  
other colleagues (seniors, juniors, peers,  
etc.)?

您和您的同事们 (资历较深的、新人以及同龄人等) 的关系分别是什么样的?

Please explain why you left the company.  
How has your life changed since you left?  
请介绍一下为什么您决定了离开玫琳凯了。那时以来您的生活怎么改变了?

How do you use your profile on  
Hicay.com to help your business? What  
features on a profile do you think are  
necessary for it to be effective?

为了帮助您的事业, 您怎么用在Hicay.com上的个人网页? 您觉得一个有效的个人网页应该有什么特点?

What plans or aspirations do you have for  
yourself in the future?  
您对自己的前途有什么计划或者希望?

Please describe your role within Mary Kay.  
请介绍一下你在玫琳凯的工作角色。

What was attractive to you about working  
there?  
在玫琳凯工作最吸引你的是什么?

What is the public's view of Mary Kay in  
China? How has the company

differentiated from other direct sellers like Avon or Amway?

中国公众对玫琳凯的看法是什么样的？这家公司与雅芳、安利等其他直销公司有什么不同？

Please describe the attributes of an “ideal” beauty consultant.

请介绍一下一名“理想的”美容顾问应具备哪些品质？

What proportion of the beauty consultant sales force are rural migrant women (either at your branch or in general)? An estimate is fine.

你估计在从事美容顾问及美容产品销售的人中，有多大比例是来自农村的外来务工女性？

What were some of the main reasons why rural women want to work for Mary Kay as a consultant?

这些外来务工女性想在玫琳凯工作的主要原因有哪些？

In what ways did the sales training program help rural women who were new to the company? What aspects of the program were especially helpful for them? What aspects were not helpful?

销售培训在哪些方面帮助了新来公司的外来务工女性们？并请具体例举这些培训在哪些方面比较有帮助以及在哪些方面帮助不大？

What were some of the difficult situations these women faced as consultants? How did they manage them? Do you think these difficulties were unique to them?

这些外来务工女性在美容顾问的工作中一般会面对那些困难？她们又是怎样处理的？你觉得这些困难是只有她们这个外来群体会面对还是美容顾问行业中的普遍现象？

In what ways are migrant women particularly effective as saleswomen? How were they rewarded for good performance? 外来务工女性在美容顾问的工作中有哪些优势？她们当中业绩优秀的会得到什么样的奖励或回报？

How are consultants managed when they perform poorly?

业绩不好的美容顾问会得到怎样的处理和对待？

How often do these women get promoted? Are there many Distributors or Top Directors from migrant backgrounds?

这些外来务工的美容顾问一般会通过什么方式得到升职？是否有很多负责分销的人或主管来自这个外来务工的群体？

What were reasons why rural consultants left the company? How frequent is job turnover among this group? What did they do after they left?

一些外来务工的美容顾问离开这家公司的原因主要有哪些？这个外来务工的女性群体一般多久更换一次工作？她们离开公司后一般会去做什么？

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<sup>i</sup> Retrieved from “Mary Kay Quotes.” *GoodReads.com*. n.p., n.d. Web. 1 Dec. 2012

<sup>ii</sup> Bian, 2002; Scheineson, 2009; Shi, 2008; Zhang, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> Chen, et. al., 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Chen and Liang, 2004; Zhang, 2011.

<sup>v</sup> Chan, 2008; Hanser, 2005; Luo, 2006.

<sup>vi</sup> On the issue of feminism and femininity in “proto-feminist” countries, see e.g. Ahern, Elizabeth. "The Benefits of Pink Think: A History of the Mary Kay Cosmetics Company in Domestic and Global Contexts." *Tempus* 12.2 (2011): 59-73. An exploration thereof is beyond the scope of this article.

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- <sup>vii</sup> Chan, 2008.
- <sup>viii</sup> NBOS, 2012; Scheineson, 2009.
- <sup>ix</sup> Sheng, 2012.
- <sup>x</sup> See Chan, Kam Wing. "Chinese Census 2000: New Opportunities and Challenges." *The China Review* 3.2 (2003): 1-12.
- <sup>xi</sup> Roberts, 2002.
- <sup>xii</sup> Chen and Liang, 2004; UNRISD, 2005.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Davin, 2005; Lou, 2006; Zhang, 2011.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Chen and Liang, 2004; Jacka, 2005; Luo, 2006; Murphy, 2002; Yan, 2003.
- <sup>xv</sup> Davin, 2005; Tiānshu, 2009.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Chen, et. al., 2011; Zhang, 2011.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Davin, 2005; Luo, 2006.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Chen, et. al., 2011; Fan, 2002; Jacka, 2005.
- <sup>xix</sup> Barboza, 2009; McLaughlin, 2011.
- <sup>xx</sup> Fan, 2002; Shi, 2008; Zhang, 2002.
- <sup>xxi</sup> "Company overview"; "Mary Kay, Inc."
- <sup>xxii</sup> "Mary Kay to Invest."
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Gross, 2009; "Mary Kay to Invest."
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ahern, 2011; Lan, 2002.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Boo, 2005.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> McLaughlin, 2011.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Ip, 2003.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> McLaughlin, 2011; Ngai, 1999; Wang, 2009.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Interview estimates placed this proportion at 70% to 80% of total beauty consultants (Bao 2012; Na 2012).
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ahern, 2011; Yeung, Niou, and Dai.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Gross, 2009.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Lan, 2002; Zhang, 2011.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Barboza, 2009; Mary Kay, Inc. company website, 2012; Yeung, Niou and Dai.
- <sup>xxxxiv</sup> Beech, 2002; Jacka, 2005; Thatcher and Zhu, 2006.
- <sup>xxxxv</sup> Jacka, 2005; Scheineson, 2009; Shi, 2008; Yan, 2003; Zhang, 2011.
- <sup>xxxxvi</sup> Lang and Lee, 2005; Thatcher and Zhu, 2006.
- <sup>xxxxvii</sup> Beech, 2002; Thatcher and Zhu, 2006; Webb, 2004.
- <sup>xxxxviii</sup> Li, et. al., 1995.
- <sup>xxxxix</sup> Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006.
- <sup>xl</sup> Beech, 2010; Grey, 1994; Reicher, 2004; Webb, 2004.
- <sup>xli</sup> Bao, 2012.
- <sup>xlii</sup> One woman was said to have exclaimed, "How can I buy bread with makeup?" (Bao 2012)
- <sup>xliii</sup> Based on the CNY/USD exchange rate on December 1, 2012.
- <sup>xliv</sup> Bao, 2012.
- <sup>xlv</sup> 2009.
- <sup>xlivi</sup> Na, 2012.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> 2009.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Ms. Lin, 2012; Ms. Yan, 2012.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Bao, 2012.
- <sup>l</sup> Gross 2009
- <sup>li</sup> Ruan, "My life at 50 years old."
- <sup>lii</sup> 2009.
- <sup>liii</sup> 2009.
- <sup>liv</sup> Barboza, 2009.
- <sup>lv</sup> 2005.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Li, 2012.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Cao, "Information announcement."
- <sup>lviii</sup> Xu, 2007; Yang, 2011.
- <sup>lix</sup> Liu, 2009.
- <sup>lx</sup> Wang, 2009.

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<sup>lxi</sup> Beech, 2010; Grey, 1994; Kolodinsky, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2008; Webb, 2004.

<sup>lxii</sup> Costas, 2012.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Bao, 2012.

<sup>lxiv</sup> Zhao, 2009.

<sup>lxv</sup> Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006.

<sup>lxvi</sup> 2012.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Qiu, "My comparative"; "Before and after"; Xiayi, Hicay.com.

<sup>lxviii</sup> Xiayi, Hicay.com.

<sup>lxix</sup> 2012.

<sup>lxx</sup> Reicher, 2004; Thatcher and Zhu, 2006.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Webb, 2004.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Beech 2010

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Pratt, Rockman and Kaufmann, 2006; Zhang, 2011; Lan, 2003.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> Bao, 2012; Huang, 2009.

<sup>lxxv</sup> Zhao, 2009.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Bao, 2012.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Bao, 2012; Barboza, 2009; Gross, 2009.

<sup>lxxviii</sup> Liu, 2009.

<sup>lxxix</sup> Hu, 2009.

<sup>lxxx</sup> Huang, 2009.

<sup>lxxxi</sup> Hermanwicz and Morgan, 1999.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> "Mary Kay Ash," 1983.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Ahern, 2011.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Li, 2012.

<sup>lxxxv</sup> Mitroff and Denton, 1999; Kolodinsky, et. al., 2008.

<sup>lxxxvi</sup> "Mary Kay Ash," 1983.

<sup>lxxxvii</sup> The type of "love" mentioned was unclear, whether it was in reference to self-love or the love of others.

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<sup>lxxxviii</sup> Ms. Wang, 2012.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> 2009.

<sup>xc</sup> 2012.

<sup>xcii</sup> Jacka, 2005.

<sup>xcii</sup> Ahern, 2011.

<sup>xciii</sup> Lang and Lee, 2005.

<sup>xciv</sup> Kolondinksy, Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2008.

<sup>xcv</sup> 2009.

<sup>xcvi</sup> Fan and Youqin, 1998; Hanser, 2005.

<sup>xcvii</sup> Zhang, 2011.

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# THE PARADOX OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND OTHER CHALLENGES:

*Labor Resistance in Contemporary Beijing*

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## ABSTRACT

Even though wildcat strikes and collective demonstrations are becoming increasingly commonplace amongst Chinese workers, these mass actions have yet to connect into a coherent national labor movement. Informed by my own participant observation as a volunteer organizer at a construction site in northwestern Beijing, my research explores the multitude of identities and social realities that inhibit a politicized working class consciousness onsite. I argue that grassroots labor activism, as exemplified by the unregistered student organization An Quan Mao (AQM), is generally impeded by a paradox of consciousness on the part of migrant laborers. Concomitantly, as workers are aware of class oppression on both a personal and global scale, they are resigned to the status quo economic system because it appears to be in their immediate self-interest to do so. Management then exacerbates these internal divisions by capitalizing on the provincialism and individualism that a considerable proportion of workers subscribe to. The result is the frustration of the potential movement to mobilize Chinese migrant laborers who realize the socio-political terms of their own struggles.

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of China in the global capitalist system created a massive demand for labor in service and manufacturing. The National Bureau of Statistics in 2011 recorded a total of 252 million migrant workers, a number that is constantly growing.<sup>i</sup> But, as itinerant workers with neither residency permits nor job stability, many find themselves subject to exploitation in its varied, layered forms—wage theft, contract violation, dangerous work conditions, the denial of basic benefits, and the threat of sexual and physical abuse. The Chinese labor law protects workers' rights in name but is rarely enforced. Bureaus of labor at both the local and regional level purportedly facilitate labor-market relations and monitor appropriate provisions of pension and social insurance. Simultaneously, the only trade union allowed to organize in China is the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), a branch of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mired in corruption and bureaucracy.

In this socio-political reality, established and grassroots organizations of every scope and practice strive to protect the interests of migrant laborers. Some NGOs receive the support of the government by negotiating with the local political leadership.<sup>ii</sup> Other “illegal” associations operate without official sanctions but effectively recruit and organize onsite. Arguably more promising are the recent cases of worker-initiated

strikes and collective actions, particularly in the industrial regions of South China.<sup>iii</sup> But in a larger context, the implications of these individual instances of resistance can be ambiguous. American labor studies scholar Eli Friedman pinpointed the crucial question when he wrote that "...workers [in China] are alienated from their own political activity. A profound symmetry exists: workers resist haphazardly and without any strategy, while the state and capital respond to this crisis self-consciously and in a coordinated manner."<sup>iv</sup> In terms of grassroots organizing in the industrial south, even successful protests frequently appear to be frustratingly sporadic and lacking in political vision. More specifically, in Beijing, a city definitively close to central government and home to a diverse population of itinerant laborers, differing models of resistance to labor exploitation are layered and complex such that collaboration becomes difficult. From their distinct advantages and shortcomings, what can we infer about the potential for labor resistance in contemporary China to move beyond redress at the individual level in a way that is not only reactionary but also constructive and transformative?

Orthodox Marxism, which sees class as the ultimate marker of identity, holds that individual consciousness of exploitation in the workplace will, by virtue of common experience, translate into an uprising against the political economy.<sup>v</sup> E.P. Thompson's 1963 study of working class formation in industrial England is frequently regarded as a historically significant text that integrated Marxist class analysis with human agency. Thompson defines the process of class-making as what "happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men

whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs...Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms".<sup>vi</sup> From a classic Marxist perspective, the perception of exploitation in the workplace almost inevitably constitutes the basis of large-scale proletarian revolution. But such a trajectory does not take into account the paradox of simultaneous social awareness and political apathy that complicates labor organizing in the context of China today. My research addresses how this understanding of class relations can then be qualified to account for other factors—from provincial identities to the prevalence of individualism—that hinder the formation of collective working class consciousness.

## BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

My research seeks to more critically understand the efficacy of grassroots labor activism that claims to engage workers from the ground up. Because the Chinese working class constitutes the foundation for China's recent and continual economic growth, its formation and predilections raise significant questions for the country's social and political future. In particular, I examine An Quan Mao (AQM), an explicitly politicized and student-run association founded in 2008 that specifically organizes workers at construction sites in Haidian District. I will contextualize my fieldwork within both contemporary research in China, labor studies and the Marxist class framework it predominantly draws from, pinpointing the paradox that inhibits the Marxist trajectory of personal consciousness translating into concerted action.

An Quan Mao (安全帽) literally translates to “safety hat” in English, a symbolic expression of solidarity with construction laborers who wear the identifying yellow cap as a part of their uniform. Founded in 2008 by a collaboration of passionate college students and professors in the Haidian District, AQM as an organization is grounded in a sense of partnership between students and migrant workers. The concept of mutuality, rather than the giving and receiving of direct aid, is thus critical to how AQM operates. Organizational activities are structured around weekly visits by volunteers to three construction sites in Haidian, sessions that the students call “worker bookhouses” (工友书屋). These visits typically consist of political discussions on both domestic and global events, cultural festivities, conversations, and film screenings. The final goal however, is not only to provide outlets for recreation and leisure to migrant workers but also to raise their political consciousness, develop community leaders, and address cases of wage theft and exploitation. Through periodic, multi-location “worker night schools” (工人夜校), select workers are trained in labor law and strategic methods to confront the rampant legal violations on every site. Staying true to its original principles of instigating social change from the grassroots, AQM has consistently turned down outside funding of any kind and urges to formalize as an organization. In spite of its financial independence and politicization, AQM is actually a locally recognized group that in October 2011 was named one of Haidian’s “Ten Best Volunteer Groups” (十大优秀志愿团体).

My analysis is informed by ten weeks of participant observation while volunteering as an organizer with AQM. With other student activists, I spent every

Sunday evening at a construction site near the National Library. For the first hour and a half, we visited dormitories to speak with workers on everything from their families and children to the lack of overtime pay. To more effectively build rapport, we spent time in the same rooms and gradually forged relationships with the same individuals. All of us would later gather to project and watch a film together huddled on the steps of the Library. The movies would range from those about the anti-Japanese war to Hong Kong romances. In spite of the constantly dropping temperatures, the turnout always remained in the dozens. Other events included a Mid-Autumn Festival celebration in September, a variety show with song and dance performances by local college students in late November, and the annual gala every December 5<sup>th</sup>, highlighted by segments pieced together by workers themselves.

In addition to providing cultural enrichment, the objective remains to inspire collective consciousness and empowerment. Dorm visits usually illuminated the frequency and severity of wage theft and labor violations; most workers for example, report never receiving government mandated bonuses for continuous extra night shifts and are paid only once every year. We made suggestions for securing justice and enter into discussions about methods for redress, from filing cases and petitions to mass demonstrations. Another important task, particularly at the National Library site, as this fall marked just the beginning of AQM’s work there, involved identifying workers with the potential to become leaders and organizers. They would then be trained at night schools AQM operates throughout Haidian multiple times during the year to become better versed in both labor law and strategies for grassroots organizing. Being more than just “schools,” however, the

core tenet of these temporary learning centers revolves around a two-way exchange rather than one-way flow of information. After all, the organizational mission aims to transform the consciousness of not just workers but students as well, bridging gaps of understanding in the process of shaping a broader movement.

This paper is organized into sections as follows. It begins by capturing the multifaceted picture of migrant labor resistance at one state-owned construction site managed by private subcontractors in Haidian District. The ethnographic encounters I detail highlight the various nuances of identity and society that complicate the development of working class consciousness: kinship networks, provincialism, and self-interest. Ultimately, I hope to capture the multiple inconsistencies that characterize the plight of the urban working class in a nominally communist country whose revolutionary potential had supposedly been achieved decades ago, whose rights are protected and lives valued and whose interests, in name, stand at the forefront of state priorities. In the context of proliferating NGO activity and worker-initiated actions throughout China, why do cases of migrant protest and resistance remain scattered and individual?

## THE COMPLEX NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Marxism delineates class consciousness as the recognition of a common working class experience in opposition to capitalists who exploit working class labor, fostered and politicized through struggle. Unity of the masses is also formed as a result of this struggle, and their strength would ultimately overthrow the fundamentally unequal distribution of power in society.<sup>vii</sup> What I found remarkable throughout my interactions with the construction workers

at the National Library was the critical understanding so many of them commanded of labor exploitation, both as applicable to their own circumstances and on a global scale. This awareness however, was almost invariably accompanied by the resignation that inequity and stratification are givens in any society, presenting an insurmountable task for many grassroots organizers.

Chen Weimin comes from a small village in Henan Province and is 61 years old. Throughout the decades that he has been in the construction trade, he has worked everywhere from Tianjin and Shanghai to Guangzhou. Both of his daughters are in their thirties, married, and itinerant laborers themselves at factories in Guangdong. He generally works anywhere between 7-10 months out of year, but now works less and less since his children are grown. When I asked Chen if he had heard about the recent strikes in China's south, he nodded and contemplated the question before sharing his take and the situation he and his co-workers found themselves in. "But for most of us, doing something like that is just unrealistic, impossible. Look, we all got our jobs because of connections – I'm only here because I know the accountant for this construction company – and if we cause any trouble we'd all lose face. This is why going to court is also not an option. You just take what you can and leave when it's too bad. Strikes are never going to work here because you don't want the money but there will always be someone willing to work for less. You can't win."<sup>viii</sup> Though generally a soft-spoken man, Chen expressed his outrage during another visit at the actions of his bosses during another one of our conversations in late October. "All the supervisors are at a fancy hotel having dinner right now. That's why we can't start on the night shift until they get back; it'll be my tenth shift in a row. It's only because we worked

hard and finished the project early that the company received a 300,000 kuai bonus. But all we got was a few free meals of the same vegetables, the same rice and a bottle of beer. This is how it is.”<sup>ix</sup> At this point, the worker sitting across from us chimed in. “We’re all at the bottom of society, what can you expect? It must be better in America.”

This overwhelming feeling of resignation and fatalism was salient throughout many of my conversations with the workers. They informed me that in spite of the blatant violations of labor rights at the site on a daily basis, no worker ever spoke up. To an extent, Chen was making a keen observation grounded in reality. Workers and organizers who overstep the boundaries—threatening the Communist Party by connecting individual cases and struggles into the faint outline of a regional movement—can find their lives in danger. A government that still claims to represent the best interests of workers in name can treat individual instances of rights violation as anomalies but cannot tolerate public displays of mass disenchantment. In 2003, two well-known labor leaders were arrested and tried on serious charges of state subversion when they attempted to organize laid-off workers at various state-run businesses in northeastern China.<sup>x</sup> Renowned labor activist Han Dongfang, who now runs the Hong Kong-based non-profit China Labour Bulletin, had served a two-year jail sentence previously and concedes that “we try to depoliticize labor disputes...We’re not trying to destroy anyone; we’re trying to build something here.”<sup>xi</sup>

Such a bleak context leaves even more questions and obstacles for activists who seek to foster change from the grassroots. The general consensus amongst migrant laborers, as my field work attests to time and again, holds that little can be done and nothing will change.

As I sat down to watch a Sino-Japanese war film with the workers one evening in early October, one man from Jiangsu asked me how things were for ordinary people in the United States. Having witnessed the multifaceted exploitation of restaurant and factory workers in San Francisco’s Chinatown as an organizer, I attempted to explain that cases of wage theft and denial of benefits were rampant for immigrants in the U.S. as well. Upon hearing my descriptions, my conversation partner expressed no shock. To him, the globalization of labor exploitation was only confirmed. “It’s the same everywhere. Inequality is just built into a society. The rich people have everything and the workers get nothing; it’s all bullshit. There’s nothing you can do. This problem cannot be solved.” Most workers echoed this sentiment. One worker from Hebei expressed his confusion when asked if he was satisfied with the work conditions on this specific site: “What does it even mean be satisfied? I don’t know what you’re trying to find out. It is what it is.” This cynicism is commonplace and frequently the only seemingly viable coping mechanism for workers who are incredibly aware of the various ways in which they are being cheated and violated.

## CULTURAL AND SYSTEMIC FACTORS

Fostering collective consciousness is also extremely ambitious considering the individualistic culture of modern China, compounded by economic difficulties. As a nation that has undergone tremendous development in recent decades, China has witnessed a corresponding transformation of values. The concept that growing economic liberalism promotes individualism at the expense of collectivism has been traced often across academic disciplines.<sup>xii</sup> In a market-oriented society where governmental policy celebrates personal

accumulation of wealth, commercialization has placed immense burdens on vulnerable populations while entrenching an individualistic framework for interpreting social relations. In many instances, labor conditions actually necessitate such an instinctually individual attitude. My site visit on an unnaturally cold November evening elucidated this reality. That night, I had accompanied a fourth-year student from Capital Normal University who had organized intermittently with AQM for years to a third-floor dorm where workers were from Baoding, a small city in Hebei. Like other rooms, the dimly lit quarters contained bunk beds for ten, a cracked ceiling, and handmade tables and stools. Partly, perhaps, because of the main subjects of our discussion—family, their children, the future—the conversation centered around money. The university students were repeatedly asked for their scores on the college entrance examination as these parents' preoccupation remained seeing their kids through a name-brand university and having them secure a well-paying job after graduation.

Workers are generally insistent that their children work hard within the system and ultimately attain a higher social status from high earnings. One man, whose daughter was only nine years old but attended a private boarding school in Shijiazhuang, justified his decision to send her away so young. "I only make 3,000-4,000 kuai/year and the school is 10,000 kuai/year not including all the living costs, but it's the best choice for her if she wants to do well later. Nine isn't too young. Don't they all say that the younger you are when you leave home, the more independent you become when you're older?" Another worker from Hebei captured the prevailing sentiment, by no means unique to migrants or the working class, with this qualification to a question

about how much we expect to earn as college graduates. "Money is everything these days. You can't really do anything without it anymore. Sometimes we don't want to admit how much it matters, but it's the base for all relationships in China today. That's why we just want our children to go to college, get a good job, earn more, and have stability." Independence aside, the ability to earn a high salary is the primary determinant of achievement. Because most workers at this specific site were in their fifties and sixties, many of their children were preparing for the college entrance exam. These men's anxieties about their family's financial futures are grounded in a social context that places increasing value on successfully maneuvering the system as an individual.

There was an intense thunderstorm the night a few of our students asked a group of workers how they could continue working the night shift when it was raining so hard. Chen's response mirrors the individualism that circumstances demanded. "You still have to do it when it rains and also sometimes when it snows. If you don't work, you're not paid, and we have deadlines that we need to finish things by. We have to meet those deadlines to get our wages. In times like these, it's just every man for himself – you do what you have to do to be safe while still completing your work." The dictates of employment, because they are often so fraught with danger and non-compliant with national labor law, require a strong if not survivalist sense of self that reflects the inherent difficulties of purposeful collective organizing.

The systematic organization of the construction site itself additionally heightens personal ties to kinship networks and hometowns in manners that obstruct the emergence of any sort of collective identity. One of the most noticeable characteristics I noticed in the

dorms was the strict physical divisions between workers from separate provinces. For instance, men from Jiangsu largely populated the first floor, while the second floor was predominantly men from Henan, and the third men from Hebei. This pattern of residential segregation is further exacerbated by divisions between various jobs within the industry because workers with the same specialization tend to have been recruited by the same subcontractor and from the same hometown. The result is startling disengagement and gaps in perception of conditions between labor and management as well as between different roles on site.

On October 14<sup>th</sup>, a few other students and I struck up a conversation with a worker specifically in charge of housekeeping and cleaning. In a radical departure from the experiences of regular laborers who work continuous shifts for meager wages, Wang Guoren explained his situation as he rested in bed watching his dormmates get ready for the night shift. “It’s much easier for me. They all don’t know, but I’m actually working two jobs for 4,500 kuai per month. I used to do business and made a bit of money. To be honest, I don’t need to be here, but I’m old, and it’s good to travel and look around. I can tell you, though, that the workers here have it hard. They’re only paid once a year when I’m paid every month; it’s difficult to not really have cash on you. It’s easy for them to cheat you. For example, the way that the meal system runs here is bad for the workers. The cafeteria charges 6-8 kuai for each dish so you can’t eat a meal without it being at least 10 kuai. Our meal allowance is only 500 kuai, and everything else is deducted from your pay; you have no control because they just want your money.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Throughout our conversation, Wang also hinted at the corruption inherent in the system. At one moment,

one manager clearly friendly with Wang wandered into the room and pressed us for what we are doing. When we said that we were college students here to screen a film for the workers, he responded, “Why don’t you charge the workers for these movie screenings? They earn hundreds of kuai a day!” The manager’s indignant claim harkens back to what another site supervisor explained two weeks prior when I inquired if he was in charge. “There are no leaders here. The workers are all the same; they’re all leaders. Everything here is fair and equal.” Not surprisingly, most supervisors refuse to acknowledge the blatant violations of national labor law on site, insisting that workers are satisfied with workplace conditions.

A few weeks later, as we watched workers fight each other for boxes of clothing donations rather than stand in line, one site supervisor approached me to ask for my reflections. I mentioned that I interpreted it as a reminder that next time we should coordinate for things to proceed more smoothly. But he viewed the situation rather differently: “You think if you all had just planned better it would have worked? You’re wasting your time. It’s all a problem of ‘quality’. If you really want to help people, donate your things to the countryside, not here. These workers don’t need any of this; do you know how much they’re paid daily? They get 200-300 kuai! They get 5,000-6,000 kuai every month!” I pressed on this further and suggested the possibility that the employees might not have access to spending cash because they are paid annually, to which he insisted that “they’re paid 3 times every year, always on time. They earn more than enough!”

It is thus small wonder that few workers place their trust into their bosses or the system, as represented by the local labor bureaus to protect their welfare. As Hong Kong labor studies scholar Chris

Chan effectively summarizes, “Since the local labour bureau and court officers have adopted a pro-capital approach in handling labour disputes, labour laws and regulations tend to be poorly monitored and enforced at the local level.”<sup>xiv</sup> The campaign to win back wages in the summer of 2011, in which AQM played a significant part which I will elaborate upon later, highlights the grim reality. The experiential disconnect between the authority and the worker, rather than any essential attribute of the latter, thus constitutes the root of working class apathy in contemporary China. Workers necessarily come to view their struggles as solely their own and monetary in nature rather than any kind of politicized phenomenon. This profound difference in mindset impedes organizing on the construction site I frequented as much as it does in factories and production sites elsewhere. It is only exacerbated by societal expectations that prize individualistic achievements, as evidenced by numerical measures like wages and test scores, over community and collectivism. It becomes immensely difficult to make the leap from fighting for individual retribution to mobilization for a common justice.

### AN QUAN MAO’S APPROACH TO CHANGE

For student organizers, the ideal of transformative consciousness is complicated by experiential disconnect and traditional beliefs. For activists who approach the stark reality of labor in China from a politicized lens, the difficulties inherent in grassroots mobilizing work can be discouraging. When I met the core group of volunteers with whom I spent my Sunday evenings—five students from the China Institute of Industrial Relations (CIIR), one from Capital Normal University and a graduate student leader who was also an alumnus

of Renmin—their enthusiasm, particularly for the group of five for whom this was their first year with An Quan Mao, was just as palpable as their anxiety. But the realities of labor organizing in the socio-political climate of contemporary China can be daunting. One poignant episode in late October served as a jolting reminder to all of us of how challenging it really is to promote any sense of collective consciousness where no such tradition exists, particularly in light of the complex power dynamics that restrict our capacity as young student activists from primarily urban and middle-class backgrounds.

It was on a chilly night that the students from CIIR hauled several large suitcases worth of winter clothing and shoes that they had gathered from a donation drive they organized on various university campuses to the construction site. We decided to distribute the goods—plenty enough if every worker took one item they needed—in front of the cafeteria before making rounds in the dorms to inform everyone what we brought. The nonchalance with which the workers reacted to our announcement assured us that not too many would be interested in these used articles of clothing. But when masses of workers showed up and would not line up regardless of how many times we asked, it became increasingly clear that several college students would not be able to keep order. Indeed, within minutes, everything was gone. Workers had fought each other to take away entire suitcases as we stood by shocked, frustrated that our plans to distribute the goods evenly completely fell through. A few of the students framed the incident in the context of migrant laborers possessing low “quality” (素质). Others struggled to find more systemic explanations. As one volunteer concluded in our group reflection while we screened a Hong Kong action film after the

incident, “You can’t just all blame it on their ‘suzhi’. It’s more a result of where they come from and the lifestyle they’re used to. They all grew up with a ‘small farmer ideology’ (小农主义), where it’s everyone for themselves. This aggression and selfishness is what it takes to make a living in the countryside.” But in spite of their attempts at empathy, it was apparent that the frustration from the incident had hampered their enthusiasm for the time being. Morale that evening was palpably low, and the students who had organized the clothing drive echoed each other that it would be difficult for anything similar to happen again.

The prevalence of “suzhi”, or “quality”, in the discourse of student volunteers at AQM captures the persistent gulf in experience and understanding that renders effective outreach and organizing such a Herculean task. The concept of “suzhi” figures prominently in popular discourse; as anthropologist Andrew Kipnis writes, the word “has become central to PRC dynamics of governance... [It] justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts, with those of ‘high’ quality gaining more income, power and status than the ‘low’... [and] development projects may be bolstered by claims that they will raise the quality of the targeted poor.”<sup>xv</sup> Even as most students hold deep concern for the personal issues of the workers they encounter, many have nonetheless internalized the social hierarchy in middle-class Chinese society that naturally places migrants at a lower rung.

It is significant to note, however, that in spite of—and perhaps because of—these challenges and shortcomings that the critical consciousness of the organizer is continually transformed in the process. Coming from geographically and economically diverse backgrounds, the AQM organizers at the National Library

do represent a remarkable selection of young people. While the students from China Institute of Industrial Relations never chose to attend the school because of any prior political commitment, they are now volunteers who willingly dedicate their energy to experiential learning to deepen their understanding of issues they have since become passionate about. One student explained, “My gaokao scores determined that I attend CIIR. But studying and being there really make me see the improvements that have to be made to labor conditions in China. Conditions at this construction site aren’t as different from what we learn in the textbooks as you would think, but it’s still a unique experience to be out here and interacting with the workers; everything seems so much more real and you really feel like you’re a part of something.” Listening to the personal stories of migrant laborers, however, intensified the facts and theories from the classroom tenfold. To be so directly confronted with the ubiquity of exploitative practices highlights the immense obstacles to actually realizing the idealized vision of worker-led grassroots change.

Most volunteers, however, already possessed a piercing awareness of the social and political context that complicates organizing. One student from CIIR tried to rationalize our lack of tangible progress on site. “You can’t measure us by all the successful strikes in factories in Guangdong. The system that governs construction workers here is different and makes building grassroots or collective consciousness nearly impossible. First, there is the ‘work contract system’ on which construction sites operate. In addition, workers come here from every province for short-term projects – it can be three months or a year, but then they leave without ever developing a vested interest in the workplace. It’s hard to recruit leaders this

way. In construction, unlike many factories where everyone does the same job, workers also fulfill different roles that come with distinct wages and benefits. It's hard to relate to your co-workers if they might be getting paid more; there's less solidarity." In particular, the student's keen observation about China's unique work contract system (包工制度) pinpoints a trend that hinders the prospects for cross-site solidarity and mobilization. This system, which now constitutes the governing structure of construction projects throughout China, begins with the subcontracting of various roles, such as roofing or electrical work, to different companies. These companies then scramble to sign on their own distinct teams of workers with little regulation, further increasing the already-rampant cases of non-contracted jobs.

Li Yu is a sophomore English major from Capital Normal University and one of the lead organizers at the National Library construction site. As opposed to most volunteers who come from middle-class Han backgrounds, Li is a Hani ethnic minority from a small city in Yunnan Province. Unsure if she wishes to ultimately settle in the city, she considers a career teaching English in or near her hometown. I first met her while outreachting in a freshman dorm at Renmin University in early September and we bonded immediately through both political and personal conversations. It was during dinner one night a few weeks later that I asked for her take on the organizational challenges of AQM and how her participation had changed her perception of labor issues. Her response revealed an incredible depth of analysis and awareness. "I haven't really sat down to summarize everything I've learned, but if anything comes to mind right now it's that mobilization is a very difficult and long-term process. It takes patience. For

example, we have been successful at recruiting volunteers this semester and expanded the base of colleges our student membership comes from. But just going by how things have generally unfolded, very few of them stay to become committed members; even fewer actually become politicized. This kind of turnover makes our work harder because everything depends on you building trust over time with the workers. Rapport is where our work begins."<sup>xxvi</sup>

Liu Chaoyang is a third-year student at China Agricultural University. We were waiting for other volunteers before a cultural performance for workers one night in mid-November when our conversation turned onto AQM's efficacy at generating consciousness. I brought up the paradox in which workers are excruciatingly aware of their exploitation but simultaneously also of their powerlessness to challenge the system. She conceded that "organizing is a hard, slow process...our end goal is definitely action; we want workers to realize that there are ways to fight back and that they should, but it's a difficult long-term plan. Like, if students who work as research assistants are not being paid enough wages by their professors, would they protest? How hard would it be to get our friends to do that?"<sup>xxvii</sup>

She then alluded to another successful campaign that AQM volunteers had taken part in earlier in the spring, in which a group of workers, at the conclusion of their project, won back wages their boss had refused to pay. But when I inquired if those same workers had walked away with any sort of tenable socio-political awareness, she replied, "Unfortunately, we usually lost contact with them after they leave the construction site. A few of them call us once in a while, but that's the best we can hope for. They all move on." She fell silent for a while before adding, "It's just

hard building long-lasting relationships with the workers. We try, but usually in the end, they move on with their lives and we do with ours.”<sup>xviii</sup> Her comment actually harkens to a different campaign AQM had taken the lead on in the summer of 2011, when volunteers aided a group of nine Hubei workers in recovering more than 30,000 yuan of lost wages.

Both wage theft and cases of physical violence against laborers were pervasive earlier that spring at a construction site in the Mentougou District of Beijing.<sup>xix</sup> In July, with funds running so low that food had become a concern, the workers contacted various organizations for help including the local Bureau of Labor and Public Security Bureau, the Petition Office of the Beijing Municipal Government, Beijing Emergency Services, and Beijing Legal Aid Center—all to no avail. By early August, they had written the details of their plight into petitions and marched to the municipal government before being promised their wages, yet again falsely. Two volunteers from AQM assorbed the evidence and filed cases with the Labor Bureau, hoping to secure redress through legal means. When the only response from the Bureau was the suggestion that they negotiate again with the employers, AQM organizers collaborated with the workers in further mediation sessions with site supervisors. In a faint victory, only the group of nine laborers from Hubei who had been most vocal ultimately won their back wages and returned home. But those from other provinces, victims of the same rights violations, would never receive the wages they deserved.

Occurrences like this encapsulate the blurred definitions of consciousness as well as the murky boundaries between successful demonstrations and failure. In Beijing, just as in the industrial areas of the Pearl River Delta that Eli Friedman

had based his judgments on, the most formidable task lies not in sparking individual instances of group resistance amongst workers already familiar with each other. Rather, the greatest difficulty is in politicizing these actions in any sustainable way so that their potential does not halt at providing evidence for the local labor bureau that it has always been on the workers’ side.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of longstanding differences in theory and praxis, student activists and scholars from across the political spectrum concur that Chinese migrant labor—the backbone of China’s export-oriented growth model—has fueled the country’s economic ascent too often at the cost of workers’ rights and well-being. Even as industrial wages in other East Asian countries rose from 8% of U.S. wages in 1975 to over 30% in 2005, wages in China stayed stagnant at 2-3% of that in the U.S.<sup>xx</sup> Through the forceful maintenance of low production costs and suppression of organized dissent, the Pearl River Delta (and increasingly, inland cities as well) have been able to retain status as manufacturing capitals of the global economy. These abuses perpetrated against migrant laborers are also not unique to special economic zones or light industry. Construction workers at the National Library, just as assembly line workers at the Foxconn factory in Shenzhen or the garment district of Guangzhou, are continually denied their legal rights such as on-time and overtime pay. But even more infuriating are incidents like the one reported by the worker from Henan Province, who witnessed his superiors flagrantly celebrate 300,000 kuai bonuses with extravagant meals while workers were only given bottles of beer. The latter represents the deep-seated inequity that has come to

define social relationships at the workplace. It breaks no law, but the fundamental injustice captures too well the complexity of labor abuse in contemporary China.

This reality can be difficult to confront and fight. Profound disagreements exist in academia over the ideological framework for interpreting labor resistance and the nature of class while concomitantly, different models of activism render collaboration an arduous task. Student organizing, as exemplified by An Quan Mao, operates with a political blueprint and attempts to galvanize workers at the grassroots through the building of relationships and constant negotiation. The ultimate sustainability of their efforts may be uncertain, but the social consciousness of both students and worker leaders are definitely transformed in the process. Further research should provide a more in-depth examination of the dynamic interactions between the state, the market, and the public sector in regulating the scope and direction of labor organizing.

In spite of the comparable objectives of scholars and organizers from across the political continuum, the landscape of labor resistance in modernizing China remains fragmented and paradoxical. The orthodox Marxist trajectory—which holds that class consciousness develops from the knowledge of shared experiences in the workplace—does not account for the role of the communist state or the multiplicity of identity. But neither will simply recognizing and addressing individual instances of exploitation without the context of global capitalism lead the labor movement on the path to sustainable change. Workers are also excruciatingly conscious that their legal rights are

constantly violated. But with the tenacious hold of provincialism and kinship networks as well as the overwhelming power of the state-capital alliance, critical awareness is usually coupled with resignation that the dynamics of exploitation are inevitable. This paradox presents an enduring roadblock to both grassroots organizing and policy advocacy, preventing the formation of a mass labor movement that connects struggle across place and industry.

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<sup>i</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, “2011 Survey and Monitoring Report of China’s Migrant Workers,” April 27, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Joseph Cheng et al, “The Survival and Development Space for China’s Labor NGOs: Informal Politics and Its Uncertainty,” in *Asian Survey* 50 (2010): 1088.

<sup>iii</sup> In the spring of 2010, nearly two thousand migrant workers struck at a Honda plant in Nanhai, Guangdong Province demanding higher wages and union reform. With the span of a few weeks, the strike had spread to other auto manufacturing plants as far north as Beijing and Tianjin. For more, see Wang Kan, “Collective Awakening and Action of Chinese Workers: The 2010 Auto Workers’ Strike and Its Effects,” in *Social Geschichte* 6 (2011): 9-27.

<sup>iv</sup> Eli Friedman, “China in Revolt,” *Jacobin Magazine*, August 2012, 34.

<sup>v</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963): 5-8.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>vii</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963): 173.

<sup>viii</sup> Chen Weimin, personal conversation, October 14, 2012.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> “Subversion Charges for China Labor Leaders,” *New York Times*, January 1, 2003.

<sup>xi</sup> Kathy Chu, “Once-jailed Labor Activist Works within the System,” *USA Today*, November 18, 2010.

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xii Richard Ball, "Individualism, Collectivism, and Economic Development," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 573 (2001): 72.

xiii Wang Guoren, personal conversation, October 14, 2012.

xiv Chan, 311.

xv Andrew Kipnis, "Suzhi: A Keyword Approach," in *The China Quarterly* 186 (2006): 295-296.

xvi Li Yu, personal conversation, October 3, 2012.

xvii Liu Chaoyang, personal conversation, November 11, 2012.

xviii Ibid.

xix The story of this campaign is taken from a piece titled *Follow-up and Reflection on an Individual Case of Rights Protection on a Construction Site* (工地跨班组维权的个案跟进与思考) by Li Dajun (李大君).

xx Jenny Chan and Pun Ngai, "Global Capital, the State, and Chinese Workers: The Foxconn Experience," *Modern China* 38 (2012): 388.

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# THE INTERSECTION OF CHRISTIANITY AND SUICIDE IN SOUTH KOREA

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past couple of decades, South Korea's suicide rate has increased drastically and currently ranks the highest among nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Although this phenomenon can be attributed to a multitude of different factors, the current paper examines the understudied role of religion in the suicide epidemic. Despite the fact that South Korea has become an increasingly Christian nation, religion has not served as a protective measure against suicide for this population. In fact, it seems likely that Christianity as it is practiced in South Korea today has contributed in creating an environment more conducive to suicidal behavior. The author examines previous research on the relationship between religion and suicide, and evaluates this relationship in the particular cultural context of South Korea through the lens of two main theories: Durkheim's integration theory and the religious commitment theory. The paper concludes with suggestions on future research possibilities.

According to the widely accepted definition established by the World Health Organization (WHO), suicide is an act that is "deliberately initiated and performed by the person concerned in the full knowledge, or expectation, of its fatal outcome" (2009). Although the majority of OECD countries have witnessed a decrease in or at least maintenance of

their suicide rate in recent decades, South Korea's suicide rate has increased rapidly since the nineties (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2011). South Korea's suicide mortality rate currently ranks the highest among developed nations with over thirty-one completed suicides per 100,000 persons in 2010, more than double its rate in 1995 (Korean National Statistical Office). This translates to about one suicide in every forty minutes (Kim *et al.*, 2010). From a population health standpoint, the current suicide rate can be considered an epidemic (Kim *et al.*, 2010) and has therefore become an important social and health concern. This in turn has motivated research on the particular risk factors associated with suicidal ideation and behavior in the cultural context of contemporary South Korea.

While suicide is a highly personal act, larger ecological influences on an individual's decision to end his or her life cannot be neglected. Because the increase in suicide in South Korea coincided with a period of globalization and modernization, there are countless concurrent societal shifts that could be responsible (Park & Lester, 2006). For example, one important determinant of suicide rates could be economic trends. Following the devastating IMF crisis of 1997, the national suicide rate exhibited a steep increase of 42.4% (Hong *et al.*, 2006). However, the suicide rate continued to increase rapidly after recovery from the IMF crisis, even throughout the early to mid-nineties and

during 2000-2001, when the Korean economy was thriving (Hong *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, it seems that economic wealth alone does not uniformly predict suicide rates. Other studies have suggested that conditions, such as high birth rates, high marriage rates, and low divorce rates are related to lower suicide rates in South Korea (Kim *et al.*, 2006; Park & Lester, 2006). Of these variables, regression analyses of data from 1983-2002 revealed that divorce rate is the strongest predictor of the suicide rate ( $r = 6.52, p < .001$ ) with marriage rates and birth rates giving mixed results (Park & Lester, 2006).

Furthermore, results from the Korea National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey administered by the Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1995, 1998, 2001, and 2005 show that although more women tend to engage in suicide ideation, men are more than twice as likely to die from suicide (Kim *et al.*, 2010; World Health Organization). Comparing suicide rate increases across specific age groups also reveals that suicide risk increases with age (Kwon *et al.*, 2009). By looking at total mortality and suicide rates from 1986 to 2005, Kwon *et al.* (2009) found that increasing suicide rates was composed of a greater absolute increase in the older group (ages 45 and up) and a greater proportional increase in the younger group (under age 45).

Despite all the attention that has been given to the issue of suicide in South Korea, one potentially significant factor that has not yet been investigated is religion. The religious makeup of South Korea has changed notably in the past couple of decades. As the neon crosses scattered all across the Seoul sky suggest, the Christian population, including both Protestant and Catholic adherents, has been growing steadily since the early 1960s and currently comprises approximately thirty percent of the total population (Lugo & Grim, 2007).

Although Christianity is not the country's official religion, it surpassed Buddhism and other traditional belief systems as the majority religion in the nineties and established South Korea as the most Christian nation in East Asia. South Korea is also home to the largest megachurch in the world, Yoido Full Gospel Church, which reported over half a million members as of 2009 (Han *et al.*, 2009). The continued growth in Christianity is mostly at the expense of those with no religion, making South Korea an increasingly religious nation in general. The influence of religion is not only visible in church settings but also in the political realm and other private and public spheres of life (Kim, 2002; Lugo & Grim, 2007). Therefore, it is appropriate to ask how the growth of Christianity and its place in society relate to the concurrent rise in suicide. While these trends may simply be coincidental, since religious beliefs shape individuals' value systems and treat issues of life and death, it seems probable that religion would affect individuals' suicidal tendencies.

Most major religions, including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, strongly condemn the act of suicide (Gearing & Lizardi, 2009). In particular, when one considers the Christian doctrine's emphasis on the sanctity of human life and Christian communities' disapproval of suicide, the growth of Christianity and increase in suicide rates seem paradoxical. One would expect that religious beliefs would serve to deter individuals from engaging in suicidal behavior. Thus, it seems reasonable that countries with a greater Christian population would report lower suicide rates. In line with this hypothesis, studies have found that some religious countries report lower suicide rates than nonreligious countries (Durkheim, 1951; Fernquist, 2012). However, despite the theoretical and empirical evidence for the inverse

relationship between religion and suicide, trends in South Korea indicate that Christianity has not served as a protective mechanism against suicide.

The current paper explores the potential effect of the rise of Christianity on suicide tendencies in the cultural context of contemporary South Korea. It first discusses the stance of the Christian doctrine and Christian communities on suicide. It then presents the two main theories on the relationship between religion and suicide, namely the integration theory (Durkheim, 1951) and the religious commitment theory (Stack, 1983) and attempts to apply them to the South Korean case. Finally, the paper concludes with suggestions on future research possibilities.

### **Christianity and Suicide**

First, we examine the ways in which the Christian doctrine and Christian communities, both Catholic and Protestant, view the act of suicide and those who commit suicide. Although the Bible does not explicitly rebuke suicidal behavior, it does imply that one should respect and care for one's life, which counters suicidal behavior. In addition, the history of Christianity reveals that Catholics and Protestants alike have consistently frowned upon suicide, although to varying degrees.

### **The Bible on Suicide**

The Christian doctrinal stance on suicide is unclear because there is no explicit discussion on the topic in the Bible (Barraclough, 1992). There are only a few biblical figures whose deaths may be classified as suicide depending on how one defines "suicide." These characters include Samson, Saul, Abimelech, and Ahitophel in the Old Testament, and Judas Iscariot in the New Testament. However, most of these individuals committed suicide only at the threat of impending death; they chose to commit suicide as an alternative to being

dishonorably murdered. Additionally, several of these characters did not kill themselves but ordered others to kill them on their behalf. Therefore, it is questionable whether these figures' deaths can even be considered suicides under the contemporary definition of the act.

The tone in which these cases are presented further reflects the ambiguity of the Bible on the subject of suicide. The authors present each of these cases in a nonjudgmental, factual manner, never using biased terms but simply describing the method of death (e.g., by hanging, by burning, etc.). None of these characters' deaths reveal the consequences of suicide either for themselves or for others, making it all the more difficult to interpret a proper biblical view of suicide. Therefore, contrary to common belief, there is not a definitive prohibition against suicide inherent to the Christian doctrine.

However, the values and ethics encouraged by the Bible seem to be in discordance with suicidal behavior. Although the Christian doctrine as presented in the Holy Bible does not explicitly judge suicidal behavior as either praiseworthy or sinful, it conveys that human life is sacred and that it is a divine gift that man has to protect. For example, the New Testament book of First Corinthians 3:16-17 (New International Version) states, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple." This text, which equates the human body with "God's temple," implies the importance of proper stewardship of one's physical body and suggests the proscription of self-destructive acts including, in the most extreme form, suicide.

Although the reliability of the Bible as a historical text is questionable, Christian churches emphasize its

infallibility as the divine word of God. If all Christian adherents genuinely internalized these biblical teachings and lived by these principles, it seems that they would be less likely to commit suicide. However, it seems that there are stronger societal forces in play that override the potential regulatory effect of the Christian doctrine and lead to greater suicide risk.

### **Christian History and Suicide**

Despite the Bible's ambiguity, the Christian community and especially the Catholic Church have openly condemned the act of suicide to varying degrees. In the fourth century A.D., Saint Augustine, the author of *City of God*, was the first to denounce suicide as a sin that violates one of God's Ten Commandments: "Thou shall not kill" (Gearing & Lizardi, 2009). Although most interpret this commandment as a prohibition against murder, Augustine argued that it also applies to suicide, as it is also a form of killing. Subsequently, in the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas elaborated on Augustine's interpretation and claimed that suicide is a sin against oneself, neighbor, and God, and that it is an unnatural behavior for human beings who are naturally driven to self-protection. Saint Aquinas also considered suicide to be among the gravest sins because unlike other sins, one cannot confess and repent for a completed suicide. However, with the pathologization of suicide by the field of psychiatry and growing public awareness regarding mental illness, the Church's view on suicide became more tempered and the Catholic Church established that one has to be mentally competent in order to understand that he or she is committing a sin. Therefore, the Church no longer holds a black-and-white ethic regarding suicide, but rather a more contextual judgment of suicidal behavior. Regardless, suicide continues to be stigmatized and reproved within the Catholic community.

The Protestant community generally does not judge suicide as harshly as the Catholic Church and instead focuses on fostering an accepting community for those undergoing internal struggles in an attempt to prevent suicide (Gearing & Lizardi, 2009). Nevertheless, the Protestant community, which is largely influenced by Catholic thought, also considers suicide a sinful rejection of God's gift of human life and treats it as a taboo. Although most of the history cited above refers to European Church history, because Western missionaries introduced Christianity to South Korea, it is without a doubt that these views indirectly influence Christianity in today's South Korean society.

With these historical backgrounds in mind, it seems likely that individuals who endorse Christian beliefs and interact with Christian communities would be less likely to engage in self-destructive acts. In fact, Fournier (1987) has argued that suicide is the result of a sin and that the antidote to suicide is to choose God and open oneself to the Holy Spirit (1987). However, Lester (1998) argues that suicide is not always a result of blatant denial and rejection of Christian doctrine. On the contrary, it can be a search for spirituality, for God, for a meaning to life, and/or for rebirth. In sum, the theoretical influence of religious belief on suicidal behavior is far from straightforward and requires further examination. With simultaneous rises in both its national suicide rate and Christian population, South Korea is an auspicious setting to study this relationship.

### **Theories on Religion and Suicide**

Two main theories dominate the literature on the relationship between religion and suicide: the integration theory (Durkheim, 1951) and the religious commitment theory (Stack, 1983). While the former focuses on the social benefits of belonging to a religious society, the

latter emphasizes the psychological importance of commitment to a certain set of core beliefs. Each model can be used to explain the possible relationship between religion and suicide in South Korea.

### Durkheim's Integration Theory

French sociologist Emile Durkheim first developed the integration theory on suicide in 1897 (1951). Although suicide is a psychobiosocial phenomenon that requires a multipronged approach, Durkheim considered it mainly as a social phenomenon that transcends individual agency. He proposed that the likelihood an individual will commit suicide can be determined by examining the two variables *social integration*, or the extent to which a person is attached to his or her social groups, including family, religious institutions, and community, and *social regulation*, or the extent to which the desires and behaviors of a person are controlled by social values and norms. He predicted that societies with higher social integration and higher social regulation would have lower suicide rates, because individuals within the society would be more closely bonded to other members of society, and because their behavior would be more closely monitored by social norms, which proscribe deviant acts like suicide. Therefore, he predicted that individuals thriving in highly integrated and regulated societies are less likely to commit suicide.

Durkheim further proposed that one's religious affiliation is a significant determinant of social integration and that it can therefore influence an individual's risk for suicide (1951). In particular, he argued that suicide varies inversely with the degree of social integration of a religious society – the more closely-knit a religious society, the lower the suicide rate. Without regard for the specific beliefs embodied by religious groups, he measured social integration as the sheer

number of shared beliefs and practices among adherents. He asserted that religious groups with more shared dogmas and rituals would foster greater social integration and consequently lower suicide risk for its members. Although Catholicism and Protestantism, the two largest branches of Christianity, are based on the same basic tenets and both prohibit suicide, Durkheim made a distinction between them based on the religious societies they tend to produce. Because Catholicism tends to more fervently require its adherents to profess certain beliefs and engage in certain practices, Durkheim hypothesized that Catholicism encourages greater social integration and acts as a more effective deterrent for suicide than Protestantism. Some examples of specifically Catholic beliefs and practices include confession and norms against switching to another religion (Stack, 1983). Accordingly, Durkheim concluded that suicide rates among Catholics would be lower than that among Protestants (1951). In the mid to late 1800s, he found support for this hypothesis among five nation states, Austria, Prussia, Baden, Bavaria, and Wurttemberg, in which the suicide rates of the Protestant population were at least fifty percent higher than that of the Catholic population.

Durkheim went so far as to assert that Protestantism would actually promote suicidal behavior (1951). He explained that because Protestantism allows a greater degree of free inquiry, or the freedom of individuals to interpret the Bible as they wish, Protestants have fewer shared beliefs and practices. This spirit of free inquiry is paired with a relative lack of ideological subordination within the Protestant community compared to Catholicism, which requires a relatively unquestioning obedience of its followers. Catholicism involves a stronger sense of collectivism, whereas Protestantism

fosters a sense of individualism. In short, Durkheim argued that Protestantism lead to lower social integration for its members, which in turn lead to greater suicide risk.

The classic Durkheimian model has been widely tested and has yielded mixed results. Spoerri et al. (2010) found that in modern Switzerland, the protective effect of a religious affiliation is stronger among Catholics than among Protestants, lending support to Durkheim's theory. However, other studies have found no conclusive relationship between religious affiliation and suicide rates. For instance, Morphew (1968) examined the religious beliefs and practices in fifty cases of self-poisoning at the General Hospital, Birmingham and found that although the Catholic patients seemed to have stronger sense of group identity and solidarity (i.e., higher social integration), they were no more immune to suicidal behavior than their Protestant counterparts.

Claiming the need to update Durkheim's theory to cater to changing historical and social contexts, Pescosolido and Georgianna (1989) reinterpreted the integration theory as a network model. Durkheim's studies were based on the rapidly industrializing societies and newly established nations, such as Italy and Germany in the late 1900s (Durkheim, 1951). While religion held cultural hegemony in these past European societies, secularization throughout the world has considerably tapered the impact of religion on contemporary culture. Secularization and other related sociohistorical trends, such as ecumenicalism and evangelical revival, have led to a renewed relationship between religion and society in today's world. Therefore, Durkheim's theory on religious affiliation and his dichotomy between Catholicism and Protestantism could be unsuitable for studies on today's national suicide trends. Instead, the network theory holds that the degree to

which religious groups vary in terms of adherent's participation and network contacts, regardless of whether they are of Catholic or Protestant background, determines suicide risk.

By examining twenty-seven religious groups (twenty-five Protestant denominations, Catholic, and Jewish) in the United States, Pescosolido and Georgianna (1989) found that Catholicism and *some* Protestant denominations had lower suicide rates, whereas other Protestant denominations exhibited higher suicide rates. This result can serve as a revision to Durkheim's assertion that all Protestant denominations increase suicide risk. Upon studying detailed descriptions of each of the Protestant denominations, they found that the denominations that are mostly "mainline," "mainstream," or "old-line" (Episcopalian, Institutional Presbyterian, Institutional Methodist, United Church of Christ) tend to report higher suicide rates while more evangelical denominations (Nazarene, Evangelical Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Church of God) tend to report lower suicide rates. Clearly, unlike Durkheim, who made the blanket statement that Protestants are more prone to suicide than Catholics, the network theory approach examines the social mechanisms underlying each denomination to clarify the effect of religion on suicide.

While the classic integration theory views religion only as a source of social integration, the Neo-Durkheimian network theory asserts that religious societies also affect individuals' sense of social regulation (Pescosolido & Georgianna, 1989). Because churches are communities, which naturally develop social norms, churches and other religious communities play an important role in behavior monitoring and social regulation. By looking at the above data, Pescosolido and Georgianna concluded that church groups with both high social integration

and regulation are thought to have high network density, whereas those with low social integration and regulation are thought to have low network density. Groups at the extremes of these measures tend to report the highest suicide rates, while groups with moderate levels report the lowest suicide rates. While moderate levels of social integration and regulation can protect individuals, extreme levels can actually encourage suicidal behavior. For instance, atheists in times of crises have neither a religious community to rely on (i.e., social integration) nor the guidance of religious authorities or fellow members (i.e., social regulation) and therefore are more likely to give up on their lives. At the opposite end of the network density gradient, cults with both high social integration, which prevents them from developing relationships with those outside the cult, and regulation by the cult leader, can also lead to disastrous cases of suicide, such as the infamous mass suicide at Jonestown in 1978. In sum, the network theory argues that the social organization within religious groups and their level of network density, and not simply religious affiliation, are what determine the adherents' suicide risk.

### The Religious Commitment Theory

Criticism of Durkheim's integration model (and its updated versions) led to the emergence of an alternative theory relating the level of religious commitment or devoutness to suicide risk (Stack, 1983). In contrast with the integration theory, which simply emphasized the social benefits of religion, the religious commitment theory focused on the psychological benefits of strong commitment to a few central, life-affirming beliefs. Because religion can offer a source of meaning and order in the world, the more strongly an individual believes in certain life-affirming religious values, the less likely he or she will engage in suicidal behavior. Examples of

Christian life-affirming beliefs include the belief in an afterlife as a reward for endurance in worldly struggles and exclude irrelevant beliefs, such as the belief in the Virgin Birth. These tenets provide individuals with internal strength to tolerate suffering and a sense of hope for the future, thereby preventing feelings of depression and anxiety, which can lead to suicidal ideation. In short, the religious commitment theory focuses more on the potentially beneficial micro-level influence of certain beliefs on individuals' emotional wellbeing instead of the social benefits that religious communities provide. This translates into the hypothesis that countries with greater populations of individuals with religious commitment would have lower levels of suicide.

Stack and Lester (1991) found some support for the religious commitment theory when they compared it with Durkheim's integration model. In their study, they measured the independent variables religious integration, which they operationalized as religious affiliation, and religious commitment, which they operationalized as the frequency of church attendance. They found a strong inverse correlation between religious commitment and suicide ideation,  $r = -0.29$ ,  $n = 1,687$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . Greater church attendance, or greater exposure to central Christian beliefs, was closely associated with lower suicide rates, regardless of whether individuals were Catholic or Protestant. In a more recent study by Neeleman et al., African-Americans had lower levels of suicide compared to white Americans, and one strong indicator of lower suicide rates was a high level of orthodox religious beliefs and devotion, as opposed to other variables, such as practice and religious affiliation (1998).

Similar studies have used other variables to measure religious commitment, including the domestic

production of religious books, which has been found to correspond to the level of exposure to certain religious beliefs. Fernquist (2003) found that the production of religious books is inversely related to female suicide rates in both high and low religious countries, whereas it is only inversely related to male suicide rates in high religious countries. Fernquist suggests that females depend on the internal strength and comfort they gain from religion whereas males depend on the external social support of religion in countries where being religious is the norm. These results suggest that while the religious commitment model may be more appropriate in assessing suicide risk among females, a Durkheimian model that focuses more on the social benefits of religion may be more relevant for males.

The religious commitment theory is not limited to Christianity, and research has found that it seems to hold for other major religions. For instance, Jahangir et al. (1998) found that Afghan refugees in Pakistan with higher degree of commitment to certain beliefs of Islam were less vulnerable to suicide ideation and behavior. In this study, clinical judgment was used to assess individuals' level of religiosity, wish for death, suicidal plan, and suicidal attempt. The religion of Islam, which is based on the Qur'an, emphasizes positive self-regard and accordingly has rigid sanctions against suicidal behavior. The results indicate that individuals with high levels of religiosity often wished for death, but rarely engaged in suicidal planning and behavior stating that suicide is an unpardonable sin. Therefore, it seems likely that individuals' commitment to their religious beliefs deter them from suicidal behavior, confirming the religious commitment theory. Some studies have found that religiously pluralistic countries, such as the United States, report lower suicide rates than more religiously homogeneous

countries (Stack, 1983). Therefore, it seems that it is not the particular belief system and religious society, but the level of individuals' devoutness that is linked with suicide risk.

However, the evidence for the religious commitment theory is mixed. Sisask et al. (2010) found that the frequency of attending church or another place of worship demonstrated a protective effect in Brazil and Iran but not in South Africa and Sri Lanka, whereas religious affiliation had no significant relationship. Although this study disconfirms Durkheim's theory, it does not uniformly confirm the religious commitment theory throughout the countries. Therefore, both theories require further development and research. Nevertheless, researchers across various fields continue to rely on these theories as a framework for assessing the potential social and psychological impact of religion on suicides on both the individual and national levels.

### **The Case of Christianity in South Korea**

The integration theory and the religious commitment theory can be used to explore the relationship between religion and suicide in South Korea. Although it is not possible to make definitive conclusions without substantial empirical data, these theoretical analyses can help formulate working hypotheses for future studies.

### **South Korea Through the Lens of Durkheim's Integration Theory**

Durkheim's integration theory and its variants suggest that religion can act as a deterrent against suicide when it serves to increase social integration and social regulation (Durkheim, 1951; Pescosolido & Georgianna, 1989). In particular, Durkheim's classic integration theory states that Catholicism deters suicide while Protestantism promotes it. Both Catholic and Protestant populations have grown in

South Korea over the past two decades. The Catholic population, however, has increased more uniformly and to a greater magnitude than Protestantism. Between 1985 and 2005, the Catholic population increased by 6.3% while the Protestant population increased by 2.2% (Lugo & Grim, 2007). The Protestant population growth stagnated and then actually dipped in the nineties for unclear reasons (Han *et al.*, 2009). Protestantism began to increase again around 2005 but at a slower pace than in the past.

Despite the greater and more consistent increase of Catholicism, the suicide rate of South Korea skyrocketed, raising questions about Durkheim's assertion that Catholicism acts as a deterrent for suicide. However, looking at these statistics does not reveal to what extend non-Christian citizens contributed to the suicide rate. Furthermore, it is too soon to dismiss Durkheim's assumption because it is possible that although the increase was greater for Catholicism, the overall population of Protestants, 18.3% in 2005, has always been greater than the percentage of Catholics, 10.9% in 2005. Therefore, Protestantism's ostensible promotion of suicide may overwhelm whatever protective benefits Catholicism might offer. In accordance with Durkheim's hypotheses, it is possible that the increase in Protestantism has deteriorated social integration in South Korea society, and therefore has contributed to the rise in suicide. National level data on these trends are not sufficient to test Durkheim's hypothesis regarding religious affiliation and further analyses of empirical data on more micro levels are necessary.

The growth of Christianity, and Protestantism in particular, may have contributed to social disintegration in other ways. Because the introduction of Western missionaries spurred the growth of Christianity in this country, it is not

surprising that the growth of Christianity coincided with a period of Westernization in general. In fact, South Koreans often conflate Christianity with the notions of Westernization and modernization (Lumsdaine, 2009). South Korea continues to become increasingly influenced by Western liberalism through channels other than religion. Especially during this past decade, South Korea has undergone globalization in all realms of life, which has led to a loss of traditional, collective values and the adoption of a Western, individualistic culture (Park & Lester, 2006). This phenomenon may have shifted Korea into what Durkheim (1951) would call an *egoistic state* or a pathological condition characterized by the breakdown or decrease of social integration. Because of this disconnect between individuals and the society, an indicator of decreased social integration, Durkheim proposed that individuals in an egoistic society are more likely to engage in self-destructive acts, including suicide. If Christianity is evaluated purely as a Western import, it may have facilitated society's general shift toward a more individualistic culture, which is more conducive to suicide according to Durkheim. Therefore, the increase in suicides may be a social phenomenon that has been inadvertently fueled by the evangelism of Western missionaries.

On the other hand, Christian churches in South Korea may have actually served to increase social integration, casting doubt on Durkheim's theory that social integration is a relevant variable influencing suicide risk. Interestingly, upon examining online church mission statements of churches in both South Korea and the United States, Sasaki and Kim (2011) found that South Korean websites tend to emphasize the importance of social affiliation whereas U.S. websites tend to stress personal or spiritual growth and acceptance.

Presbyterian churches and Catholic churches in South Korea seem to rely heavily on the social benefits that church settings provide. The relative emphasis on social aspects of Christianity can be explained by remnants of collectivism in South Korean society and the notion of the nurturing of the interdependent self. If Korean churches are successfully achieving their goals of fostering loving relationships and accepting communities within their congregations, they may have served to increase social integration. While this is beneficial to a moderate degree, excessive social integration can lead to *altruistic* societies, in which individuals are too closely bonded and are driven to commit suicide for the sake of others in the group (Durkheim, 1951).

Just as South Korean churches today may foster either too little or too much social integration, they can also facilitate too little or too much social regulation. According to Durkheim, a lack of social regulation can lead to an *anomie* society, or one that is devoid of social norms and other means of social control, and overregulation can lead to *fatalistic* society, or one characterized by the oppression of individuals (1951). Either type of society can be poisonous and lead to the excessive suicides of its members. It is possible that South Korea is currently in a state of anomie because of its rapid industrialization and modernization since the Korean War in 1953, which also marks the beginning of the growth of Christianity (Kim, 2002). Industrialization can trigger cultural confusion and criticism against traditional ways, which can lead to a disruption of social equilibrium (Stack, 1983).

In addition, the general increase in the economic wealth of South Korea points to its potential state of anomie. Overall, the per capita gross national income increased to \$16,400 in 2005 – a sixty-fold increase since the 1970s (Kwon

*et al.*, 2009). Such dramatic changes in the economy could have led to an anomie state because individuals who once had to devote all their energy and resources to obtain a decent standard of living began to live with greater comfort. This could potentially lead to a lack of social direction (Durkheim, 1951). Individuals in wealthy societies who do not know the limits of their desires could be driven to moral confusion as well as a lack of a sense of purpose in life.

Another potential determinant of social regulation that may or may not be related to religion is the divorce rate. In spite of the increase in Christianity, which condemns divorce, South Korea's divorce rate has almost doubled over the last decade (Kwon *et al.*, 2009). The divorce rate has increased from 1.4 per 1000 in 1993 to 2.5 in 1998 and 2.6 in 2005. This suggests that Christian communities in South Korea do not exert adequate social regulation over the domestic sphere to counter the increasing prevalence of divorce. In addition, marital status is thought to have a regulatory effect of its own. Durkheim argued that because marriage is a force of social regulation, divorce leads to decreased social regulation, especially for males (1951). Because he believed that lower social regulation leads to greater suicide risk, Durkheim hypothesized that nations with higher divorce rates would also show higher suicide rates. Moreover, in his study of twenty-one developed countries, Fernquist (2003) found that divorce could increase suicide risks for females in low divorce countries and for males in all countries. These findings suggest that the lack of social regulation among Christian communities could have contributed to the prevalence of divorce, which in turn leads to a greater lack of social regulation in society at large.

Johnson (1965) argued that altruistic and fatalistic suicides, or those

that result from societies with high social integration and/or high social regulation, are rare in modern societies. The imbalance of the evidence considered above seem to confirm this, as it seems likely that Christianity in South Korea has contributed to the development of an egoistic and/or anomic state with low levels of social integration and/or social regulation, respectively.

### **South Korea Through the Lens of the Religious Commitment Theory**

In contrast to the integration theory, the religious commitment theory focuses on the influence of suicide on individuals' psychological processes and how genuine devotion to certain religious beliefs can serve to deter suicide by altering one's thoughts (Stack, 1983). Because the increasing prevalence of the Christian religion in South Korea does not seem to lead to the decrease in suicide rate, one alternative possibility is that the relevant variable is not individuals' religious affiliation but their level of devoutness. Although national rates may report higher percentages of those who are nominally Christian (Lugo & Grim, 2007), this may not necessarily correspond to an increase in the aggregate level of religious commitment across all religions in South Korea.

Alternatively, it may be that the core religious beliefs that Christian churches in South Korea propagate do not serve to prevent suicide. In other words, it is possible that these core beliefs are only superficially life-affirming. Although Christianity may be based on the same basic principles in different countries, the way in which the religion is practiced may be disparate due to cultural differences (Sasaki & Kim, 2011). The reasons that certain religions appeal to certain populations also depend on context. The main reason that Protestantism gained such widespread acceptance in postwar South Korea is that

the religion was associated with beliefs and practices that promise material gains, such as wealth and health (Han *et al.*, 2009; Kim, 2002). Dr. David Yonggi Cho, the past head pastor at Yoido Full Gospel Church, emphasized "threefold blessings" of salvation, good health, and material blessings (Cho, 1979). He preached, "You can tap that power for your tuition, your clothes, your books, your health, your business, everything! When you go out to preach the gospel you are not preaching a vague objective, a theory, philosophy, or human religion. You are actually teaching people how to tap endless resources!" (Cho, 1979). Yoido Full Gospel church is the largest church not only in South Korea but also in the world (Han *et al.*, 2009) and has a significant influence on the country's Christian culture. As such, the emphasis on the worldly blessings that can be unlocked through the gospel is not foreign to the South Korean Christian population.

Religious commitment to the "prosperity gospel," or the message that adherence to Christianity will be rewarded with earthly riches, can be detrimental to one's mental health. Adherents that overemphasize this distorted interpretation of the Christian doctrine may actually be more at risk for suicide than nonreligious individuals when such wishes are left unfulfilled. The prosperity gospel, with its emphasis on materialism, instills a false notion of the benefits of religion among its followers, and the widespread diffusion of such a notion could diminish any potential protective effects of the religion.

Furthermore, Christianity in South Korea is often associated with individuals of affluence and higher social status. For example, Kim (2002) found that Christians on the whole tend to have higher levels of educational attainment and occupy higher economic class than Buddhists. Such social associations can

serve to further strengthen an emphasis on material gains among the Christian community. If the “prosperity gospel” is the central message that the churches in South Korea are preaching and that Korean Christians are drawn to, it makes sense that the increase in Christianity would lead to a sense of disillusionment about the gains of practicing Christianity followed by increased despair and disappointment, and in the most extreme cases, suicidal ideation and behavior.

Because religious commitment is a variable that cannot be captured by impersonal census reports, it is necessary to conduct further research on the relationship between devoutness and suicide among individuals, as well as on the particular beliefs that individuals commit to with the strongest fervor. It would be useful to conduct a study to determine whether individuals who have greater commitment to certain religious beliefs tend to have lower levels of suicide ideation and/or experience with suicide attempts.

### Possibilities for Future Research and Conclusion

This paper investigated the nature of the relationship between religion and suicide, and Christianity and suicide in particular, through the lens of Durkheim’s integration theory and the religious commitment theory. Current research on both the relationship between these two variables, as well as recent transformations in South Korean society, seem to indicate that among a multitude other relevant variables, Christianity may be playing a significant role in increasing individuals’ risk for suicide, and consequently the national suicide rate. Clearly, the intersection between religion and suicide is a complex matter that requires thorough examination on both social and psychological levels. The current suicide epidemic in South Korea despite the increase in Christianity casts doubt on the

possibility that this religion has acted as a significant deterrent against suicide. Rather, it seems likely that Christianity as it is practiced in South Korea today has contributed in creating an environment more conducive to suicidal behavior. Because the increase in South Korea’s suicide rate is a relatively recent and ongoing phenomenon, the current research on specific risk factors are limited and requires further attention.

To test both Durkheim’s integration model and the religious commitment model, future studies on this topic could include empirical studies of youth and adults with the independent variables of both religious affiliation and level of religious commitment, and the dependent variable of suicide ideation and attempts. On the national level, one could compare the statistics on the religious composition and on the production of religious books against statistics on completed suicides. In addition, one could conduct nationwide surveys in South Korea including questions on each of the three variables and run regression analyses to determine whether significant correlations exist, and if so, in what direction. Data on different religious denominations would provide stronger results. In addition, the level of religious commitment can be measured by variables such as the frequency of church attendance. Suicide ideation and attempts can simply be in the form of direct questions, such as “Have you ever thought about committing suicide?” and “Have you ever attempted to commit suicide?” Because this can be a risky topic to discuss, the survey should be designed with a high level of cultural sensitivity.

However, such studies are limited in that they rely on the data of large aggregated populations instead of on individual cases. One way to avoid this limitation is to conduct retrospective analyses, or psychological autopsies, on

past suicide victims. By examining suicide notes and interviewing these individuals' friends, family members, and/or clinicians, researchers could develop a more thorough understanding of the social and psychological impacts of religion on suicidal tendencies. In addition, researchers could conduct one-on-one, detailed clinical interviews of a random sample of individuals to gain a more accurate understanding of the forces of religion that influence individual's thoughts and behaviors regarding suicide. Of course, these studies are limited in that their results cannot be generalized to the national population. In spite of these limitations, such research is necessary in expanding our knowledge on the underlying causes of the increase in suicides.

Furthermore, the current suicide epidemic must be addressed both on a clinical and policy level. Considering the potential impact of religion on suicide ideation, many have suggested that it could be helpful for professionals to incorporate religiosity into suicide risk assessments as well as any other psychological assessments (Colucci & Martin, 2008; Gearing & Lizardi, 2009). Clinical settings provide natural environments for research on this topic. Furthermore, by knowing the influence of religious involvement on individuals', clinicians could better address patients' needs.

On a policy level, it would be beneficial for the South Korean government to compile information on suicide cases on a nation-wide database. This database should include relevant information on each suicide attempt, including the individuals' religious affiliation and activity prior to death. A more systematic approach to this problem would help identify the risk factors that are specific to the South Korean population. Once more information on

the suicide epidemic is obtained, the South Korean government should implement social policies that can lower these risks and protect high-risk populations.

Although it is too soon to assert that religion has been playing a significant role in the suicide epidemic, it seems that further investigation into the topic would be fruitful. Whether future research indicates that the South Korean case can be better explained by Durkheim's integration theory or the religious commitment theory, any further knowledge will be able to shed greater light on the issue. All in all, a collective effort is necessary to reverse the current suicide epidemic in South Korea. It is imperative that South Korea quickly and fervently addresses this issue, and further empirical data and analyses will contribute to successful interventions.

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# EURASIANS IN EARLY COLONIAL HONG KONG

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## ABSTRACT

In the colonial past, “Eurasian” indicated a racial category of hybrid people, who were usually offspring of European and Asian descent. Early colonial Hong Kong, namely from 1841 to the Japanese occupation in 1941, represents the living embodiment of colonial encounters, with Eurasians being collectively stigmatized and separated. Their situation, caused by racial and spatial separation, was a direct result of social, cultural, and political inferiorities. These features had a great effect on racial categorization and led to much suffering for Eurasians at the time. The problems of Eurasian identity provide a fertile ground for an exploration of race, ethnicity, and the relationship of these two concepts to the colonial structural power. Specifically, this article historically and ethnographically sees the Eurasians’ livelihood in early colonial Hong Kong and then addresses the core problem of why Eurasians were stigmatized. This article investigates how European colonizers practiced racial norms by managing segregation both socially and geographically, examines how the “Eurasian” group was formed and how “Eurasian” was defined under the colonialist classification, and how Eurasians reacted to this socially oppressed identity in their daily practices. The ultimate goal of this article is to show how a race concept is manipulated by social, cultural, and political power.

## INTRODUCTION

Both in Hong Kong and in other European colonies in Asia, Eurasians were often perceived as being the living embodiment of colonial encounters, belonging to a stigmatized and isolated colonial category that straddled racial, ethnic, and sometimes national boundaries.

In earlier colonial Hong Kong, namely from 1841 to the Japanese occupation in 1941, Eurasians had considerable economic and political influence within the colony. But at a deeper level, their stigmatization and isolation, caused by racial separation and social segregation, were perhaps much more acute and insidious than they appeared on the surface. Racism had a great effect on racial categorization and caused much suffering for Eurasians. They were collectively discriminated against due to their racial background, which was considered embarrassing and problematic.

Compared to other early colonies in Asia, Hong Kong was highly race-conscious regarding hybridity. Racial mixing in colonial encounters was seen not only as a colonial transgression, but also as an “indication of degeneration and abnormality, as well as a moral and intellectual regression” (Smith 1983: 98; Lethbridge 2006: 527). British men’s intimacy with Chinese women was punishable under the law. There were rules and social pressures against racial mixing. Those who had intimate relationships with local women faced severe consequences. Any European employee found engaging in an interracial romance “not only jeopardized his career

but also risk[ed] ostracism by the European community” (Lee 2003: 16). Not all the multiracial people in colonial societies were regarded inferior; for example, Eurasians in other early colonies, such as Portuguese India and British India, were not considered racially problematic (Hawes 1996; Perdue 2003). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Portuguese India, relationships across the racial divide, i.e. between British men and Indian women, were common. Similarly, in British India, as Carton puts it, “set in a romantic mode, these were mostly interracial relationships in the upper levels of both British and Indian society, in which shared notions of elite status were perceived to have largely outweighed concern over racial differences” (2009: 238). The Eurasian women were even highly desired by British men due to their symbolic whiteness (*Ibid*: 238-239). Evidence also shows that, for the Portuguese, the main difference between Christians and “heathens” was the primordial social distinction that moderated the social acceptance of intercultural marriages, rather than notions of “race” (*Ibid*: 235). Britain’s colonization of Hong Kong began a few hundred years after its colonization of India. It came to Hong Kong with an already fully developed imperial caste and even bigger colonialist ambition. In contrast to Portuguese India, where religious norms were more powerful, and British India, where the Indian local caste system had already dominated the social hierarchy, the British colonizers in early Hong Kong society—then still a small southern Chinese town—quickly adopted the imperial Victorian ideology of race and class and applied these to the colonization effort. Thus, historical and political forces together created in Hong Kong a race-conscious society.

In Hong Kong, the Portuguese and Eurasians were two distinct groups in both social and cultural terms. The category in Hong Kong called “Portuguese” basically referred to racially mixed people from Macau. They formed a community and were socially different from the “Eurasians.” The two groups may have “looked similar” in “racial” terms, but they were viewed very differently and grew up differently. The Portuguese had a community, clubs, and a recognized social role. By 1860, the Portuguese were widely employed by the Hong Kong government and British firms. They were considered “less problematic because of their Roman Catholic ties and Portuguese names” (Lee 2003: 20). The Portuguese practiced Catholicism, maintained their identity as a distinct group, and, because of their religion, tended to intermarry amongst themselves. The Portuguese were never embarrassed by their “race.” Eurasians, in contrast, were often the result of prostitution and informal marriages, causing them to be looked down upon as “bastards” (Lethbridge 2003: 535).

Living in a society in which cultural bias was covered by racial terms, Eurasians in Hong Kong often found themselves “stranded between two mutually aloof, at times mutually contemptuous, cultural worlds” (Lee 2003: 6)—i.e. between Europeans and Chinese. “Eurasian” in colonial Hong Kong was an identity often based on racial indeterminacy and social uncertainty; they were seen as “neither fish nor fowl [不三不四].” Such characteristics led Eurasians to isolation. They were distinguished as a bounded racial group, even though some were able to “pass”—or tried to pass—as Chinese. Social isolation was engraved into their very identity, and this common trait led them to develop into a racially tight-knit group.

There are sufficient examples illustrating the discrimination against hybridity as particularly a problem in early colonial Hong Kong. It was not a universal issue in many of the given colonial societies. We should note that the misfortune faced by Eurasians in colonial Hong Kong was not a direct result of “being racially mixed,” even though it appeared as such and most people believed this to be the case. From the contrasting examples of multiracial people in earlier Portuguese and British India, and the examples of the Portuguese in Hong Kong, we can see that although British and local Chinese treated Eurasians and Portuguese differently, this was not simply due to what Eurasians “biologically” were, but rather what they socially and culturally were categorized as.

These problems of Eurasian identity provide a fertile ground for an exploration of race and ethnicity and the relationship of these two concepts to the colonial structural power, which this study will explore. The following sections will explain how Eurasians were isolated, stigmatized, and how the “Eurasian” racial category was manipulated by social, cultural, and political power.

## STIGMATIZATION OF EURASIANS

### Social hierarchy

#### Divisions of Europeans

In Hong Kong’s early colonial history, race formed a distinct divide, and different ethnic groups led separate lives. The British colonizers tended to replicate their own home institutions in this new colony of Hong Kong. They brought with them the imperial Victorian ideology of race and class, which naturally placed Europeans at the top of the social hierarchy.

Before the 1941 Japanese occupation, according to Lethbridge’s (2003) research on pre-war Hong Kong, the European population of Hong Kong could be divided into four broad groups: officials, merchants, members of the professional classes, and Europeans in supervisory or low-status occupations. Lethbridge asserts that although these groups often overlapped, nevertheless the four groups did have sociological significance (2003: 518). Viewing the division of European groups by class helps to understand the tension between upper-class Europeans and lower-class Europeans, Chinese, and Eurasians, as well as to understand how each group became segregated from the others.

In general, no matter which group an expatriate belonged to in the class hierarchy, these expatriate Europeans in Hong Kong saw themselves as members of the elite. A pseudonymous writer, “Veronica,” who in 1907 wrote a series of sketches for *The Hong Kong Weekly*, depicted an English-style upper-class elite as being sharply distinguished from a European petty bourgeoisie and a member of the Chinese working class. Some of the elite had adopted the lifestyle, attitudes, and behavior of the English upper class, even though they did not belong to it by reason of birth or education. “These you will know from their extreme exclusiveness and their lack of that all-round virtue charity,” “Veronica” wrote (Lethbridge 1978: 164 quoting “Veronica” 1907: 14). Historical evidence regarding the background of Europeans supports this depiction.

An analysis of the social origins of eighty-five cadets appointed to the Hong Kong Civil Service from 1860 to 1941 reveals that most army and naval cadets were, in fact, young men who were from middle-class families, not rich, who had to make their way in the world by their own talents and hard work, with only the benefit of a

conventional upper-class education (Lethbridge 2003: 525-526). As Lethbridge notes, “many people stood high on Hong Kong’s social ladder who were very small fry indeed in the provincial town or community from which they hailed” (Ibid: 526). Moreover, many members of the Hong Kong Civil Service were Scots by birth and upbringing and were solidly middle and upper class within Hong Kong’s hierarchy. The members of the professional class also shared many of the attributes of officials and merchants and included a strong Scots and Irish Protestant contingent (Ibid: 518-519). This would indicate that the social hierarchy in early Hong Kong was more likely a limited “faux-reconstruction” of the imperial institution. It was re-formalized based on the middle-class Europeans’ own version of creating a social structure where they were at the top—a position they could never occupy in their own society. To summarize, early on all Europeans carried with them to Hong Kong class notions derived from their own very class-conscious society, but not their real class background. In Hong Kong, they used their political power to create a social order that maximized benefits to themselves.

### **Europeans’ relationships with the Chinese community**

Most Europeans were ethnocentric at that time, convinced their society was superior. However, the concept of ethnocentrism does not entirely explain European attitudes and behavior toward other ethnic populations. Traditional Chinese society was also ethnocentric in its own way, as well as socially hierarchical. The difference between the Chinese and European ethnocentrism is that the Europeans’ use of ethnic divisions was meant to maintain their class superiority. Unlike the Chinese form of ethnocentrism, which was more

concerned with the stability of kinship and tracing of ancestry, European ethnocentrism in a Chinese society developed with the backbone of a strong consciousness of social class.

The upper and lower-class Europeans seemed to have had different attitudes toward the Chinese. Upper-class attitudes toward the Chinese were close to the middle-class attitudes toward servants in Britain: servants in that country were perceived as almost like members of another race—dumb, incomprehensible, “illiterate troglodytes” (Lethbridge 2003: 521-522). The upper-class Europeans were very exclusive and drew sharp lines between themselves and the Chinese, thereby promoting their ideas of racial hierarchy and social Darwinism. The Europeans rarely had contact with ordinary Chinese. On the other hand, lower-class Europeans more often had close contact with local Chinese in their work and in their residences, which sometimes led to intimate relationships.

### **Contact with the Chinese**

In such a racially hierarchical society, where distinct boundaries were laid between Europeans and Chinese, how did interracial couples meet, and how did some even end up having intimate relations?

The Europeans who often had close relationships with Chinese were from the supervisory and low-status occupations. For example, as Lethbridge notes, “The dregs of European society in Hong Kong were the European beachcombers and prostitutes, who for one reason or another gravitated to this Britain’s distant colony. They formed a caste of pariahs or *déclassés*, who were avoided publicly by most Europeans” (2003: 518). These Europeans lived in areas where there were mostly local Chinese residents, which increased the possibility of them coming into regular contact with the Chinese.

There were two major reasons why these lower-class Europeans had closer connections with the Chinese. First, during the years between 1880 and 1890, prostitution flourished in Hong Kong as a major social institution in European circles (Ibid: 519). It is not surprising that prostitution arose in Hong Kong, since there was an obvious market. There were many single European men and married men who came without bringing their families. The government succeeded in clearing most of the European prostitutes out of the colony in 1891, so that errant males had to seek female company in Canton, where some prostitutes had migrated, or had to find a local Chinese woman in Hong Kong (Ibid: 527). While upper-class Europeans could not use prostitutes and keep a concubine without attracting negative attention, the lower-class European men had more anonymity and could go to red light districts more freely. Second, these *déclassé* Europeans led lives that were distinct from the rest of the European population, lives that brought them much more closely in touch with the Chinese population than most officials and merchants. Often, the males either married Chinese or Eurasian women or cohabited with them and lived in Chinese residential quarters.

Socially, those Europeans who associated with Asian women were ostracized by the Europeans above them in the class structure (Ibid: 520). Magistrates in those days treated such European “failures” with great severity in their courts because they were thought to lower the prestige of the white man in the East (Ibid: 525). This inevitably led the children of these European and Chinese unions to be collectively discriminated against by those Europeans above them in the social hierarchy

### Manipulation of segregation

#### Social segregation

Unlike the attitudes of their Portuguese colonial counterparts in Macau, the British colonists’ attitude toward racial mixing had never embraced tolerance. Under the Portuguese colonial ideology, racial mixing was officially hailed as a positive step toward social harmony and an important strategy of successful colonization (Carton 2008: 235). The British colonial leaders in Hong Kong, on the other hand, had quite the opposite view of marriages or unions with native women. Racial mixing in colonial encounters was seen not only as a colonial transgression, but also as an indication of moral degeneration and social/racial abnormality.

It was government policy to insist on demarcating a boundary from the indigenous population and culture in the colony (Lee 2003: 13). From the 1840s to 1941, the British colonizers in Hong Kong did all they could to try to avoid interracial mixture and maintain racial “purity.” They created strict rules to demonstrate the idea that racial mixing equaled abnormality and should be a punishable offence. For example, The Hon. C. G. Alabaster, who was a member of the Hong Kong Legislative Council and later Attorney-General, asserted:

[I]t [is] urgent for the Hong Kong colonial government to deal with the problem of race mixture by declaring marriage between certain races invalid or a punishable offence, or at least certain decisions as to the degree of blood making a particular person a member of one race or of another. (Lethbridge 1978: 248)

Even though Hong Kong never established any laws against “miscegenation” and the legislation Alabaster recommended was never enacted, the proposal still reflects a deep-seated uneasiness about Eurasians on the part of the British community.

Under such a rigid ideology of social segregation, the consciousness of status and ethnic origins increased and peaked around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when sentiments like Alabaster’s were common. This colonial ideology created clearly defined ethnic groups, with “Whites” viewing themselves as superior to Chinese, and seeing Eurasians as an embarrassment. The Chinese view was less severe, but they also kept their distance from Eurasians (Lee 2003: 15-17; Lethbridge 1978: 248-249).

This “social law” constituted by British colonization influenced social interactions in Hong Kong and led people not to engage in intimate contacts with other “races,” even the Russians. The chief manager of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, Sir V. M. Grayburn, said in 1937, “foreign, native, half-caste are definitely taboo” (King 1988: 286), referring to non-Europeans, Chinese, and Eurasians. There were rules and tremendous social pressures against interracial romances or marriages, pressures that could even end their careers. For example, many European employees had to sign documents promising not to marry a Chinese woman; otherwise, they would be dismissed.

### Spatial segregation

Spatial segregation also became very stringent, reflecting the social hierarchy and racial divisions of the colonial order. The British colonizers sought to separate people of different classes and different ethnicities. It is said that from the time Hong Kong was ceded to Britain in 1842 until the Japanese invasion of 1941, Hong

Kong was a society based on segregation (Lee 2003:16).

Spatial and social segregation were both carried out with the approval of the government. For example, Sir John Bowring, Governor from 1859 to 1865, stated:

My constant thought has been how best to prevent a large Chinese population establishing themselves at Kowloon, and as some native population is indispensable, how best to keep them to themselves and preserve the European and American community from the injury and inconvenience of intermixture with them.  
(Endacott 1964: 122)

In the 1860s, all affluent Europeans moved to the Peak District. Lower-class Europeans continued to live east of the city in the developing suburb of Wan Chai or moved over to British Kowloon, which had been ceded in 1860 (Lethbridge 2003: 527). The Europeans claimed that their moving to the Peak in the 1860s was simply because the area was cooler in the summer and far less crowded than the older, low-lying residential quarters of the City of Victoria. However, the fact is that Europeans were uncomfortable living close to Chinese. What Europeans knew about conditions in the Chinese quarters of Hong Kong, gleaned from newspaper reports and official publications, frightened them, principally because they concluded that such areas were breeding spots for plague and other contagious diseases—a threat to their security and way of life (Ibid: 522).

The move to the Peak had important sociological consequences. By 1905, Hong

Kong Island reflected the colony's social hierarchy. The lower levels looked up to the Peak, which was cut off from the rest of the colony by a number of social barriers and by geography. The Peak thus became a kind of "Simla" of Hong Kong (Lethbridge 2003: 525 quoting Moore 1999: 252), comparable to the famous summer capital of the British Raj in India. The Peak acquired its own uniquely British institutions, such as Anglican churches, a hospital, a sanatorium, a hotel, a club, and recreational facilities. The move to the Peak exaggerated the separation of the European population—mostly the group of Europeans at the top of the class structure of Hong Kong—from the Chinese and other "races." The Europeans were isolated to a greater degree than had been customary in the early days of the colony when officials and *taipans* lived mostly in the city or on the levels immediately adjacent to it (Lethbridge 2003: 528).

### **Legitimization of segregation**

To ensure distance between the European and Chinese communities, various laws and rules were instituted to maintain the segregation. One of the main purposes of the Ordinance and subsidiary legislation was to see that standards of hygiene were rigorously upheld. However, the Ordinance was also introduced principally to guarantee that only European-style houses were built and European standards maintained in this pleasant hill district. Both reasons meant that the Peak district ultimately developed into a purely European residential area for the upper class, as English as any small English provincial town. Sir William Des Voeux stated in his memoir, *My Colonial Service*, "from that spot neither sight nor sound gave any token of human existence, and it seemed difficult to realize that within so short a distance was a dense population"

(Lethbridge 1978: 171 quoting Des Voeux 1903: 223).

The Ordinances were designed to guarantee the exclusiveness of this European residential "Sukhavati."<sup>1</sup> Although the designation of the Peak District as a reserved area under the 1904 Ordinance was not expressly a discriminatory measure aimed at the Chinese, Chinese were only allowed to reside on the Peak if the Governor-in-Council concurred and so long as the Chinese conformed to certain residential standards. The Ordinance stated: "It shall be lawful for the Governor-in-Council to exempt any Chinese from the operation of this Ordinance on such terms as the Governor-in-Council shall think fit." Thus, this Ordinance essentially forbade all Chinese from living on the Peak. There were no non-Europeans who could conform to such standards since they were politically an underclass and inferior, which made it extremely difficult for them to obtain economic and social advantages. The only non-Europeans who slept at night on the Peak were Sir Robert Ho Tung and his family, who identified himself as Chinese but was physically Eurasian (Lee 2003: 13; Lethbridge 2003: 528-529).

Despite the appearance of segregation, Europeans in Hong Kong continued to live two lives, one spent in the bustling but still socially segregated world of work downtown and the other in the rarefied atmosphere of the Peak, far removed from Chinese living quarters in the Western District of the city of Victoria (Moore 1999: 257). In sum, most of the Europeans who had sexual contact with Chinese women were those who worked as servicemen or beachcombers, living close to the Chinese quarter. It was far less likely for a European who lived on the Peak, or one who had a tight relationship with the people of "elite" status, to have sexual relations with

Chinese women, except for a few adventurous and sly bachelors who broke the rules.

### **Why were Europeans in Hong Kong so racially conscious?**

Why were the British so obsessed with social status and racial distinctions? A number of answers can be suggested.

First, one assumption regarding social ranking is that Europeans were conditioned by certain narrow, bureaucratic features implicit in the structure of the administration, which integrally linked with racial ideas. Beginning in the 1840s and continuing for the following one hundred years, given Europe's ongoing global dominance, European political and imperialist elites continued to emphasize "racial" differences between so-called white and non-white "races," and European "raciologists" continued to affirm this distinction. Even after WWII, racial ideas of this type were reaffirmed by scientists while the Western global racial order persisted (Baum 2006: 247-248). The European colonizers authoritatively employed racial discourse, established racial categories and meanings, and exercised power as they "produce[ed], mark[ed], and fix[ed] the infinite differences and diversities of human beings through a rigid binary coding" (Baum 2006: 244 quoting Hall 1998: 290-298). Racial discourse establishes ideas about who should be a fully participating member of society and who "does not belong" (*Ibid*: 244). European colonizers were powerful and had used racial discourse to justify colonialism and racialized discrimination in social life. As a result, the construction and use of racial categories are integrally related to the development of a colonial society.

Secondly, Hong Kong society was a microcosm of British society. However, as has been previously mentioned, a home-

based "upper class" was lacking in Hong Kong; very few Europeans came from truly upper-class families, as the majority were from the middle or lower-middle classes. Therefore, the structure of Hong Kong society was no mere microcosm of British society, though it simulated many features of class found in the British homeland.

Moreover, the early expatriate Europeans borrowed a strong social class ideology derived from the nature of colonial Anglo-Indian society—the idea of caste. Such ideas of caste were then imported into Hong Kong by early Hong Kong settlers, officials, and merchants, who "had resided previously in the great caste-ridden subcontinent and brought with them to Asia not only Benares trays and other Indian gewgaws but the nabob mentality" (Lethbridge 2003: 535-538).

Furthermore, one interesting theory has traced the origin of the obsession with status to the boredom experienced by European wives in Hong Kong. Wright and Cartwright in 1908 emphasized the peculiar nature of European society in Hong Kong—its "formalism, stuffiness, feuding, and appalling snobberies" (Mellor 1992: 192 quoting Wright and Cartwright 1908: 5). The authors assert that those wives led circumscribed lives in nineteenth-century Hong Kong. Since they did not work (the social climate of the day was not conducive to the idea that middle-class married women might also work, therefore few jobs were open to European women and middle and upper-class Chinese women), they spent their time supervising domestic arrangements and organizing various dinners and parties. Inevitably, they indulged in gossip and scandal, as in any small, inward-looking community, because "they had much time on their hands and met frequently with the same small group of people" (*Ibid*: 193-195; Lethbridge 2003: 538-539, 542). The obsession with status

was seen, then, as a kind of game played principally because of the insufficiencies of colonial social life.

Max Gluckman argues that gossip and scandal serve to maintain the unity of groups (1965: 22). With the founding of the Hong Kong Club, which soon became the “nerve center” of the European community, “certain rules of behaviors and commitment to a set of conventional beliefs were enforced” (Lethbridge 2003: 521). If a person did not conform, then he would be ostracized, and that was social death for the transgressor. Since the British resident civil population was extremely small before 1941—it numbered approximately 2,700 in 1901 and only 4,300 in 1931—there was no other circle to which an individual could adhere for the validation of his status. As a result, the Club described here was “in fact a matrix of cliques and gossip circles” (*Ibid*: 521).

Thus, the gossip and scandal in Hong Kong’s European community were not necessarily “disruptive”; in fact, they were “functional” for the society. Gossip and scandal helped in the allocation of Europeans to positions within various strata and thus worked ultimately to provide continuity for the European social system. Moreover, to extend the argument, it isolated Europeans from the rest of their own universe, and by doing so distinguished this small community from others.

To summarize, the evolution of an “impenetrably European society,” an Imperial caste, helped to manage tensions that resulted from being an expatriate: the more class-conscious and stratified their society became, the more familiar social life became for the British (Lethbridge 2003: 539). At a deeper level, the emergence of racial ideas in modern Western societies during the nineteenth century coincided with the gradual diffusion of racist-based recognitions of

different social members (the term racism first came into usage in the 1930s). The “race” concept, as Baum notes, had been fundamentally bound up with “constructing and rationalizing unequal social relations” (2006: 235). Baum also notes that, “Equality has always been difficult for modern nation-states to manage”, especially “in relation to the dislocations, class-based,” and race-based inequalities generated by imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism (*Ibid*: 8). Over time, then, a distinct British Imperial social order came into existence. The Europeans in Hong Kong, especially the British colonizers, as it were, filled their allotment of social space by reproducing in microcosm the various racial and class stratifications of their homeland. The result was a highly artificial society. As the power of colonialism grew, Hong Kong’s original social stratifications were reformed: the social status of the Chinese decreased, along with their racial status, while the Europeans moved to the top of the social ladder.

### Categorization of “Eurasians” in colonial Hong Kong

#### Differences between “Portuguese” and “Eurasians”

By 1860, the Portuguese were widely employed by the Hong Kong government, and many were working for British as well as foreign firms, generally as clerks or middle-level managers. As mentioned above, the “Portuguese” were mixed-race people from Macau. During the first decade of the twentieth century, when race consciousness was approaching a peak worldwide, Alabaster distinguished between three types of Eurasians: British Eurasians, “Portuguese,” and Chinese Eurasians. Of these, the Portuguese were considered the least problematic because of their Roman Catholic ties (Lethbridge

2003: 20). The employment of Portuguese as clerks, shroffs (a Hong Kong term for a cashier), and interpreters was a direct result of the educational activity of the Catholic missions in Hong Kong. The missions early on also established a number of small schools that provided the Portuguese with an elementary education in English (Lethbridge 2003: 535).

In general, the Portuguese were of a very mixed nature (including not only Chinese and Portuguese but also Indian and Malay) and practiced Catholicism, but spoke Cantonese. The Portuguese maintained their identity as a distinct group and, due to their shared religious affiliation, tended to intermarry. When the Kowloon Peninsula was ceded by the Chinese in 1860, the Portuguese moved over to this new area in increasing numbers, and their identity as a group was further strengthened by a degree of residential separateness (*Ibid*: 535).

One of the major differences between the Portuguese and the Eurasians was that the former usually lived in Catholic environments, where racial differences were less important and racial consciousness was moderated. As I stated previously, the Portuguese were concerned more about the difference between Christians and “heathens,” rather than notions of “race” (Carton 2009: 235). That is to say, the Portuguese notion of religious cohesion surpassed any concerns about race. Another major difference between these two groups was that of religious intermarriage. The Portuguese followed Catholic marriage customs, including monogamy, no premarital sex, and no divorce, whereas “Eurasians” came mainly from unmarried (and often single-mother) families (Lee 2003; Carton 2009).

### The common domestic structure of “Chinese Eurasian” families and their origins

As mentioned previously, many contacts between European men and Asian women were conducted in a highly discreet manner. Asian women were mostly mistresses or concubines who lived separately from their European lovers. Most of the time, the affairs were conducted under what were referred to as “protected women” arrangements. Amongst the earliest Eurasians in colonial Hong Kong were the offspring of local Tanka women who conducted prostitution on their boats for the early European sojourners. According to Eitel, the Tanka (boat people) were a marginal group of lower status than the dominant Cantonese. Specifically, they were fisher-folk who supplied European ships with provisions and provided other useful services. Some of their daughters became the mistresses or common-law wives of early European settlers and sojourners in Hong Kong (Eitel 1895: 169; Lethbridge 2003: 531). This practice of affairs, concubinage, and secret common-law marriages seriously affected the perceived moral standing of these kept women and, consequently, how the early Eurasians were looked upon by both the European and the Chinese communities (Lee 2003: 19-20). Sadly, the products of these secret interracial romances—Eurasian children—were usually abandoned by their European fathers, who remained in the colony for only a limited time (Eitel 1895: 170). For a long time, Eurasian children were teased and looked down upon because of the absence of a father in their lives.

The “Eurasians” described above were the most common type of Eurasians in early colonial Hong Kong. They were the ones that worried Alabaster most—the “Chinese Eurasians” that he noted were “half-caste” in physical appearance but

wore Chinese clothes and a queue, went by a Chinese name, and followed Chinese marriage customs, including polygamy. There is also evidence that suggests a high percentage of Eurasians tended to marry Chinese or into other Eurasian families (Moore 1999: 268; Lethbridge 2003: 531). Alabaster seemed to worry about this group of Eurasians because their choice to live as Chinese seemed to deny the superiority of British culture. Given a choice between living as British or as Chinese, they had rejected British ways (Lee 2003: 20-23).

#### **The declining number of Eurasians in the census: the effects of “passing”**

Unlike the “British Eurasians” who were culturally British, the “Chinese Eurasians” lived a life closer to the Chinese style, mostly within the Chinese residential quarters. Even though some of them were bilingual and bicultural, having learned English and British customs at missionary schools, they would rather live in a manner more typical of the Chinese. The majority of Eurasians consciously cultivated a Chinese identity. In the 1901 and 1911 censuses, already, self-identified Eurasians were gradually disappearing from the population and being assimilated into the larger Chinese population.

The census in 1901 showed that Eurasians numbered only a few hundred. The Census Office claimed that “the number of persons who return themselves as Eurasians gets fewer every Census.” This official total was a gross under-estimation of the size of the Eurasian community, according to the Register General’s report. This was because, as the Register General reported,

...the large majority of Eurasians in this colony dress in Chinese clothes, has been brought up and lives in Chinese fashion,

and would certainly return themselves as Chinese. Those who have called themselves Eurasians in this Census probably only represent the small [minority] who have been brought up as Eurasians. They would most likely not have any objection to declaring themselves as Eurasians (Lethbridge 1978: 175).

Although the Census number was small, a portion of the Eurasian population could be properly designated as a distinct community. Moreover, this fact was symbolized by the provision in 1890 of a special Eurasian “authorized cemetery” at Mount Davis (Lethbridge 2003: 531). Still, the decreasing number of Eurasians naturally raises the question of why the Eurasians wanted to dismiss their identity, which will be explored in the following section.

#### **DESIRING TO BE ANOTHER: “PASSING”**

#### **Precariousness and unease with the “Eurasian” identity**

The notion of “Eurasian” identity in pre-war Hong Kong was linked to the sense of precariousness and unease. Because of their anomalous and ambivalent “racial” heritages, Eurasians were perceived as a threat to “pure and authentic” Europeans. Eurasians in a European social gathering often created psychological tension. They were difficult to classify into the Europeans’ existing social hierarchy, as they were both European and Chinese. They could not be allocated with ease to their proper niche in the colonial social

structure, based as it was on the division of races.

In early colonial Hong Kong, racism against Eurasians could be quite blatant. To a certain extent, Eurasians were indeed considered to be a kind of aberration in the natural order resulting from “miscegenation.” They were described as a monstrosity: “the dragon’s tail of the Orient...fastened to the goat’s head of Europe” (Eitel 1895: 221). Note that this metaphor is not simply of a monster. In choosing a goat’s head to represent Europe, he has chosen a symbol of the cuckold, suggesting immoral sexual behavior. Under the oppression of such racial thinking, the whole society was against the racial mixing of subjects. Even some highly educated Europeans reacted strongly against racial mixing. For example, Mr. Thomas Watters, H. B. M. Consul at Foochow, a Sinologue of note and a Spencerian sociologist of some reputation in his time, felt obliged to write in his autobiography, published in 1928, “East is East, and West is West, and should never meet...biology proves that the offspring of parents of widely-different races inherit the worst characteristics of both sides—though there is a certain amount of precociousness, it is soon followed by deterioration” (Sollors 1996: 494 quoting Watters 1873: 47).<sup>ii</sup>

In this regard, Eurasians continuously encountered severe racial and social discrimination. It is thus not surprising that even the most affluent Eurasian, Sir Robert Ho Tung,<sup>iii</sup> the only non-European man who lived with his family on the Peak before 1945 and the colony’s first millionaire, who was respected for his wealth and abilities, still experienced a measure of discrimination. His daughter, who claimed to have been the first Chinese baby born on the Peak, said that other children “might suddenly refuse to play with us because we were Chinese, or

they might tell us that we should not be living on the Peak” (Gittins 1969: 15).

It is true that apart from receiving unfair treatment from others, most Eurasians also felt uncomfortable about their own identity. On one hand, racial and social discrimination were the external reason and a core influence. On the other hand, the Eurasians themselves were also forced to accept and then gradually internalized the colonial theories of race, which were predicated upon the assumption that racial differences were biological and absolute. This intensified the Eurasians’ internal struggle. Colonial racial thinking extended the ideas of Social Darwinism, which equated “race” with “species,” producing an argument implicitly suggesting that “miscegenation” was equivalent to aberration (Gossett 1975: 151; Grice 2002: 261). Following such racial thinking, Eurasians were “troubled” by the subject of “miscegenation,” and this “trouble” was regarded as innate, perpetual, and unchangeable. This made them perceive themselves as an embarrassing mixture of races and a poor product of “miscegenation.”

The consequences of racism on the Eurasians lasted for almost one hundred years (starting in the 1840s and 1850s, and lasting to 1941), long enough to entirely ruin their self-confidence as a population. As a result, Eurasians for a long time faced a dilemma in self-identification. The whip of harsh self-assessment continuously cracked in their minds. For example, Han Suyin expressed this feeling when she wrote, “I am Eurasian, and the word itself evokes in some minds a sensation of moral laxity” (Han 1952: 215). The after-effect of colonial racism lasted for decades. Those of my informants who had spent part of their childhood in the period from the 1950s to roughly the early 1980s had a common experience of avoiding mentioning their ethnicity. The situation did not improve

until the 1990s. More examples of this will be presented in the next section.

Hence, Eurasians' experiences in pre-war Hong Kong often had been characterized by an acute sense of "precariousness," which was mostly produced by the discourse of racial hierarchy and the ideology against racial-mixing. Evidence suggests that for this reason, it was very likely many Eurasians consciously cultivated a Chinese identity and, as it were, passed as Chinese to the general population.

### The practice of "passing"

As mentioned in the previous section, the number of Eurasians was ascertained to be small in the 1901 and 1911 Censuses. The reason was also stated by the Register General: few Eurasians would declare themselves as Eurasian, and many identified themselves as Chinese. Practically speaking, it was quite possible for Eurasians to "monoracialize" themselves. One major reason was that racial markers in terms of names, clothing, and lifestyle were no longer reliable after 1911. After 1911, the Chinese population began cutting off the queue and adopting Western clothing, thus assimilating to Western styles of dress (Hall 2003: 159). Given this lack of clothing markers, it became quite possible for some Chinese Eurasians to pass the racial divide whenever and whichever way they thought fit.

"Monoracialization" or "passing" evolved into various forms. Both temporary and permanent passing were options. Temporary "passing" was usually chosen for practical reasons, such as getting a job. Passing as Chinese might make the person feel more comfortable when working in a Chinese company, while a perceived Eurasian might have an easier situation in a European company. Most of the time,

the strategic concealing or "deleting" of undesirable traits was carried out by Eurasians who suffered psychological anguish from being Eurasian on a permanent basis. As Eurasian author Ling wrote, "I would have given anything to look less foreign" (1990: 166). Those who "passed" permanently did so for life, severing all family ties (Hall 2003: 159).

A typical case of practicing "passing" cosmetically was mentioned in Far's "Leaves from the mental portfolio of a Eurasian," in 1890, where the author depicted a Eurasian girl who tried very hard to mask her true physical appearance:

I meet a half Chinese, half white girl. Her face is plastered with a thick white coat of paint and her eyelids and eyebrows are blackened so that the shape of her eyes and the whole expression of her face is changed. She was born in the East, and at the age of eighteen came West...It is not difficult, in a land like California, for a half Chinese, half white girl to pass as one of Spanish or Mexican origin. This the poor child does, though she lives in nervous dread of being discovered (Far 1890: 1).

In her book, Eaton clearly disapproves of this girl's passing tactics and rejects technologies of racial disguise as a means of coping with biracial identity in a hostile environment. However, this passage proved that, for many Eurasians, there was an ever-existing "social burden" of being a Eurasian in the given society (Ling 1990: 35).

What the girl had apparently done was try to conceal her nervousness at being identified as a Eurasian. Other Eurasians practiced “monoracialization” for different reasons. Typically Eurasians were attempting to monoracialize due to their insecurity about specific parts of their ethnic background. They intended to erase the undesirable traits: the despised ones in the racial hierarchy usually were purged, while the more desirable traits were emphasized. Those who had an ambiguous configuration might even pass themselves off as belonging to an ethnicity that they did not even belong to partially. For example, a Eurasian writer, who was half-Chinese and half-American, published her work in 1915 under a Japanese pseudonym. The reason she chose not to use her real name, but to use a Japanese name instead, was because at the time Sino-phobia had reached an all-time high in most Anglo-European countries. Since her physical appearance prevented her from passing as white, she decided to use a “mask” to cover her undesirable identity as half-Chinese by using a more ethnically compatible identity as a Japanese (Grice 2002: 261-262).

Practicing “passing” was prevalent among the Eurasians in Hong Kong. My oldest informant, Alan, a man in his 70s, whose father is Indian and mother is Chinese-Portuguese, told me that he had “passed” for a long time when he was young. He used to tell people that he was purely Portuguese. Even though the “Portuguese” were actually of racially-mixed heritage, the point was that “Portuguese” was an ethnicity that was clearly stated, culturally and religiously bounded, and differentiated from Eurasians, as discussed above. In order to convince people he was an “authentic” Portuguese, Alan avoided speaking the Indian language of his parents, which he can speak a little, and also avoided having

contact with materials and knowledge related to India and China. He did so for the purpose of covering up his Indian and Chinese background. Even though his Indian father had earned a decent position and emolument working for the Hong Kong government, he still felt embarrassed about his Indian background. Having entered a school where the students were almost all Europeans, Alan felt a sense of unease with his mixed nature. Hence, pretending to be a monoracial Portuguese made him feel more comfortable and confident among the white children.

Alan’s case was quite profound since it reveals that in Hong Kong, racial institutions were so powerful that they superseded socioeconomic power. “We were invited to parties held in Government House several times. I once saw a picture my father took with Gandhi.” As we can see, his father’s occupational success was not able to override the negative feelings caused by his “race.” In Hong Kong, it was not the case that one’s socioeconomic status could prevent him/her from being racially discriminated against. Alan’s case reflects Baum’s idea that “racial identities” are actually racialized identities,” demonstrating that a racialized identity has had enormous social, cultural, and material consequences (Baum 2006: 241). An inferior niche in the racial stratification had greater influence than poorer economic power on a person’s self-assessment. Racial differences were seen as a primordial social distinction that segregated each of the social strata.

It is thus obvious that the rejection of the “Eurasian” identity was strategic. If people at various stages of their lives are not satisfied with what they gain from certain identity circles, changing identities seems reasonable. The embarrassment and precariousness were naturalized and infused into this identity by the colonial

racial notions, which then led to the Eurasians' negative self-assessment. Eurasians tried to monoracialize themselves in order to get rid of the sense of internal conflict and the self-denial produced by this socially stigmatized identity. They tried their best to conceal undesirable traits, or traits that made them feel uneasy, to better their lives by living in a society where monoraciality was preferable.

In short, "passing" may offer possibilities for improving one's status. Some passed as Chinese and enjoyed the same social status as the Chinese. Others maintained relations with both the native Chinese population and the Europeans and had the possibility of becoming members of the elite, possibly even passing as Europeans. Passing as Europeans helped Eurasians to earn greater economic benefits and social equality, so long as they were able to appropriately emphasize their European traits. Most cases showed that those Eurasians who had navigated obstacles to success in the colonial caste system were, not surprisingly, those with the lightest skin color (Hall 2003: 151). There is no doubt that a strategic change to a desirable ethnicity gave them a commercial advantage. Some Eurasians even discarded their Chinese names for English ones in order to capture their share of socioeconomic profits (Lee: 2003: 23-24). While racial whiteness does not guarantee anyone an advantaged social position, it nonetheless remains a source of material advantage and social capital (Baum 2006: 248).

## EURASIANS' ROLES IN COLONIAL HONG KONG

The administrative ideology sought to exclude Eurasians from the center of the power structure, placing them in working positions that were of less importance.

Even so, the rise of Eurasians in the colonial power structure was evident.

There were reasons for this rise on the part of Eurasians. From the beginning of colonization, all business was conducted entirely in English (Smith 2003: 268). This meant that the acquisition and knowledge of English had been "legislatively" required. The English language became a link to higher status in colonial society; one could earn a better position by speaking English. At the same time, as part of one's work, one also needed to be able to deal with the Chinese community. Essentially, to qualify for a position involving mediating issues between or conducting business with both Europeans and Chinese, one had to be fluent in both English and Chinese and had to have some influence within the local Chinese community. For example, having many Chinese relatives could help the individual to communicate with other Chinese in the territory.

In the early stages of the colonial period, Chinese possessing all of these qualifications were rare. European colonizers found it difficult to locate suitable Chinese workers to fill required positions in the administrative system. Given the difficulty in finding acceptable Chinese workers, these bilingual Eurasians were sought to fill the positions.<sup>iv</sup> Eurasians became widely employed by the Hong Kong government and Hong Kong banks, and many worked for other Westerners' firms. They generally worked as interpreters or mid-level administrators in the colonial offices, or as compradors in Hong Kong banks. Because they were usually locally-born residents and spoke English, they were regarded as more reliable and loyal than racially pure Chinese (Lethbridge 2003: 531).

### Eurasians as interpreters

During the nineteenth century, British colonizers faced a problem in that the majority of the local Chinese people could not understand English and thus had trouble understanding the British legal system. This was especially troublesome because all legal transactions were conducted in English. Additionally, the British people could not understand Chinese customs. These problems interfered with the British colonization effort in Hong Kong.

For the sake of maintaining law and order, it seemed necessary to use interpreters and translators, both for the legal profession and the courts to understand the Chinese, and to explain Chinese ways and customs to the British (Smith 2003: 274). Thus, there was also a demand for those who had the ability to understand and to use both the Chinese and English languages. However, qualified interpreters were in relatively short supply. Eurasians, Portuguese, and Macanese were available for recruitment, as those groups had all grown up speaking English, Cantonese, and often Portuguese as well.

As discussed previously, many Eurasians came from unmarried families where education on social norms may have been insufficient. To cultivate Eurasians to be useful human resources serving the British, and to become “proper social members,” as Eitel states, Eurasian boys were “invariably” sent to the Government Central School, where they generally distinguished themselves. As a rule, and with some help from their European fathers, these boys obtained good situations in Hong Kong, as they acquired well-paid jobs in the government or in schools (Lee 2003: 21 quoting Eitel 1880: 131). As a result, some were government interpreters, while others taught Chinese servants English in the factories run by the British.

The interpreter position, for many Eurasians, became the first step toward

ridding themselves of their embarrassing position in society. The opportunity to work with Europeans represented a bridge to a “socially proper status.” Those appointed as interpreters often eventually went on to reach the highest status, thus bypassing the government civil servant rung of the ladder (Smith 2003: 274).

In truth, however, their positions were often unhappy ones. Although they had acquired a degree of Western culture, they were not accepted as social equals by their foreign co-workers. While their salaries were greater than those of other Chinese employees, they were below those of Westerners who also served as interpreters (*Ibid*: 275). This salary structure reflected the social structure of colonial Hong Kong.

However, the shift in education did not benefit most Eurasians girls the same way that it did the boys. Even though it was possible for some Eurasian girls to enter missionary school, attending missionary schools in the nineteenth century did not guarantee their immunity from concubinage. In Eitel’s letter to the Colonial Secretary in 1889, he pointed out, “almost every one of the girls, taught English, became on leaving school, the kept mistress of foreigners.” This unfortunate fate of many Eurasian girls is one reason that Eurasians were looked down upon by Europeans and Chinese (Lee 2003: 21).

### Eurasians as compradors

As one of the characteristics of a “Chinese Eurasian” described in Alabaster’s writing, being a comprador was a common career field for Eurasians.

The position of comprador in a foreign firm in China reflected the effort needed to come to terms with the language and business practices of different cultures. The comprador was responsible for the

hiring, dismissal, and conduct of all Chinese staff. He negotiated and secured the business of the firm with Chinese customers, and he was expected to be “loyal, trustworthy, honest, and a man of financial standing” (Smith 1983: 93). One of the essential qualifications of being an ideal comprador was to be of substance with extensive business and social connections in the Chinese community. Another was the ability to communicate fluently in two languages (*Ibid*: 98). The comprador was a man looking in two directions: he was a leader in the Chinese community in Hong Kong and he was also working for a foreign business as part of the foreign imperialistic thrust into China.

Eurasians fit naturally into this position because they were capable of bilingual communication and had a certain degree of knowledge of Chinese culture, customs, and practices. Thus, the Chinese side of the business was certain to be well-managed. They were also accepted more by their compatriots than a total foreigner. Moreover, Eurasians could be counted on to be more permanent than a European employee was, since their home was located in China and not some other distant place. Their local rootedness qualified them as being relatively trustworthy and stable members in financial matters when they held positions in banks (*Ibid*: 93-100).

The most famous comprador was Sir Robert Ho Tung, who made a fortune working for a Hong Kong trading company (Jardines) from 1880 to 1889. As a Eurasian, his bilingual nature assisted him in his career. Working for the longest time in a Hong Kong bank, he became the richest non-European and most senior comprador (Lethbridge 2003: 527). Finally, he made his home on the Peak with the upper-class Europeans. Despite this, Robert Ho Tung and his family were part of the Eurasian community of Hong

Kong. However, Ho identified himself as Chinese rather than Eurasian or European. Even so, most European managers and governors and the Chinese undoubtedly regarded him as a Eurasian. After World War Two, the staff in Hong Kong banks were increasingly able to speak English due to expanded English education in the colony, so the need to employ Eurasians in this special position decreased (Smith 1983: 101). Originally, one of the chief reasons for establishing the comprador system was the barrier created by the use of different languages. Once this barrier began to disappear, the system began to lose its reason for existence. As the years passed, the gap between Chinese and Western business methods also narrowed. On both sides, there was a better understanding of the two ways of doing business, and thus there was less need for specialized knowledge of Chinese affairs. In essence, the more effective the reforms in traditional Chinese practice, the less a Eurasian comprador would be needed as a go-between.

In 1965, the last comprador, Peter Lee, retired; thus the last vestiges of the comprador system disappeared. Recruitment of staff was now the responsibility of the personnel section, and terminal computers changed the whole system of customer service. Thus, the importance of compradors for connecting with clients also decreased. At this point, no distinction was made between Chinese and other businesses. The title of comprador was finally eliminated in 1965 (Smith 1983; Lethbridge 2003).

### **Eurasians' social niche**

In the early stages of colonization, Eurasians were essential to the stability and the administration of the colony.

Eurasians gained seats in administrative structures not necessarily because they were “racially” closer to the Europeans, but because of their mastery of English and Chinese and their colonial loyalty (compared to the Chinese) (Lee 2003: 23-26). In this regard, they constituted a colonial community that functioned fairly well in the colonial society.

However, the rise of the economic status of Eurasians did not seem to guarantee the rise of their social and political status. It has also been acknowledged that Eurasians were still looked down upon by “purebred” Chinese, who habitually referred to them as “the Bastards” (Miners 1987: 128). It is true that Eurasians were stigmatized by both Europeans and Chinese, very likely due to the Eurasians’ embarrassing family origins. Chinese had their own reasons to “hate” Eurasians: their existence challenged the traditional Chinese theory of preserving ethnic “purity,” bringing the Chinese ancestral lineages to a halt, and Eurasians took away the job opportunities available to the Chinese. Occupationally, the competitive tension between Eurasians and Chinese, in some sense, may have resulted in stronger Chinese enmity toward Eurasians.

Regardless of how much the Chinese community may have disliked them, the British colonizers still saw the Eurasians as the best candidates to support the colonial elite. As stated in a dispatch written by Stubbs to the Colonial Office in 1922, “[w]e can rely on nobody except the half-castes and even they will throw in their lot with the Chinese if they think they will be on the winning side” (Sweeting 1986: 8).

## CONCLUSION

Colonial stratification was based on race, demonstrating the idea that race determines class. The racist idea was

applied to every aspect of colonial society, including marriage, residency and career. The stigmatization of “hybridity” was one of the major consequences of this colonial racial thinking. As a result, most Eurasians suffered greatly from racism—racism supported by a discourse of social hierarchy and political power. Clearly the basis of such racial thinking was pseudoscientific, though it was a socially real chapter of colonial history.

Undoubtedly, Eurasians exemplified “hybridity.” They were born into a world that categorized as Eurasians, from the Chinese perspective, anyone who had any trace of European heritage or, from the European perspective, anyone who had any trace of Asian heritage. Thus, Eurasians always experienced a sense of “precariousness” from their combined foreign and native elements. The ambiguity of their position was the major trait that qualified them to be stationed in between the two communities.

Eurasians were perceived as a threat to the Europeans’ colonial etiquette, principally because of their ambivalent racial heritages—they were seen as both European and Chinese, though they were marginalized by both groups. In this highly race-conscious society, “Eurasians could not be allocated with ease to their proper niche in the colonial social structure, based as it was on the division of races” (Lethbridge 2003: 532). Those racial rules arbiters would define one as being of a lower class by focusing on how mixed a person was: no matter how “white” one looked, it would be inferred that the person was a “problem” because he or she was mixed. Racial mixing was viewed by many as creating an “abnormal” identity.

Hence, living in a culture where racial-mixing was seen as a reflection of “moral laxity,” people of mixed heritages began to define themselves negatively. Evidence showed that Eurasians tended to refuse

their “Eurasian” identity. The feeling of insecurity and unease toward their own identity constantly shadowed them. These Eurasians were forced to live with the consequences of their racial packaging during every waking moment of their lives. It should then come as no surprise that those racial packages, such as skin color and facial structure, or even a Chinese surname, caused some internal strife. Much of this strife focused upon self-assessment and self-identification. Some Eurasians could not accept the non-White part of themselves—that part had been defined by colonial society as ugly and inferior. They also could not accept their mixed nature, as it was defined by colonial racism as abnormal or “aberrant.” In short, this explains why so many Eurasians wanted to pass themselves off as monoracial people. In a society where monoraciality was preferable and multiraciality was “threatening,” by practicing “passing” one might feel less anxious about their hybrid nature. As Hall argues, “If such people have no particular political agenda or ethnic loyalty, then ‘passing’ may seem to be a perfectly logical way of getting what they know they deserve, just as many other groups of people get what they deserve” (2003: 155). To conclude, colonial racism has always been based on a belief in the superiority of races. This kind of essentialist racism produced a tendency to read cultural differences as absolute, and it was inextricably tied to biology. The assumption that the face, body, and other physiognomic features may be read as clues to internal characteristics endorsed biologists’ theories of race and, stemming from that, of racial superiority (Grice 2002: 255-257). In other words, colonial racism read humans’ “racial” features as a cultural text that could project a particular identity and define a distinct class.

Thus the oppression of this colonial racial thinking created for Eurasians an ever-

present sense of internal strife regarding their own “problematic race.” Psychological tension and moral unease did exist, and some Eurasians even learned to feel that they were the result of “moral laxity.”

Eurasians were considered to be “genetic aberrations.” However, their “aberrant nature” was socially determined. This is because their existence contradicted the colonial racial “aesthetics” and challenged the social rules, in which racial mixing was equated with mutation and abnormality. The reason that hybridity was considered anomalous was not simply a matter of aesthetic disagreement. Rather, the sentiment that Eurasians were ugly and embarrassing was culturally constructed. Eurasians were not “racially” strange; they were actually socially unacceptable. The prohibition against racial mixing was precisely a response to the manner in which multiraciality threatened to disturb and destabilize the social constraints of racial hierarchies.

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<sup>i</sup> A Buddhist notion referring to a heavenly place, the pure land.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas Watters, 1873, *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

<sup>iii</sup> Sir Robert adopted the manners, deportment, and costume of a Chinese gentleman, took a keen interest in all matters relating to Chinese life, and did not seek to pass as a European, nor to enter European society. Europeans deliberately categorized Sir Robert as Chinese and thus clarified his status as a Hong Kong resident.

<sup>iv</sup> Most Eurasian’s fathers abandoned their children and Chinese common law wives, or visited only rarely and discreetly. Therefore the Eurasians could hardly learn English from their European fathers. To learn European social customs, Eurasians had to receive missionary or government education. This will be discussed in the next section.

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# THE EXOTIC WOMEN OF THE WEST:

*Depictions of Nanban Women in the Momoyama Period*

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*Dedicated in memory of Ms. Ellen White, who taught me  
how to notice rather than look, and realize beauty in the details.*

## ABSTRACT

Through several visual analyses of *nanban byōbu*, or ‘barbarian screen paintings’, this essay seeks to discuss the connection between depictions of Western women in Momoyama period works by Japanese artists and the Japanese interest in the exotic nature of the West. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> century when these screens were painted, artists such as Kanō Sanraku faced a dearth of physical references to work from when depicting Western women. As a result, unlike the Western men and boys that are often depicted alongside them, these women are imaginatively rendered in an amalgam of Asian features. From their white faces and straight noses—facial qualities usually ascribed to Japanese and Chinese women—to their Chinese-style, thickly cuffed sleeves and Indian-inspired trousers and shoes, these women bear little resemblance to the accurately attired, pink-faced, long-nosed *nanban* males that accompany them. Conceived during an age when Japan had just opened its doors and aesthetic sensibilities to foreign goods and styles, these portrayals of women signify the important intersection between the characteristic braveness for which Momoyama artists are remembered and the seminal impact that Western styles had on Japanese ones, even after those doors had closed again.

In the chronicle *Yaita-ki*, one of the oldest recorded reactions of the Japanese to the arrival of the first Portuguese, describes the astonishment felt regarding the strikingly different physical features of European men:

*These men are the traders of Seinanban [Southwest Barbary]... They have large eyes, long noses, and are generally hairy. They wear voluminous clothes, especially their trousers and collars. Their outfits, decorated in gold and silver, are charming.<sup>i</sup>*

Such opinions as this are easily found in diaries and records that date back to around 1542, when the first Portuguese traders landed on Japanese shores. Often alongside these descriptions of Portuguese men are reports of their ships and of rare, imported animals. Much more scarcely found, however, are Japanese accounts of European women, who did not sail the three-year journey to Japan. As a natural extension of this fact, illustrations of *nanban* men, ships, and rare beasts are depicted in great detail with a commensurate level of historical accuracy, but the same cannot be said for illustrations of *nanban* women. Such an imbalance stems from the lack of first-hand encounters necessary to supply Japanese artists with physical references when painting *nanban* screens. This dearth

left artists with only their imaginings of what Western females looked like, and eventually such fantasies gave rise to depictions of women attired in an amalgam of ethnically ambiguous costumes, largely based on designs from other Asian countries. The production of the resultant *nanban* screens also collided with the introduction of European world maps and anthropological illustrations of ethnic clothing from around the globe. This intersection reached its visual culmination in the Japanese people's expressions of newfound interest in international costumes, which the imaginative renderings of Western women aptly exemplify. Concerning perceptions of cultural identity in response to the inundation of anthropological knowledge that came from the West, this essay will also discuss the extent to which Japanese artists adopted European modes of rendering and applied them to figural depictions of their own women.

A pair of late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> century *nanban* screens attributed to Kanō Sanraku in the Suntory Museum provides a strong example of the marked contrast between portrayals of *nanban* men and women (Fig.1). The left screen portrays a scene of Westerners in their native country before their departure to Japan; the right screen shows their arrival. Although some may argue that this scene of departure is not necessarily set in Europe and instead might take place in Asia, the plainly European boys scattered among the group of women on the left portion of the left screen prove otherwise (Fig.2). Firstly, why would a plethora of wealthily dressed children accompany a long voyage overseas? Judging from the behavior of the boys playing with the peacock, the pair pointing and ogling at a sight over the balustrade, and the two boys in the windows, these children cannot be older than about ten years old.

What purpose would they serve on a mission? Secondly, the two boys watching from the windows of the two-tiered gate appear to be too comfortable around the women they stand beside to be on unfamiliar terms with them. The fair-haired boy in particular, hiding behind the woman dressed in blue, expresses enough affection in his behavior for one to believe that she is his mother, or at least a close member of his family. Therefore, assuming that the children in the scene are under the guardianship of the women they accompany and that those women are in some way related to the group of men that they walk toward and that European men did not take their families on long voyages, we can then establish that the scene is set in the native country of the Western men in the painting.

Turning our attention to the group of women who emerge from under the gate, they appear to be dressed in an array of ethnically ambiguous clothes: voluminous trousers, diagonally draped swathes of cloth that run across their torsos, loose, wide skirts, frilly collars, pointed shoes, and head accessories with ear flaps — all in a vibrant display of various colors and patterns. The woman wearing red trousers, for instance, wears green slippers that curl up at the front beneath green and white feather-like protrusions that jut out in a circle at the base of each leg. The trousers themselves are reminiscent of a *salwar*, a type of trousers worn by Indian women.<sup>ii</sup> A green strip of cloth hangs between her legs and evokes a *patka*, a sash worn by both men and women of the Mughal Empire.<sup>iii</sup> Both the trousers and the sash appear to be heavily embroidered with gold threads, lending them the opulent and ornate qualities often associated with both the items brought by wealthy *nanbanjin* and textiles that came by way of the Silk Road.<sup>iv</sup> The gold buttons that stud the sides of her trousers lend mention to

another fascination that the Japanese had with the West, as metal buttons were a novel item introduced by the Portuguese.<sup>v</sup> Moving upwards, the brown sash encircling her waist and left hanging at the back appears to be made of cloth akin to Madurese *pesan* batik material, which usually incorporates the dominant brown color characteristic of most batik and combines it with red and green, as seen in the sash's print.<sup>vi</sup> That the design motif's leaf shapes are outlined in white and yellow, suggests an incorporation of the wax-resist technique that is essential to the Indonesian batik-making process.<sup>vii</sup>

Hanging above the sash are the woman's wide sleeves, which have come together in the typical arm gestural pose of Chinese nobility and matching the likely cultural inspiration for the sleeve design.<sup>viii</sup> Her blouse and collar, however, do not seem to be of an Asian inspiration. Instead, her blouse, with its protruding, bordered shoulder seams and numerous buttons down the front indicate an aesthetic idea derived from the artist's depictions of Western men, who are shown seated beside the group of women. They all wear the same frilly collars, buttoned-down fronts, and exposed shoulder seams that are also given to virtually all members of the *nanban* group of women and children portrayed.

It appears that with certain aspects of the women's attire, Kanō Sanraku took even more inventive artistic liberties, going beyond the realm of existent ethnic dress. One such example is the palm tree-like fronds that two of the women carry, presumably as fans. The woman conversing with the one in red trousers carries a shorter frond, while to their right, another woman in green trousers carries a longer version that rests on her left shoulder. Such an accoutrement highlights the predilection that artists such as Kanō Sanraku had for inventing fantastic

additions for their works when an absence of visual references prevented them from representing Western subjects authentically. These inventions include the ethnically unidentifiable plumed collars worn by the woman carrying the long frond and the woman in red trousers, as well as the narrow headscarf draped over the ears of the woman in the green blouse and the headgear flapping over the hair of the woman in the green trousers. The women watching from the second floor of the tiered gate wear similar head accessories, with added small bundles of material atop their crowns.

The European men to the right of the screen provide a perfect contrast to the women (Fig.3). Depicted in the meticulous detail that is characteristic of the *yamato-e* style, the artist has given individualistic attention to the portrayal of each man.<sup>ix</sup> Their facial features exhibit a visual language that conveys their foreignness independent of their clothing: trimmed beards, long sideburns, and bushy mustaches stand out against their peachy skin and fair hair. Overall, their noses, eyes, and ears are of almost exaggerated proportions. For instance, the *nanban* man in the red hat with one hand on his hip possesses a disproportionately large nose and ears as compared to his pointing hand. The facial features that emphasize the men's distinct European heritage, however, are nowhere to be found in the facial features of their female counterparts. Instead of the warm coloring found in the men's faces, their pallor is stark white against their black hair, eyebrows, and eyes. Unlike the men, who have a range of hair colors and textures ranging from straight and grey to curly and auburn, all of the women have uniformly straight, black hair piled atop their heads. The female and male attendants walking beside each other at the back of the group supply an even clearer example of this discrepancy in the

transfer of physical attributes. The women look unmistakably East Asian, and one may venture further to argue that they look specifically Chinese. In view of Kaihō Yūshō's *The Four Gentlemanly Accomplishments*, a painting in which the four typically gentlemanly pursuits are practiced by women instead, and Kanō Sansetsu's *Song of Lasting Sorrow*, which focuses on a well-known female protagonist in Chinese literature, one can understand how a resurgence in the popularity of Chinese themes during the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> century was concomitant with visual manifestations of that trend in screen paintings such as the one by Kanō Sanraku.<sup>x</sup>

Kanō Sanraku was not the only Kanō school artist who portrayed *nanban* women in this creative fashion. Kanō Naizen, born only eleven years after Kanō Sanraku, also incorporated similar features into his work, as seen in the 17<sup>th</sup> century *nanban* screen attributed to him in the National Museum of Art in Lisbon (Fig.4). On the upper left-hand side of the screen, a number of women gather to watch the foreigners' procession occurring in the foreground (Fig.5). Again, the use of culturally unidentifiable garments is employed, and the women possess vaguely Asian features. More specifically, they possess trousers reminiscent of *sahwars*, Chinese facial features and hair, diagonally draped swathes of cloth, frilly collars, and structured blouses, all as evident here as they are in the Kanō Sanraku screen. Additionally, the boy running into his mother's arms on the right side of the detail supports the argument that this scene takes place in Europe in the same way that the Kanō Sanraku left screen does as well. Another screen attributed to Kanō Naizen in the Kobe City Museum shows a *nanban* woman crouching down in the interior corner of a building (Fig.6). Although she

is not in an upright position, she clearly sports the headscarf worn by some of the women in the Kanō Sanraku screen, as well as the sari-like swathes of cloth draped across and around her body as seen in the Kanō Naizen screen in Lisbon. Of course, her white complexion speaks of the recurring Chinese face as well. Additionally, the frilly white sleeves and collar that poke out of her red blouse obviously imply a European inspiration and are ubiquitously featured in both the Kanō Naizen screen in Lisbon as well as the Kanō Sanraku screen.

One could go on at length dissecting the inspiration for each attribute of these women, but it is sufficient to say that such an analysis reinforces the idea that the exposure to foreign cultures by way of the Portuguese kindled the Japanese people's interest in foreign textiles and costumes. A 1542 record written by a Portuguese captain named Antonio Galvão describes the shipwrecked Portuguese men's first encounter with the feudal lord of Tanegashima, who, upon being shown a bolt of cloth from Europe, was so enamored of it that he immediately summoned the city's wealthiest merchants to trade for it, among other unmentioned items of his interest.<sup>xi</sup> The combination of disparately sourced fabrics and garments that makes up the women's outfits exemplifies this fondness perfectly.

It is possible that this renewed interest may have been related to an overall rise in awareness about international peoples. As globes, maps, and anthropological illustrations came to Japan, Japanese artists took on the role of cartographers, sociologists, and anthropologists in producing works that showed Japan in a global context. A pair of six-paneled screens entitled *Four Capitals of the World* is one reflection of the Japanese people's newfound interest in

ethnic attire (Fig.7). In it, a large world map dominates most of the area, flanked by two seven-by-three columns on each side that show various couples from around the globe attired in their native garbs, holding their associated accoutrements, and interacting in different ways. This screen not only demonstrates the overall interest in foreign costumes, but it also highlights the implied, acknowledged awareness of Japan in a global context, as seen by the Japanese couple surrounded by other foreign couples on the lower right, and of course the geographical setting of Japan alongside every other country on the map.

Such a growing awareness allowed for some degree of introspection concerning Japanese views of other ethnicities in relation to their own. More precisely, the notion that there were many other cultures to which the Japanese could compare themselves naturally led to an exploration of what made Japanese traditions unique and resulted in visual experimentations. *Western Genre Scenes*, an early 17<sup>th</sup> century pair of six-panel screens, exemplifies these explorations (Fig.8). It contains an inversion of the concept found in Kanō Sanraku's work as, instead of European women painted in a Japanese style, here we see a Japanese woman painted in a European style. According to Narusawa Katsushi, this figure is especially noteworthy because the Japanese artist who produced it must have felt comfortable enough with painting in a Western style to apply it to a subject of his own ethnicity.<sup>xiii</sup> This palpable level of assimilation demonstrates the ways in which European materials and techniques were absorbed and utilized by Japanese artists, who were compelled to use them in rendering subjects that related to their own cultural identity. To a significant extent, these fluid forms of assimilation may be construed as a symptom of

Japanese artists' growing familiarity with the idea of the Foreign, an idea that eventually gave rise to mixing Japanese and European elements in painting.

Upon a closer examination of the Japanese woman in *Western Genre Scenes*, her pose and facial features more than faintly resemble that of certain depictions of European women by Japanese artists. Her inclined head, seated repose, and upward looking eyes evoke the postures assumed by women in other European genre paintings such as *Maiden Playing the Lute*, attributed to 17<sup>th</sup> century artist Nobukata (Fig.9), *Scenes of Hunting and European Social Customs* (Fig.10), *Woman and her Lute* (Fig.11), *European Genre Painting* (Fig.12), and *European Social Customs* (Fig.13).<sup>xiii</sup> All of these examples were allegedly executed around the same time. In these five works, the European women depicted express their fondness for music and lean in towards the respective string instruments being played. It is also worth noting that this particular subject of a female strings musician recurs in both individual portraits and genre paintings that contain larger groups. Every woman shown in these images wears an outfit combining vermillion orange and sage green. Because the original, European sources of these imitations are not known, this redundant pairing implies that the sources used were possibly colorless engravings instead of paintings. If that were the case, artists would have been forced to come up with their own color scheme. Given that opulence and contrasting, bright hues were perceived as a characteristic of *nanban* goods—especially brocade material and clothing—the color combination of orange and green might have been utilized because it was understood to be the ultimate pairing of contrasting colors.<sup>xiv</sup> On the other hand, given that there were few imported European paintings that contained female subjects, one image of a woman in a green

and orange outfit could have served as the prototype for many subsequent copies like the five mentioned above.

Okamoto Yoshitomo, author of *The Nanban Art of Japan*, refers to this phenomenon of redundancy as the “copies of copies” phenomenon. It is based on the fact that as *nanban* motifs such as Western genre paintings became more popular, “generations of similar screens were copied out”, and artists who had “absolutely no knowledge of Portuguese ships and no understanding of the missionaries” would either invent their own conceptualizations (as seen in the Kanō Sanraku screens) or imitate the work of fellow artists who, in turn, had to draw from an accurate but limited number of imported European illustrations.<sup>xv</sup> Ultimately, this “copies of copies” phenomenon gradually ensued, and as time passed, the screen paintings that were produced later were “not very spontaneous creations but rather mechanical reproductions of set subject and construction, inexorably faithful to the model”.<sup>xvi</sup>

In support of Okamoto’s argument, the two women in *European Social Customs* and the two in *European Genre Painting* exhibit such an uncanny resemblance that it is entirely possible to believe that one pair was derived directly from the other. Looking once again at the Japanese woman in *Western Genre Scenes*, the woman on the right side of the detail from *European Social Customs* and her compositional counterpart in *European Genre Painting* show a particularly strong resemblance to the Japanese woman in both their poses and facial expressions. All three women are seated and lean to their right in a somewhat sentimental gesture. Their heads are deeply inclined and their faces express the same serene look achieved by their doe-like eyes and rosebud-mouths. All of them possess a

widow’s peak hairline, loosely styled hair, and even the pallor of their skin is comparable—the stark white complexion favored traditionally is nowhere to be found.

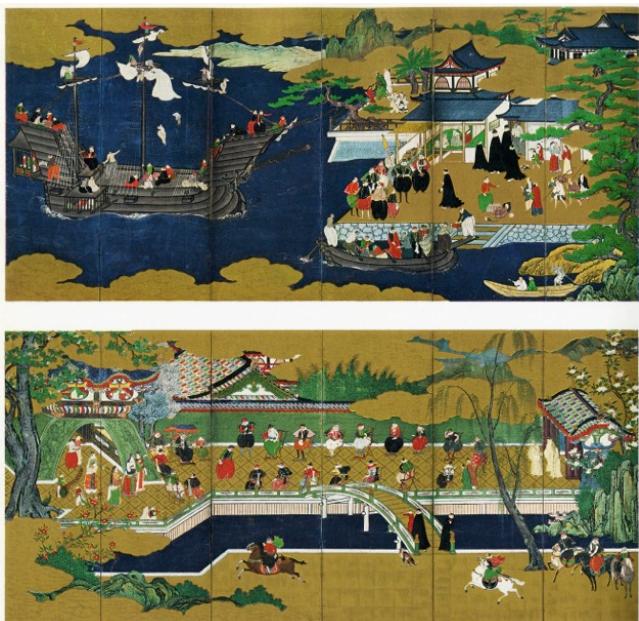
This comparison aptly demonstrates Okamoto’s phenomenon as, in this case, the poses and expressions assumed by the women in the five aforementioned paintings all fall under the same generic formula, which presents European women as swooning ladies who had a penchant for playing string instruments for leisure. And although the Japanese woman in *Western Genre Scenes* is not shown playing an instrument, the style in which she is rendered suggests that the artist based her image on that of a Western woman in order to keep consistent with the overall appearance of a painting in the European mode. Furthermore, the orange and green combination present in her ensemble reinforces the strong possibility that the artist responsible for this work looked to depictions such as the five mentioned earlier for inspiration. Thus, this example supports both Okamoto as well as Narusawa in her remark about the absorption and assimilation of European styles in Japanese painting.

Another example outside of the one mentioned by Narusawa can be found in *Four Capitals of the World* (Fig.7). In it, one cannot help but notice one surprising feature when examining the couple from Japan—namely, the woman’s curly hair (Fig.14). It is of course absolutely possible for women of Japanese descent to possess curly hair. However, keeping in mind that, up until the Momoyama period, the only female painting subjects were more or less ones in illustrated scenes from *The Tale of Genji*, the tumultuous curls with pinned-back sections that the woman sports here is uncharacteristic of the typical straight locks worn by female subjects in earlier works. Furthermore, it is worth noting

that her outfit also possesses the recurring orange and green colour combination, which is further emphasized by the visual influence of her partner's green clothes. Thus, as with the Japanese woman in *Western Genre Scenes*, the artist responsible for this work was compelled to add European stylistic elements to a Japanese, female subject. In this case, that manifestation came in the form of the curly hair and color palette that is repeatedly present in European-style works, as seen in the five aforementioned depictions of female musicians. Such a movement in Japanese figure painting from a restricted number of female subjects depicted in generic ways to an increase in those subjects rendered in ways that were specific to European styles of representation not only exemplifies the adoption of Western styles into Japanese painting but also reinforces the overall idea of a newfound interest in European modes of fashion.

It is without question that this interest was inextricably linked to a newly acquired global consciousness. As Japan's international trading avenues expanded laterally, so did its knowledge of foreigners and their customs. Stories, maps, animals, and imported goods from the West inspired Japanese artists to formulate their own visions of Europe and its people. Even when a vague knowledge of Western women could have prevented artists from including such subjects in their work, some, such as Kanō Naizen and Kanō Sanraku, circumvented those problems by bringing their own fantastic visualizations to life, thereby exhibiting the innovative bravery characteristic of Momoyama artists. As time passed, an introspection of traditional Japanese modes of female depiction led to an inevitable experimentation with *nanban* styles in fashion and art. Eventually, this gave rise

to a conventionally acceptable integration of these foreign elements into Japanese art. These elements are often detectable, particularly in reference to historically accurate paintings of Western women by Japanese artists, because such paintings reflect what artists repeatedly derived from their sources before applying them to female subjects of their own culture. In conjunction with a comparison to earlier, formulaic Japanese styles of female depiction, one is then able to chart the movement and depth of this foreign influence. Ultimately, this movement is indicative of the fact that while Japan indeed entered its well-known age of cultural isolation at one point, there was also a time when its people positively



responded to foreign cultures through the visibly inquisitive immortalizations they left behind.

Fig.1: Kanō Sanraku, *Nanban Byōbu*. Late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> c., pair of six-panel screens. Ink, colours, and gold on paper. 182 x 371 cm. Suntory Museum of Art, Tokyo.

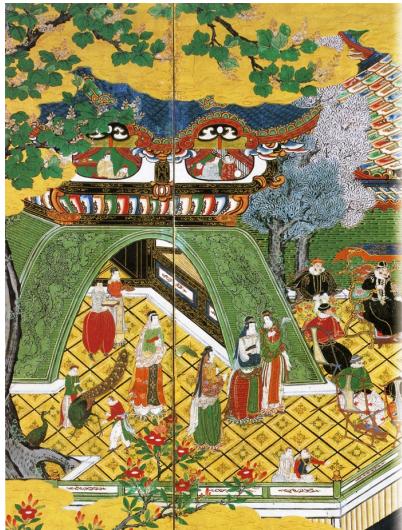


Fig.2: Detail taken from left screen (*Scene in a Foreign Country*). Kanō Sanraku, *Nanban Byoubu*.



Fig.3: Detail from left screen (*Scene in a Foreign Country*). Kanō Sanraku, *Nanban Byoubu*.

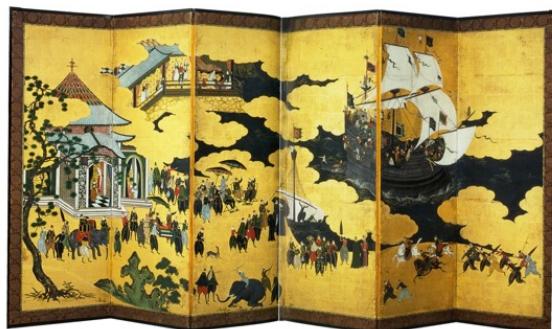


Fig.4: Kanō Naizen, *Scene in a Foreign Country* (left screen of *Nanban Byoubu*). 17<sup>th</sup> c. (1603-1610), pair of six-panel screens. Ink, colours, and gold on paper. 178 x 366 cm. National Museum of Art, Lisbon.

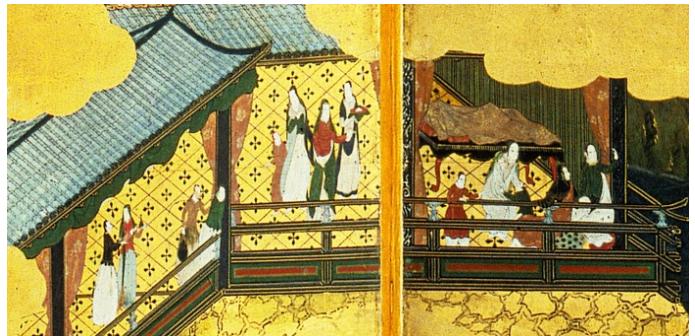


Fig.5: Detail from left screen (*Scene in a Foreign Country*). Kanō Naizen, *Nanban Byoubu* (National Museum of Art, Lisbon).

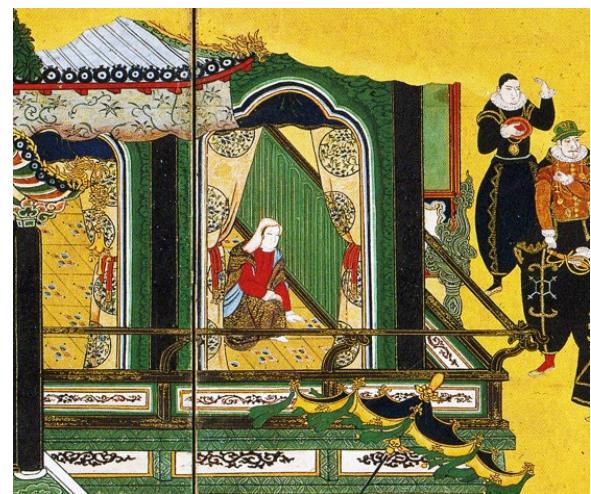


Fig.6: Detail from *Scene in a Foreign Country* (left screen of *Nanban Byoubu*). Kanō Naizen, Late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> c., pair of six-panel screens. Ink, colours, and gold on paper. 154.5 x 363.2 cm. Kobe City Museum, Kobe.



Fig.7: Japanese, unknown artist, *Four Capitals of the World*. Late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> c., pair of six-panel screens. Ink, colours, and gold on paper. 162 x 385.8 cm. Kobe City Museum of Nanban Art, Kobe.



Fig.8: Japanese, unknown artist, detail from *Western Genre Scenes*. Early 17<sup>th</sup> c., pair of six-panel screens. Ink and colour on paper. 116.7 x 308.6 cm (each).



Fig.9: Attributed to Nobukata, *Maiden Playing the Lute*. Colours on paper, 54.6 x 36.6 cm. Yamato Bunkakan, Nara.



Fig.10: Japanese artist, unknown, detail from *Scenes of Hunting and European Social Customs*. Late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> c., 98.2 x 310.5 cm. Nanban Bunkakan, Osaka.



Fig.11: Japanese artist, unknown, *Woman and her lute*. Late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> c., Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture, Nagasaki.

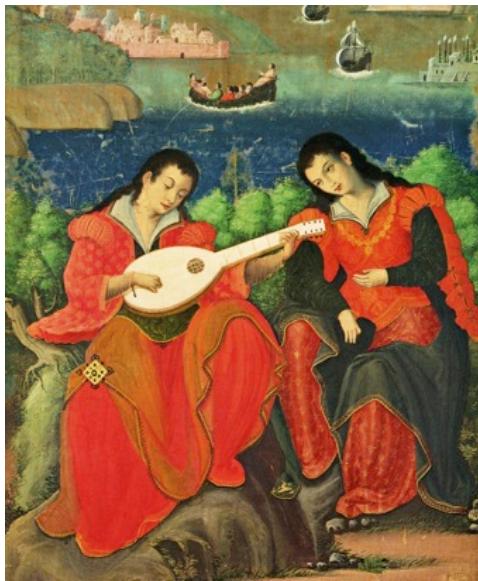


Fig. 13: Japanese artist, unknown, detail from *European Genre Painting*. Late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> c., pair of six-panel screens. Colours on paper. 93 x 302 cm (each). Collection of Moritatsu Hosokawa, Tokyo.

<sup>i</sup> Boxer, C. R. *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549-1650*. Berkeley: University of California, 1951. Print, p.28. Original text found in Okamoto, Yoshitomo. *Nagasaki Kaikō Izen Ōhaku Raiō Kō*. Tōkyō: Nittō Shoin, 1932. Print, p.187-189.

<sup>ii</sup> Tierry, Tom. *Fashions from India*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003. Print, p.4.

<sup>iii</sup> Description of a *patka* found in "Portrait of Maharaja Bhim Kunwar: Leaf from the Shah Jahan Album, Mughal, Period of Jahangir (1605–27), Ca. 1615." [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Apr. 2010. Web. <<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/55.121.10.2>>.

<sup>iv</sup> Oka, Yasumasa. "Hollandisme in Japanese Craftwork," p.135-139, as found in Shirahara, Yukiko. *Japan Envisions the West: 16th-19th Century Japanese Art from Kobe City Museum*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2007. Print.

<sup>v</sup> Rivero, Lake Rodrigo. *Nanban: Art in Viceregal Mexico*. [Madrid]: Estiloméxico Editores, 2005. Print, p.134.

<sup>vi</sup> Fraser-Lu, Sylvia. *Indonesian Batik: Processes, Patterns, and Places*. Singapore: Oxford UP, 1986. Print, p.174.

<sup>vii</sup> In batik manufacturing, the wax-permeated parts of the cloth resist the dyes and are often left either white or

are filled in with a light dye, like yellow, especially when the surrounding areas of the waxed part are darker in hue so as not to interfere with the dominant colour if the filled-in dye bleeds through the outline. Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Oda Nobunaga to Nanban Byōbu. Shukan Nihon no bi o meguru; no.30. Tōkyō: Shōgakkan, 2002. Print, p.7.

<sup>ix</sup> Okamoto, Yoshitomo. *The Nanban Art of Japan*. New York: Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1972. Print, p.115.

<sup>x</sup> McCausland, Shane, and Matthew P. McKelway. *Chinese Romance from a Japanese Brush: Kanō Sansetsu's Chōgonka Scrolls in the Chester Beatty Library*. London: Scala, 2009. Print, p.108.

<sup>xi</sup> 「携へて行つた織物の見本を覧せると、ナウトキンは甚だび、直ぐ土地の重だつた商人を呼び寄せるやうにいひつけた。」

「ナウトキン」 appears to be the nickname given to the feudal lord of Tanegashima by Galvão. Original text found in Tratado que compos o nobr e enotael capitão Antonio Galvão dos diversos e desvayrados caminhos—que são feitos em a era de 1550. Lisboa, 1563. Boletim da Segunda Classe. Vol. II. p.87-88, translated to Japanese by Okamoto Yoshimoto in *Nagasaki Kaikō Izen Ōhaku Raiō Kō*, p.35.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Okamoto, Yoshitomo. *The Nanban Art of Japan*, p.52.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Nanban No Yume, Kōmō No Maboroshi* =: *Visions of Nanban*. Fuchū-shi: Fuchū-shi Bijutsukan, 2008. Print, p.22-23.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid., p.115-116.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid.

# KOREAN COMFORT WOMEN:

*Nationalist Discourse in Contemporary South Korea*

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## ABSTRACT

Although Korean comfort women, or enforced sex slaves to the Japanese military during World War II, continues to be a popular topic on both academic and political fronts, very few literature has made the link between the two fields by analyzing the popular or political discourse surrounding this issue today. This article examines whether the South Korean public continues to discuss the comfort women issue in a way that reflects nationalistic and patriarchal values that repressed the women into silence for over fifty years, through the lens of an advocacy organization called the Korean Institute for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan. It uses a framework of discourse analysis, as described by post-structural feminist theorists, in order to argue that contemporary discourse in South Korea further objectifies the former comfort women as a means to achieving nationalist aims, strips the women of their subjectivities, and normalizes gendered power relations that caused their suffering in the first place.

During World War II, the Japanese military abducted or coerced 80,000 to 200,000 female civilians from its conquered territories to serve as comfort women, or enforced sex slaves for their soldiers.<sup>i</sup> Although approximately 80 percent of these women were known to be Korean, South Korea did not popularly

discuss this issue until 1991, when a former victim first came forward publicly to tell her story. In fact, many Korean survivors who returned to their homeland continued to suffer due to societal shame and isolation, with some even committing suicide.<sup>ii</sup> Therefore, critics have argued that the Korean comfort women suffered from a “triple crime”: daily rapes by Japanese soldiers, shaming and victim blaming once they returned to Korea, and more recently, denial of coercion and refusal of reparations from the Japanese government.<sup>iii</sup> Although most people believe that all but the third of these crimes have been resolved, this article addresses the possibility of a fourth crime: in the early nineties, feminist<sup>iv</sup> scholars began to critique the South Korean government and public for exploiting the stories of the victims for nationalist aims.<sup>v</sup> This article evaluates whether this nationalist discourse continues today by analyzing a recent publication and website of an advocacy organization called the Korean Institute for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereby known as the “Korean Institute”). Although the contemporary discourse around comfort women appears to have improved since the nineties by focusing away from victim blaming and the lost chastity of the women, the Korean Institute continues to represent the crime, the role of the Japanese government, and even the testimonies of the former victims in a way that advances a nationalist agenda, suggesting a continuation of or even deepening in nationalist discourse.

In this article, I first establish my theoretical framework of discourse analysis and provide a literature review of the relevant scholarship on comfort women. Next, I provide a general overview of the recent political tensions between Japan and South Korea and the current status of the comfort women issue, which serve as valuable context for evaluating contemporary discussions of the issue in South Korea.<sup>vi</sup> I also provide a brief history of the Korean Institute and the reasons for why I chose this organization as a lens into the Korean public. Then, I analyze the publications, website, and related articles of the Korean Institute since 2005 to argue that the contemporary discourse in South Korea still portrays the comfort women issue as a national crime by the Japanese military instead of allowing the women's diverse voices from being heard or seeking the reparations that they desire. Lastly, I discuss relevant conclusions and remaining questions for future research.

#### *The Value of a Discourse Analysis Framework*

The evaluation of discourse, or how one discusses a subject in speech or writing, is especially relevant to the comfort women issue, because discourse contains the power to both regulate society and provide opportunities for subject formation, as argued by poststructuralist theorists. In her 1990 work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains that categories such as gender, sex, and sexuality are performative—socially and culturally constructed and subconsciously internalized by individuals—as opposed to natural. In her explanation of this theory, Butler borrows from Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, arguing that gender has become “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”<sup>vii</sup> Therefore, a study of the discourse around

comfort women, with its relevance to common gender issues such as sexual violence, chastity, and patriarchy, serves as a valuable case study for analyzing how the restrictive and disciplinary notions of gender become naturalized in our society. Furthermore, since gender “as an ongoing discursive practice...is open to intervention and resignification,” it is important to continue evaluating contemporary discourse, as well as changes in discourse over time, for the possibilities of new “interventions and resignifications” that may contribute to the subversion of gender categories and hierarchy.<sup>viii</sup>

This project is also important for the former comfort women, many of whom are still alive today, because discourse, as the ability to verbalize and reflect on one's experiences, often allows individuals to form their subjectivities.<sup>ix</sup> This ability to verbalize one's story is especially valuable in cases of sexual violence due to the common methods of silencing and shaming used to instill guilt in the victims. In fact, many of the Korean comfort women have expressed feeling great relief after telling their stories.<sup>x</sup> Furthermore, as poststructuralist writer Chris Weedon argues, “the ways in which particular discourse constitute subjectivity have implications for the process of reproducing or contesting power relations.”<sup>xi</sup> Applying this framework to the discourse surrounding comfort women, the ways in which the Korean media and publications discuss the victims' experiences could in fact reproduce power relations that further oppress the victims or normalize ideas of male dominance and patriarchy, which contributed to their suffering in the first place. Thus, it is my desire that this article will not only contribute to the scholarly work on nationalist discourse and subject formation, but also serve as a reminder for Korean authorities to allow the former

comfort women to speak for themselves and honor their diverse experiences and perspectives.

### *From Universalist Discourse to Postcolonial Feminist Critiques*

The Korean comfort women emerged as a popular topic in scholarly works in the early nineties, with the support of the growing feminist movement in South Korea and the first public testimony of a former comfort woman, Kim Hak-sun, in 1991.<sup>xii</sup> Therefore, the earliest writers on this topic can generally be described as feminist humanitarians, whose main aim was to demand further investigation into the issue and reparations for the victims, thereby adopting a human rights framework that tends to focus on the crimes of the Japanese military and neglect the diverse experiences of the comfort women.<sup>xiii</sup> A prominent figure in this movement is a Japanese historian named Yoshimi Yoshiaki, who in 1995 published a book titled *Comfort Women* that gives a comprehensive overview of the historical context, recruitment process, and the living conditions of the comfort women. Yoshimi makes it clear that he is adopting a human rights framework from the first paragraph of his introduction, where he states that “the essence of the issue...is the grave violations of human rights that combined sexual violence against women, racial discrimination, and discrimination against the impoverished.”<sup>xiv</sup> Although the human rights violations by the Japanese military are undeniably a central aspect of the comfort women issue, to say that this is the “essence of the issue” undermines the diverse perspectives of the former comfort women who have the right to define the essence of their experiences for themselves. Also in the introduction, Yoshimi states that “the salience and universality of these problems have attracted international attention.”<sup>xv</sup>

Although it is understandable that Yoshimi is trying to “help” the former comfort women by framing their experiences in a way that is relatable to the international community, such language of universality simplifies and degrades the experiences and perspectives of these women in a way that is common and knowable.<sup>xvi</sup>

Nevertheless, during the same time as the publication of these works, several Korean, Japanese, and Western feminists were already starting to question the other side of the story: why Korea kept silent for so many years and how the Japanese and Korean authorities have politicized this issue in order to advance their nationalist agendas. In contrast to Yoshimi, who focuses on the historical evidence and political context behind the comfort women issue, Keith Howard simply allows the women to speak for themselves in *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*, the earliest English translations of the testimonies published by the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan.<sup>xvii</sup> In his introduction to this 1995 work, Howard notes that the Korean government had silenced the victims for almost fifty years and “that no documentary evidence survived the defeat of Japan, hence this issue should not detract from the need to normalize Korean-Japanese relations.”<sup>xviii</sup> In fact, Howard argues that “both Koreans and Japanese took part in coercion,” since the primary reason that the comfort women did not come forward until recently was due to the social conservatism in Korea, which places great value on traditional gender roles and female chastity.<sup>xix</sup> Testimonies in this book have indeed confirmed that many of the women stayed silent due to the fear of societal judgment, and some even experienced ostracism from neighbors and family members who learned of their experiences.<sup>xx</sup> Thus, by

focusing on the voices of the former victims, Howard and similar writers during this time set a precedent for being wary of the politicization of the comfort women issue.<sup>xxi</sup>

Fueled by the newly emerging primary sources like Howard's compilation of English-translated testimonies and increasing discussion of this issue in the political arena, feminist writers in the late nineties began to focus on the nationalist aims of the Korean public when discussing the comfort women issue. In doing so, these scholars were analyzing the tension between nationalism and feminism, a framework common in many works of postcolonial feminism. One of the first writers who explicitly examined this tension in the context of Korean comfort women was Chizuko Ueno, a noted Japanese feminist sociologist. In her book *Nationalism and Gender*, originally published in Japan in 1998, Ueno critiques both Japanese and Korean nationalist discourses in their debate regarding whether the comfort women were voluntary prostitutes or victims of Japanese coercion, because such discourses normalize patriarchal values such as the emphasis on women's chastity and discrimination against prostitutes.<sup>xxii</sup> Nevertheless, Ueno mostly focuses on other scholarly works in her critique, which neglects the views and subjectivities of the former comfort women, as well as the power of popular discourse in reproducing and regulating power relations.<sup>xxiii</sup> In contrast, in "Remembering the Korean Military Comfort Women," Hyunah Yang does an admirable job of juxtaposing the testimonies of the former comfort women with Korean popular discourse from 1992 and 1993 in order to demonstrate that the feelings of shame and guilt were often forced upon the victims from external forces. In particular, Yang grounds her arguments in several letters from Korean

citizens to major newspapers about comfort women, as well as Korean concepts of *han* and *chajonsim* which describe sentiments similar to resentment and pride, respectively.<sup>xxiv</sup> Therefore, by analyzing the discourse around the comfort women issue with popular Korean perspectives and concepts, Yang makes her critique historically and culturally specific and avoids the assumptions of universality common in the earlier works of feminist humanitarians.

This article continues such postcolonial feminist evaluations of the nationalist discourse around the comfort women issue in contemporary South Korea. Although writers like Ueno and Yang have already initiated such projects more than a decade ago, no project to date has completed a comprehensive overview of popular discourse regarding this topic, as Yang herself only analyzes two news articles. Furthermore, it is important to extend this discourse analysis to contemporary times, not only because the comfort women controversy is ongoing, but also because we live in a digital age in which information is widely accessible and discursive power even more extensive. This article thus offers a unique case study of discourse analysis regarding gender issues, especially for those interested in the Korean comfort women and contemporary gender relations in South Korea; it argues that "progress" around gender issues needs to be further questioned in terms of both the discourse and primary aim.

#### *History of Japanese-Korean Tensions and the Role of the Korean Institute*

After Japanese control of Korea ended in 1945, South Korea experienced tumultuous times, with the three-year Korean War breaking out in 1950, subsequent phases of autocratic rule marked by protests, and rapid economic

development and modernization beginning in the eighties. In fact, several scholars have cited this political and economic instability as one of the reasons why South Korea covered up the comfort women issue for so long.<sup>xxv</sup> In fact, the Korean government seemed more than happy to normalize Japanese-Korean relations after the war, with the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations re-establishing diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea. The documents from this treaty, which were later disclosed in 2005, revealed that Japan provided South Korea with \$800 million as compensation for colonial rule, and South Korea agreed to demand no more compensation after the treaty. Furthermore, while the Korean government assumed the responsibility of compensating individual victims, including the comfort women, it used most of the money for the economic development.<sup>xxvi</sup> This explains much of the anger of the surviving victims toward the Korean government in recent news articles, such as the former comfort woman who reproached the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, saying that the Korean government is just waiting for all the victims to die off.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Perhaps because the two countries never reached a compensation agreement that was widely popular, Japanese-Korean tensions have slowly escalated in the last few decades, especially around issues of Japanese revision of history and territorial dispute over the Liancourt Rocks, a group of islets in the East Sea that marks valuable fishing grounds. Over the last few decades, several Japanese right-wing politicians have made controversial statements denying the war crimes of Imperial Japan, which outraged many Korean citizens. For example, Abe Shinzo, ex-Prime Minister of Japan, stated in 1997, “Many so-called victims of comfort women system are liars...prostitution was ordinary behavior in Korea.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Similar

sentiments have been echoed by other politicians, including Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Shimomura Hakubun, who in 2007 stated, “Korean parents sold their daughters during that time.”<sup>xxix</sup> Likewise, Minister of State Edano Yukio stated in 2010, “The invasion and colonization of...Korea was historically inevitable.”<sup>xxx</sup> Japan was also criticized in 2001 and then in 2010 for publishing history textbooks omitting war crimes, including the comfort women and the Nanking Massacre.<sup>xxxi</sup> Another prime source of conflict between the two countries is the dispute over the Liancourt Rocks—although South Korea currently administers the islets, Japanese school children are instructed that they belong to Japan, and Japanese officials declared a national holiday dedicated to the islets in 2005.<sup>xxxii</sup> More recently in August 2012, tensions heightened when Lee Myung-Bak became the first South Korean president to visit the Liancourt Rocks. In reaction, Japan temporarily withdrew its ambassador from South Korea and threatened to bring the dispute to the International Court of Justice.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Among these rising tensions, the comfort women issue has gained new prominence, making this an even more important time to evaluate whether the Korean public continues to exploit the stories of the victims for nationalist aims. At the center of the advocacy movement for the comfort women are two non-governmental organizations: the aforementioned Korean Institute, first formed in July 1990, and the Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (hereby known as “Korean Council”), formed in November 1990. Although both are prominent organizations, I chose to focus on the Korean Institute, because it specializes in research and dissemination of information, whereas the Korean Council is more of an activist organization

that leads the weekly demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy.<sup>xxxiv</sup> I thought that the Korean public would turn to the Korean Institute for official information on the comfort women issue, and thus the publications and website of the organization are crucial to the formation of public thought around this topic.

I draw from three main sources in my research. One is the 2007 *Ianfu Report Vol. 1: We were Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*, co-published by the Korean Institute and the Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities. This book includes eleven English translations of testimonies selected out of the 225 published by the Korean government in 1993. The second source is the website of the Korean Institute ([www.truetruth.org](http://www.truetruth.org)), which includes a detailed history of the comfort women issue and the mission of the organization. Yet the majority of my analysis will be dedicated to the third source, the compilation of relevant articles from major newspapers on the website of the Korean Institute. Although the website includes articles from 1993, I will focus on the ones from 2005 and beyond, which amounts to 175 articles. Most of the website and articles are in Korean and were roughly translated by myself as a South Korean native. Through the lens of the Institute's curators, these articles provide access to the voices of the major newspapers and politicians that both reflect and shape the discourse of the South Korean public.

#### *True Truth, But Not Complete Truth?*

Upon entering the website of the Korean Institute ([www.truetruth.org](http://www.truetruth.org)), one is faced with a banner displaying a picture of an elderly woman in tears, along with the words next to it, “We remember, in order to avoid repeating the painful history.”<sup>xxxv</sup> This summarizes the mission of the Korean Institute, which is

elaborated on the English version of the page as “disclosing the truth about the *Chongshindae* [comfort women].”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Despite this mission of being dedicated to the “true truth” and despite criticizing Japan of historical erasure, a close analysis of the Korean Institute’s website shows that the organization also practices selective storytelling. For example, although the history section on the website is very thorough, especially regarding the deceptive recruitment of the comfort women and the involvement of the Japanese government,<sup>xxxvii</sup> it neglects the fact that many Koreans were also involved in deceiving the women into sexual slavery for money. It also fails to criticize South Korea for the silencing and shaming that occurred after the women returned, as the section about their lives after the war merely states, “For the victims who survived, their lives afterward were unimaginably difficult... There was no place that could soothe their torn bodies and souls... It was difficult for them to be dignified even in front of their families, and they had to suffer through hiding from people they knew.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Therefore, although this statement mentions the hardships faced by the women after the war, it suggests that these hardships were entirely due to their experiences in the comfort stations and undermines the complicity of the Korean society, since “no place could soothe their torn bodies and souls” anyway. The history written by the Korean Institute neglects the various experiences of the comfort women such as the woman who was in fact sold by her parents<sup>xxxix</sup> or those who “committed suicide aboard civilian ships carrying them toward Korea rather than face a homecoming of degradation or lifelong social isolation.”<sup>xl</sup> The entire website of the Korean Institute seems to be geared towards reiterating the belief that the comfort women issue was a

national crime committed on Korea by Japan.<sup>xli</sup>

Even worse, the Korean Institute has chosen to omit sections of victims' testimonies in its 2007 publication, *Ianfu Report Vol. 1*, which includes several of the same testimonies as Keith Howard's 1995 *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women*. While comparing the two publications side by side, I found that the *Ianfu Report* often edited out the women's experiences after the war or other aspects that would look unfavorably upon the Korean government. For example, in the testimony of Kim Hak-sun, first Korean woman to publicly come out as a comfort woman in 1991, the *Ianfu Report* omits her experiences after she returned to Korea, where she lived in poverty with a husband who abused and insulted her, calling her "a dirty bitch or a prostitute in front of [her] son."<sup>xlii</sup> Kim further describes her failed attempts at suicide and only coincidentally meeting someone who convinced her to tell her stories to the public. Her testimony greatly contrasts with the Korean Institute's romanticized version of the story in the history section of the book, in which Kim "revealed herself at a press conference" to give her "brave testimony."<sup>xliii</sup> Instead of feeling brave or empowered, Kim reveals in her testimony that she only told her story because she had nothing to lose and wanted to release her pent-up resentment. Another testimony with its ending omitted is that of Hwang Kumju. In the *Ianfu Report*, her testimony ends with the statement, "Sometime after I had got back to Manchuria, Korea was liberated," as if all of her suffering ended with Korea's liberation.<sup>xliv</sup> The version in Howard's *True Stories* shows that this was indeed not the case. After this sentence, Hwang describes that she ran away from the comfort station after learning that the soldiers had abandoned it, begging for food and sleeping on the road during her journey

back home. Even after she returned to Korea, she suffered from disease and poverty. Lastly, probably deleted from the *Ianfu Report* because it is damaging to Korea's reputation, Hwang laments at the end of her testimony, "I wonder how I can live the rest of my life without continually being looked down upon... I have wanted to tell my government what I had to suffer, but I haven't been given the opportunity."<sup>xlv</sup>

One could argue that the Korean Institute perhaps took out all endings of the testimonies, because as an organization dedicated to receiving an apology from the Japanese government, it wanted to focus on the crimes that occurred during the war. In fact, when I emailed the Institute about these omissions, the representative replied that the publishing committee "selected the parts out of the testimonies that they deemed important."<sup>xlvii</sup> Nevertheless, some testimonies were published in full, while others even had their experiences during the war edited out. One example of a testimony published in full ends with the statement, "I think we must try to get what we justly deserve from Japan: a proper apology and proper compensation."<sup>xlviii</sup> Although I do not doubt that many women desire and deserve an apology from the Japanese government, this testimony is one of the few that directly verbalizes this desire, which is probably why the editors considered this part "important" enough to be published in the book. In contrast, they apparently did not think that the unique relationship between Kim Tokchin and a Japanese officer was as valuable, as they even took the effort to censor the middle parts of her testimony. In the sections omitted in the *Ianfu Report*, Kim describes that she developed a special relationship with an officer named Izumi while at the comfort station, stating, "I continued to meet Izumi often and came

to regard him almost as my father, husband and family rolled into one... Every day, he said he loved me... Even after I returned to Korea, we wrote to each other for quite some time.”<sup>xlviii</sup> Although such intimate relationships between the Japanese soldiers and the comfort women were probably rare, Kim obviously thought that her relationship with Izumi, who in fact helped her to escape, was important enough to include in her testimony. Furthermore, the ending of Kim’s testimony, once again edited out of *Ianfu Report*, describes how the Korean society silenced the victims. Kim explains that when she first saw Kim Hak-sun’s testimony on television, she felt compelled to tell her story as well and relieve her “resentment and anger buried deep in [her] heart.”<sup>xlix</sup> Yet when she consulted her nephew, he pleaded her not to testify as she “will only bring trouble on [her] family and [her] children will be traumatized.”<sup>l</sup> Even after she told her story, she states that her son and his wife became despondent and she still feels guilty whenever she sees them.<sup>li</sup> Nevertheless, she, or any other victim for that matter, should not have to feel guilty about speaking up about her experiences, especially because silencing and victim blaming are mechanisms that perpetuate acts of sexual violence and patriarchy. After decades of physical, emotional, and mental abuse, the former comfort women should not have to experience any more distortions of their voices, especially by their own advocacy organization.

#### *Nationalist Framing of the Comfort Women Issue*

Broadening our perspective to the recent news articles compiled on the Korean Institute’s website, they at first seem to suggest progress from the discourse in the nineties, since almost all articles advocate for Japanese acceptance of the crime and compensation for the

victims as opposed to shaming the women for selling their bodies as in the past. Nevertheless, justice for the women depends on not only *what* the Korean media and politicians are advocating for their sake but also *how* and *why*, and a closer investigation of the articles reveals that most Korean and Japanese politicians and scholars frame the comfort women issue as important primarily for the improvement of Japanese-Korean relations. In other words, justice for the women is treated as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. For example, the Korean Council was quoted in a December 2011 article as stating, “The Japanese government has negatively impacted Japanese-Korean diplomatic activity for 66 years by refusing to assume legal responsibility...or give compensation regarding the ‘comfort women’ issue.”<sup>lii</sup> This statement not only frames the comfort women issue as important primarily for Japanese-Korean relations but also assumes that an apology and compensation from the Japanese government meet the desired justice for all the victims. It denies their diverse experiences and perspectives, such as those of aforementioned Kim Tokchin, who states at the end of her testimony, “I resent the Koreans who were their instruments even more than the Japanese... The Korean government should grant us compensation.”<sup>liii</sup> Similar sentiments as those of the Korean Council were again expressed in an August 2012 article, in which about ten organizations in the movement to pressure the Japanese government for compensation were quoted, “It is clear that the first step toward overcoming the Japanese-Korean relations crisis and creating a future of cooperation is to resolve the ‘comfort women’ issue.”<sup>liv</sup> Such statements further objectify the former comfort women by treating justice for the women as important for the sake of Japanese-

Korean relations rather than for its own sake.

Korean politicians also frequently frame the comfort women issue as a political one, discussing its importance for the sake of Japanese-Korean relations and bringing it up during national holidays to provoke nationalist sentiments. One counterexample to this is an article written on August 15, 2012, the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the day Korea gained independence from Japan, when President Lee stated, “Because the comfort women issue goes beyond the relations of the two countries as a wartime women’s rights issue, I urge the Japanese government to take responsibility for its actions.”<sup>lv</sup> As noted in the article, this is the first time that President Lee has framed the issue as a women’s rights issue as opposed to one regarding Japanese-Korean relations, and it shows a drastic improvement from his statement during the last national holiday ceremony in March: “We must not deny the historical truth if Japan and Korea are to work together as true partners.”<sup>lvii</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether Lee made a conscious choice to frame the comfort women as a women’s rights issue because he was wanted to appeal to the international audience including foreign ambassadors that such a large ceremony is bound to attract. In addition, the original transcript of his speech shows that he discusses the importance of Japanese-Korean relations and the collective future of East Asia both before and after this statement.<sup>lviii</sup> Furthermore, in both articles published after the August 15<sup>th</sup> ceremony that quoted President Lee, he again discussed the comfort women issue as important primarily for the sake of Japanese-Korean relations.<sup>lvix</sup> In one of the two articles, Lee stated, “We should further solidify the foundation for a mature partnership between the two countries with the courage and wisdom to look squarely at

history.”<sup>lx</sup> This statement again emphasizes the relationship between Korea and Japan as the primary goal and “looking squarely at history” only as a means to that end.<sup>lx</sup>

Another way in which the comfort women issue is politicized in news articles is its repeated tie to the Liancourt Rocks dispute, despite the historical disconnects: 27 articles out of the 175, or 15.4 percent, tied the two issues together. Although both issues have similarities in being at the center of the controversies of Japanese history textbooks and right-wing politicians, the two issues are from fundamentally different time periods, with the Liancourt Rocks dispute originating in the seventeenth century and only revitalized recently, while the crime against the comfort women occurred during World War II. Furthermore, many articles switch abruptly between the two topics, as if it is obvious that the two issues are similar national crimes committed on Korea by Japan. For example, a November 2012 article reported that Japanese right-wing politicians ran an advertisement in a New Jersey daily newspaper claiming that the comfort women were voluntary prostitutes who earned enormous incomes. Nevertheless, the article ended with the statement, “Last month, a sticker that read ‘Takeshima [Japanese term for Liancourt Rocks] is Japanese land’ was placed on the Korean embassy building in New York and sparked anger in the Korean American community.”<sup>lxii</sup> Another example is an August 2012 article, which stated, “In an effort to pressure the Japanese government which is refusing to budge on the comfort women issue, the Korean government is carefully evaluating the proposal for an ‘arbitration committee’... This is a response to Japan’s recent provocations such as filing the Liancourt Rocks dispute to the International Court of Justice.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Both

articles primarily about comfort women relate other news about the Liancourt Rocks almost as if they are one and the same issue, treating the victims like national property or a piece of land that Japan took from Korea. In particular, the latter article explicitly states that the Korean government's legal action regarding comfort women is a direct response to the Japanese government's filing the Liancourt Rocks dispute to the International Court of Justice. Nevertheless, a complete dedication to justice for the comfort women on the part of the Korean government would consist of pressuring the Japanese government at all costs, not only because Japan recently provoked Korea over the Liancourt Rocks dispute.

Lastly, the news articles are so focused on the controversies surrounding the statements of Japanese and Korean politicians and scholars, who are mostly male, that the former victims, who should be the main subjects of this conversation, are left out of the picture. As Hyunah Yang writes in her analysis of the Korean public discourse in the nineties, much of the contemporary discourse is still comprised of a "Man's talk with a Man...the discourse is neither *about* nor *for* the (Military Comfort) women."<sup>lxiii</sup> Although it is understandable that news articles would want to focus on recent political events and controversies for high readership, they still have the effect of making the words and actions of the politicians seem more important and newsworthy than those of the actual victims. Furthermore, the articles often focus on how the Japanese and Korean officials react to each other's actions, such as Japanese politicians making more angry statements about the comfort women after President Lee's visit to the Liancourt Rocks and President Lee reacting to these statements, thereby focusing more attention to the subjectivity of these

politicians at the expense of the subjectivity of the former victims. News articles even find it worthy to quote representatives from international organizations such as the United Nations and the United States House of Representatives, yet less than 15 articles, or 8.1 percent, actually quote individual comfort women. Such patterns show that contemporary discourse still falls guilty of Chizuko Ueno's critique in *Nationalism and Gender* that disputes between the Japanese and Korean government officials regarding the comfort women issue simulate a ridiculous situation in which a woman was raped, and her rapist and husband or father are trying to reach a mutual agreement on the appropriate reparation.<sup>lxiv</sup>

#### *Portrayals of the Former Comfort Women*

While some articles do mention individual comfort women, many of these articles seem to be used to appeal to the emotional sentiments of the reader, provoking anger toward Japan often during national holidays. A prime example of this is a 2012 article about the March 1<sup>st</sup> holiday celebrating the beginning of Korean protests against Japanese colonialism in 1919. Beginning with its title, "Comfort woman *halmoni*'s tears on the March 1<sup>st</sup> holiday," the entire article appeals to the emotions of the reader, detailing the experiences of former comfort woman Kang Il-Chool, who was taken to a comfort station in China at the age of sixteen and was only able to return to Korea in 2000, almost sixty years later. Nevertheless, the article aims to channel most of the reader's emotions toward anger at Japan, as the subheading reads, "Only seven comfort women *halmoni* left [at the Sharing House]... hoping to receive Japanese apology before death."<sup>lxv</sup> Such articles once again homogenize the perspectives of all the women to demanding an apology from the Japanese

government, despite several testimonies stating that they feel more anger toward the Korean government and people.<sup>lvi</sup> Another article written in celebration of the March 1<sup>st</sup> holiday in 2010 also mentions an individual woman, who is reported as shedding a tear while listening to a student's speech during one of the weekly demonstrations in front of the Japanese embassy. Yet after a couple lines regarding this incident, the article quickly turns to an interview with a Japanese man named Matsubara Masaru, who formerly worked in a comfort station. In the interview, Matsubara discusses witnessing the young comfort women in tears after they returned from "work" each night and speculating that they had come to Japan to send money to their family.<sup>lvii</sup> Although Matsubara gives a compelling interview, it is unclear why the reporter could not have asked the comfort women themselves regarding their experiences at the demonstration or perhaps referred to the hundreds of detailed testimonies published by the Korean government. By relying on the perspectives of Matsubara, the article ironically gives more time and weight to a testimony of a witness, once again male, than the testimonies of the victims themselves.

Furthermore, some counterexamples of articles that seem to be entirely dedicated to giving voice to the comfort women still serve the larger purpose of receiving a national apology from Japan. One article from January 2012 reports an interaction between a comfort woman and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in which she condemns the Korean government by stating, "Is your ministry a Japanese ministry? Were you pleased to see the *halmoni* pass away one by one for the last twenty years?... Take responsibility."<sup>lviii</sup> She even goes on to explicitly criticize the history of gender discrimination in South Korea: "During the presidency of Park

Chung-hee, we supposedly received compensation, but we didn't know anything since the country only taught men [to read and write]."<sup>lxix</sup> Yet despite her demanding the Korean government to take responsibility, the article still attempts to end with a positive portrayal of the Korean government and a negative one of the Japanese government. The conversation between the woman and the government official is followed by a statement from a representative of the Ministry, "At first the *halmoni* scolded us, but later she encouraged us to do well."<sup>lxx</sup> Yet no part in the article quotes a comfort woman who encouraged or showed faith in the Korean government. The article also mentions that the Korean government proposed bilateral talks with Japan about the comfort women issue, but Japan had refused to respond for more than four months. In doing so, the article emphasizes the efforts of the Korean government, although it is obvious that the woman quoted in the article does not consider them sufficient. It also portrays the Japanese government as the only one responsible for the fact that the former comfort women have still not received compensation, although the woman alludes to the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations, in which the Korean government reached agreement with the Japanese yet tricked the victims out of their money. Therefore, the article aims to pressure the Korean government to take more action against the Japanese while avoiding the historical crimes committed on the women by the Korean government and people. As Yang writes, "By looking outward to Japan, Koreans evade questions regarding the responsibility that we have for our own colonial history."<sup>lxxi</sup>

Even the terms used to refer to the comfort women reveal much about the Korean public's patriarchal sentiments toward the women. In articles referring to the women while they were at the comfort

stations, the most common term used is *cheonyuh*, which means young, unmarried women but also refers to virgin. Thus, intentionally or not, the media's use of this word gives the effect of focusing on the "stolen chastity" of the women. For example, in the aforementioned article interviewing Matsubara, the word *cheonyuh* is used a total of ten times, including the title which reads, "Korean *cheonyuh*'s familial love did not cease even in a comfort station."<sup>lxxii</sup> Furthermore, the word is almost always paired with the word *Korean*, which again obliterates the individuality of the comfort women and homogenizes them into one identity of *Korean cheonyuh*, defined against the Japanese military. In addition, the term most commonly used to refer to the women during present times, is *halmoni*. *Halmoni* is a term of respect and familiarity used to refer to elderly women, including one's own grandmothers. In her 2008 book *The Comfort Women*, C. Sarah Soh gives an overview of how the comfort women came to be called *halmoni*.<sup>lxxiii</sup> She writes that Koreans adopted the term to show respect, because they felt that the term "comfort woman" conjures up images of prostitution.<sup>lxxiv</sup> Yet although it is understandable that the Korean media would choose to use this term, issues lie in the way and the sheer number of times they use it. Out of the 175 articles on the Korean Institute's website, 68 articles, or 38.9 percent, used the term *halmoni*. The term is also especially used in articles that try to appeal to the emotions of the readers. One such article, conveniently published during the August 15<sup>th</sup> Korean Independence Day, uses the term *halmoni* eighteen times, including statements like "To us, *halmoni* is sadness. We're sadder when August 15<sup>th</sup> comes around."<sup>lxxv</sup> By first introducing the *halmoni* as enjoying singing and dancing and only later revealing that she suffers from post traumatic stress disorder due to her

experiences at the comfort station, this article's use of the term *halmoni* compels the readers to think of their own grandmothers and invokes feelings of sadness and anger, especially targeted towards Japan. Nevertheless, as Soh states, one would never think of calling female leaders, no matter their age, *halmoni*. She further argues that it would be more appropriate to "use [the former comfort women's] full names followed by the honorific suffix *-ssi* or *-nim*," which emphasizes their individual identities and portrays them as strong subjects in charge of their own situations.<sup>lxxvi</sup> The comfort women's rapid transition from *cheonyuh* to *halmoni* in the media not only obliterates their experiences as middle-aged women when Korea silenced and shamed them, but it also conjures up images of vulnerability on both ends, which the Korean society supposedly has the responsibility to protect. In other words, the excessive use of these terms still proliferates patriarchal sentiments that Japan stole the virginity of our *Korean cheonyuh* and caused our *halmoni* to "shed tears of blood."<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Furthermore, one of the most disturbing articles found actually brings up this importance of how we refer to the comfort women, only to be completely dismissed by the Korean Council. This article from July 2012 reports that Hillary Clinton corrected a U.S. State Department official during a briefing that "enforced sex slaves" is the more accurate term to the euphemism "comfort women." Many Korean scholars backed this movement to question the term "comfort women" and even stated that it is crucial to first ask the victims for their perspectives before proceeding with any debate on the appropriate term. Nevertheless, the Korean Council responded, "It has been almost a year since the Korean Constitutional Court's ruling that urged the resolution of the comfort women

issue, and it is not the time to be just debating about a word... The important thing is not to change a word but to receive a sincere apology from the Japanese government.”<sup>lxxviii</sup> Although it is understandable that the Korean Council is trying to hasten the movement to receive an apology from the Japanese government, especially since the average age of the victims is 86, it is absurd that the organization advocating for the victims would completely dismiss the importance of how they are being referred to. In fact, as poststructural feminists argue, discourse has the ability to normalize power relations: the root cause of the women’s suffering, not only in the comfort stations but also after they returned to Korea, is the patriarchal ideas shaped by discourse that rape can be used as a weapon of war and that women are ultimately at fault for being raped. This is especially hypocritical for the Korean Council, because one of the missions listed on their website is the “prevention of sexual violence against women during war times.”<sup>lxxix</sup> Although I am not arguing for either term of “comfort women” or “sex slave,” as this is in fact a difficult debate, I am arguing that it is a debate always worth having, because it serves as an invaluable opportunity to question the discursive power that is normalized in our society. It is especially important for the former comfort women who were silenced for almost fifty years due to issues of representation, or lack thereof.

#### *Discourse Analysis in the Age of the Internet; Gender Analysis in the Age of “Equality”*

Despite appearing to have moved beyond the decades of silencing to wholeheartedly seeking justice for the former comfort women, the Korean Institute and the news articles on its website continue to filter the women’s voices and use their experiences for political purposes, framing the issue as a

national crime committed on Korea by Japan. This not only results in seeking a type of justice that may not fit the desires of all the women, but it also oppresses the women even further by suppressing their subjectivities and using them as a means to another end. In addition, such movements are not effective in preventing the “repeating of the painful history” as the Korean Institute claims, because they fail to question the patriarchal norms underlying our societal discourse. After all the suffering of the women, the least that the Korean society can do is to allow them to speak for themselves rather than censoring their words or calling on the authorities to speak on their behalf. As Butler and other poststructuralist theorists would argue, there is something positive to be gained just by allowing the women to speak up about their experiences in the ways they feel compelled.

This project of analyzing the contemporary discourse around the comfort women issue sparks several questions for further research. One is that while this project focused on the Korean Institute as a lens, there are thousands of other articles and publications on comfort women yet to be analyzed. Furthermore, South Korea, as one of the world leaders in Internet usage, has a very active Internet culture in which people often keep blogs and leave hundreds of comments on news articles.<sup>lxxx</sup> It would be fascinating and valuable to take on a project that evaluates whether these Korean “netizens” employ the same nationalist discourses found in the articles. Discourse analysis becomes even more valuable in our digital age, because information is so accessible and the voice of the average citizen has unlimited potential to reach the rest of the world. This project also reminds us the importance of questioning the supposed “gender equality” in developed countries. In South Korea, for example, the country

looks equal on the surface—it has elected the first female president in 2012 and its education system is completely meritocratic across genders. Nevertheless, patriarchal values still run deep, with only 60 percent of college-educated women working and these working women earning only 63 percent of what men do.<sup>lxix</sup> Particularly related to sexual violence, one estimate showed that just 6 to 8 percent of the victims report their cases to the police, while only 41 percent of these reported cases reached a conviction in 2009.<sup>lxxii</sup> It is clear that South Korea still struggles with the silencing and shaming of sexual assault victims, and it is no wonder that this is reflected in the contemporary discourse around comfort women. In order to understand what provokes people to commit sexual assault and even further, what compels people to blame the victims for it, we need to analyze discourse and understand its ability to shape thought and normalize power relations.

<sup>i</sup> The exact number and ethnic composition of the comfort women are unclear due to the destruction of Japanese government documents from this time.

<sup>ii</sup> Alice Yun Chai, “Comfort Women’/Military Sexual Slavery,” in *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Helen Tierney (Greenwood Press, 2002), accessed October 15, 2012, <http://gem.greenwood.com/wse/wsePrint.jsp?id=id134>.

<sup>iii</sup> Chizuko Ueno. *Nationalism and Gender* (Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 69.

<sup>iv</sup> I am using the word *feminist* broadly to mean that which aims to advance the rights and social standing of women.

<sup>v</sup> For a definition of *nationalist*, see Hyunah Yang, “Remembering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (New York, Routledge: 1998), 128-129: “[that which is nationalist] affirms unified identity, based on an unchangeable essence that is transmitted through blood and homogeneous culture...Like other forms of anti-colonial nationalism, however, unified Korean national identity was constructed to a great degree through its opposition to colonizing Others, including Japan.”

<sup>vi</sup> From here on, *Korean* and *Korea* will generally refer to *South Korean* and *South Korea*, which has more accessible publications regarding comfort women, as well as a history of direct tensions with Japan.

<sup>vii</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 43.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Throughout this article, I will adopt Chris Weedon’s definition of *subjectivity* as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world.” See Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 32.

<sup>x</sup> See Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 114: “Now that everyone knows the story, however, I feel I have I have nothing to fear. So now I have told you everything about myself, I can rest easily.” Similar sentiments are expressed in different testimonies on pages 87, 157, and 167.

<sup>xi</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 88.

<sup>xii</sup> Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), vi; C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 43.

<sup>xiii</sup> C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 45.

<sup>xiv</sup> Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, trans. Suzanne O’Brien (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 23.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> For other works with similar aims of informing the public about the “comfort women” issue and the necessity for Japanese state redress, see: Alice Yun Chai, “Asian-Pacific feminist coalition politics” in *Korean Studies*, Volume 17 (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1993) and George Hicks, *The Comfort Women: Japan’s Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 1995).

<sup>xvii</sup> C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 48.

<sup>xviii</sup> Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), vi.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid., vii-7.

<sup>xx</sup> See Ibid., 48, 68, 78, 113, 123, and 176.

<sup>xxi</sup> For another pioneering work on the selective history and politicization of the comfort women issue, see Chungmoo Choi, ed., “The comfort women: colonialism, war, and sex,” in *Special Issue of Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 5:1 (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>xxii</sup> Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender* (Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 92-94.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), 109.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Hyunah Yang, “Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (New York, Routledge: 1998), 129-131.

<sup>xxv</sup> See Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), vi-vii and Chizuko Ueno, *Nationalism and Gender* (Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 70-71.

<sup>xxvi</sup> “S. Korea discloses sensitive documents,” *United Press International*, January 17, 2005, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/2005/01/17/SKorea-discloses-sensitive-documents/UPI-38131105952315/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2005/01/17/SKorea-discloses-sensitive-documents/UPI-38131105952315/).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Bong-Kyu Kim, “Comfort woman *halmoni*, ‘Korean government, are you just waiting for us to die off?’” *Pressian*, January 25, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=2&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=352](http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=2&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=352).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Sang-Won Chang, “Abe, Prostitution ordinary because Korea had many brothels,” *Hankooki*, March 20, 2007, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://news.hankooki.com/lpage/politics/200703/h2007032017454421040.htm>.

<sup>xxix</sup> “Japan, until when will you repeat ridiculous remarks?” *Yonhap News*, March 25, 2007, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&m\\_id=sec&sid1=110&oid=001&aid=0001586057](http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&m_id=sec&sid1=110&oid=001&aid=0001586057).

<sup>xxx</sup> “Ridiculous remarks repeated from Japanese higher officials—has it gotten out of control?” *Seoul News*, March 29, 2010, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20100329031003>.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Young-Soo Kang, “Korean-Japanese civic protests in movement,” *Kookmin News*, April 3, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&m\\_id=sec&sid1=102&oid=005&aid=0000049613](http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&m_id=sec&sid1=102&oid=005&aid=0000049613).

<sup>xxii</sup> Sang-Hun Choe, “Desolate Dots in the Sea Stir Deep Emotions as South Korea Resists a Japanese Claim,” *New York Times*, August 30, 2008, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/31/world/asia/31islands.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

<sup>xxiii</sup> “Japan asks ROK to join ICJ Takeshima action,” *Jiji Press*, August 22, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/national/T120821004503.htm>.

<sup>xxiv</sup> C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 57.

<sup>xxv</sup> “Korean Institute for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan,” Korean Institute for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, accessed December 1, 2012, <http://www.truetruth.org>.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For an example of this overemphasis, see *Ibid*: “This kind of transportation [of the women to the comfort stations] could not have been possible without the permission and cooperation of the Japanese military... Even when civilians were involved in the mobilization, it is obvious that the Japanese government and military were behind them.”

<sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxix</sup> C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>xl</sup> Alice Yun Chai, “Comfort Women/Military Sexual Slavery,” in *Women’s Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Helen Tierney (Greenwood Press, 2002), accessed October 15, 2012, <http://gem.greenwood.com/wse/wsePrint.jsp?id=id134>.

<sup>xli</sup> On the English section of the website, the Korean Institute actually states, “The Japanese government’s negligence of the issue, especially, makes it more difficult but essential for us, *whose nation was the primary victim*, to collect all available evidence as soon as possible” (emphasis my own).

<sup>xlii</sup> Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 39.

<sup>xliii</sup> Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities, *Ianfu Report Vol. 1: We were Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (Seoul, South Korea: Korean Institute for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 2007), 252.

<sup>xliv</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>xlv</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>xvi</sup> Soon-Joo Yuh, e-mail message to author, December 9, 2012. The quote was translated from Korean.

<sup>xvii</sup> Institute for Research in Collaborationist Activities, *Ianfu Report Vol. 1: We were Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military* (Seoul, South Korea: Korean Institute for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, 2007), 46.

<sup>xviii</sup> Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 47.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Chang-Myung Lee, "Comfort women *halmoni* 1000<sup>th</sup> Wednesday demonstration, still shameless Japan," *Money Today*, December 12, 2011, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=3&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=34](http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=3&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=34).

<sup>iv</sup> Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 49. Also see Howard, 57: "The Japanese were bad. But the Koreans were just as bad because they put their own women through such terrible ordeals for personal profit...It doesn't matter whether we receive compensation or not. After all, what could we do with money, with so few years left before we die?"

<sup>v</sup> Min-Jeong Cho, "Civic groups, Japanese government, acknowledge the comfort women issue and repent," *Yonhap News*, August 28, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=37](http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=37).

<sup>vi</sup> Byung-Sik Lee, "Comfort women, wartime women's rights issue," *Yonhap News*, August 15, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=370](http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=370).

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> "The 67<sup>th</sup> *Kwang-Bok Jeol* Celebration Address," *Office of the President*, August 15, 2012, accessed December 1,

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<sup>ix</sup> "President Lee urges Japan for repentance of human rights abuses," *Yonhap News*, November 8, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=385](http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=385).

<sup>x</sup> Eun-Joo Lee, "Kono insists Japan own up to WWII sex slavery," *Joongang Daily*, October 9, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=379](http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=379).

<sup>xi</sup> In the Korean articles on the Korean Institute's website, Japan also seems to be employing similar mechanisms of politicizing the comfort women issue. For an example, see Ibid: "If Japan denies the issue of comfort women," Kono [former Japanese chief cabinet secretary] said in an interview released yesterday, "it could lose national credibility."

<sup>xii</sup> "Japanese right wing party advertisement distorts historical facts about comfort women, 'They earned great income from prostitution...'" *Herald Economy*, November 9, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=386](http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=386).

<sup>xiii</sup> Sang-Hyup Kim, "Last resort for Japan's complete ignoring of the 'comfort women issue': consideration of proposal for Japanese-Korean arbitration committee," *Munhwa Daily News*, August 17, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012, [http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=371](http://www.truthtable.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=371).

<sup>xiv</sup> Hyunah Yang, "Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing," in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (New York, Routledge: 1998), 130.

<sup>xv</sup> Chizuko Ueno. *Nationalism and Gender* (Melbourne, Australia: Trans Pacific Press, 2004), 75.

<sup>xvi</sup> Hyung-Min Jeon, "Comfort woman *halmoni*'s tears on the March 1<sup>st</sup> holiday," *Kyeonggi Daily News*, March 2,

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<sup>lxvi</sup> See Keith Howard, ed., *True Stories of the Korean Comfort Women* (London: Cassell, 1995), 49 and 57.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Bo-Keun Kim, “Korean *cheonyuh*’s familial love did not cease even in a comfort station,” *Han Kyeoreh*, August 4, 2010, accessed December 1, 2012,  
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<sup>lxviii</sup> Je-Min Son, “Comfort woman *halmoni*, ‘What did you do for the last 20 years? Are you a Japanese ministry?’” *Kyungbyang News*, January 25, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012,  
[http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=2&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=o](http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=2&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=o)

n&sc=on&select\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=351.

<sup>lxix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lxx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Hyunah Yang, “Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* (New York, Routledge: 1998), 127.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Bo-Keun Kim, “Korean *cheonyuh*’s familial love did not cease even in a comfort station,” *Han Kyeoreh*, August 4, 2010, accessed December 1, 2012,  
[http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1](http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1)

=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc=on&select\_arrange=headnum&desc=asc&no=325.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 73.

<sup>lxxiv</sup> *Wianbu*, the Korean term for “comfort woman,” is still used to refer to prostitutes near American military bases.

<sup>lxxv</sup> Susan Han, “The day these women become flowers,” *Munhwa Daily News*, August 15, 2011, accessed

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December 1, 2012,  
[http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=2&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc](http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=2&sn1=&divpage=1&sn=off&ss=on&sc)

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<sup>lxxvi</sup> C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 74.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Mi-Hyang Yoon, “MB, how could you make the *balmoni* shed tears of blood...” *Ob My News*, September 29, 2009, accessed December 1, 2012,  
[http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true\\_news&page=1&sn1](http://www.truetruth.org/bbs2/zboard.php?id=true_news&page=1&sn1)

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<sup>lxxviii</sup> Hye-Lim Suh, “Comfort woman vs. sex slave, scholars say, ‘comfort woman’ is a proper noun...the perpetrator must be disclosed when using sex slave,” *The Korea Times*, July 17, 2012, accessed December 1, 2012,  
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<sup>lxxix</sup> “Honor and Human Rights to the *Halmoni*,” Korean Council for the Women Drafted for Military Sexual Slavery by Japan, accessed December 1, 2012,  
<http://www.womenandwar.net/contents/general/>

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<sup>lxxx</sup> The World Bank, “Internet users (per 100 people),” accessed December 12, 2012,  
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<sup>lxxxi</sup> “Gender arbitrage in South Korea,” *The Economist*, October 21, 2010, accessed December 12, 2012,  
<http://www.economist.com/node/17311877>.

<sup>lxxxii</sup> Bryan Kay, “South Korea’s Silenced Speak,” *The Diplomat*, November 22, 2011, accessed December 12, 2012,  
<http://thediplomat.com/2011/11/22/south-koreas-silenced-speak/2/>.

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# ‘STRANGE KALEIDOSCOPIC SCENES’:

*Western Representations of Japanese Cities in Meiji, 1868-1912*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is a discussion of Western representations of cities in Japan during the Meiji era. Western accounts of Japan, whether in newspapers, travel guides or memoirs, were instrumental in both creating and then perpetuating certain views of Japan disseminated in the writers' home countries. However, these views largely focused on the static, ancient side of Japan – rather than that which in historical treatments of the Meiji era is seen as emblematic of the change which the country was undergoing: the “modern” city. The paper will ask to what extent the representations of Japan of this time were informed by colonial precedent and to what extent they were influenced by Japanese traditions of representation. It will conclude with a discussion of how the dichotomy of East and West as synonymous with that between tradition and progress could be seen as frustrating self-representations of Japanese modernity.

## INTRODUCTION

At the start of the Meiji era, Tokyo was still known as Edo, as it was until the city was opened for trade and renamed a year later. Tokyo's shift from shogunal headquarters to a modern capital began in earnest in the 1870s and continued throughout (and beyond) the following three decades of Meiji. However, for many visitors to Japan, nearby Yokohama, not Tokyo, was their first experience of a

Japanese city. Like Yokohama, most of the other cities visited by Western tourists or travelers were ports, and their very status as a “contact zone”<sup>i</sup> between Japan and the West led to their modernization ahead of the rest of the country. For most tourists, these ports were not the end of the journey and were instead a border zone between their docked ships and the traditional, ‘real’ Japan that waited for them inland. However, for long-term residents, their interests (mainly commercial or diplomatic) meant that the treaty ports and Tokyo were ‘home’.

The authors discussed in this paper are from a variety of backgrounds and fall into both the tourist and resident camps. Some of them wrote of experiences before the Meiji era, (Francis Hall) and some published their memoirs after the death of the Emperor, (Walter Weston, Isabel Anderson) but their descriptions and accounts impart information relevant to the paper's aims and have therefore been included. As well as falling into different groups with reference to their relationship with Japan, they are also split by their relationship to writing itself; their circumstances and abilities were widely disparate. However, in writing on Japan, the authors were all part of a tradition of representation that in the second half of the nineteenth century had almost separated “Japan” from the “reality” of its existence:

“The whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people...Japanese people

are...simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art.”<sup>ii</sup>

This paper firstly explores the paradigms that informed the writing of all those who attempted to represent Japan and secondly analyses the play between these conventions and the changing Japan that confronted them.

#### VICTORIAN TRAVEL WRITING: THE CONVENTIONS

Before discussing specific conventions of representing Japan, the wider context of travel writing by Victorians (here I mean both British *and* other English-language writers of the Victorian age) in a time of empires and colonies must be addressed. The situation of Japan as an “Oriental” nation not colonized by Western nations was unique. However, the rhetoric of colonialism and empire was present in the West’s dealings with and literature about Japan. Authors such as Kipling were writing for a colonial audience: his 1889 Letters were published in the *Pioneer*, a newspaper in Allahabad, India, and contain many comparisons between the ‘natives’ of Japan and the *Babu* – the Indian white-collar class with their “veneer of English culture.”<sup>iii</sup> Japan’s proximity to other Eastern colonized (or semi-colonized) nations prompted further comparisons; for many “globe-trotters,”<sup>iv</sup> Japan was one stop on a world tour that was largely restricted to colonies like India and the treaty ports of China. For diplomats or merchants, Japan was also the latest posting in a career likely to have included other strategic locations in the Far East. This is seen in the naming (or renaming) process that Japan underwent at the hands of Westerners. Yokohama had a Bund, like Shanghai,<sup>v</sup> its “native boats” were “called by foreigners, *sampans*.<sup>vi</sup>

In her work *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt argues that the “Imperial stylistics” of travel writing in the late nineteenth-

century was based on an unequal relationship between the seer and the seen. The land is landscape – something for the “seeing-man’s” powers of taste to work upon.<sup>vii</sup> How this was articulated in a Japanese context shall be discussed more fully below, but it is important to note here the aestheticization of the colonial land into landscape and the clear hierarchy between viewer and view. I will argue that these metropolitan norms of representation were open to re-interpretation in a country that had long commodified its landscapes and *meisho* for domestic and, more recently, international consumption.

Although Japan was not *quite* a colony, it was certainly part of “the Orient”, subject to (or created by) Western representations. Many of the tropes used to represent Japan were based on attitudes towards to the Orient; which Setsuko Ono (writing *before* Said’s *Orientalism*), in her work on Loti and Hearn, splits into three groups – the antithetical, the fearful, and the projective.<sup>viii</sup> The antithetical attitude sees an utter reversal of mores in the Oriental nation; they are stagnant where the West is dynamic, they are decadent where the West is modernizing. Connected to this is the idea that the value of his or her own society could be confirmed through the writer’s comparison of it to the other. In writing on Japan this takes an ambivalent stance: Japan is a fairyland, a land of children, it is fantastical, its people are constantly at play. References to the fantastical worlds of Carroll and Swift are widespread:

“To hear of a thousand houses  
being burned in a night is  
appalling, but a thousand of these  
Lilliputian dwellings and their  
microscopic landscape gardens  
would not cover more area than  
two or three blocks of a foreign  
city”<sup>ix</sup>

"A large number of them [Japanese passengers on the train] were modified Europeans and resembled nothing more than Tenniel's picture of the White Rabbit on the first page of Alice in Wonderland."<sup>x</sup>

Considering that the Meiji era saw the creation of an industrializing modern nation with a strong army and economy, we can see these descriptions as a denial of Japan's attempts to join the great powers, a refusal to see Japan as a threat or even an equal.

Fear of the nations of the Orient shows itself in writing that emphasizes the sheer magnitude of their populaces. This fear often led to descriptions of teeming cities, human individuals reduced to herds or swarms of animals and racist depictions of people seen as inferior to those in the West. Tokyo is referred to as a "warren" in numerous descriptions, and its habitations as "Brobdingnagian pigeon houses."<sup>xi</sup>

Other writers projected reactions to their own cultures onto the Orient; the decadent *fin-de-siecle* in England was transposed to the East, the blight of opium addiction was removed to China, and in Japan's case, the negative aspects of modernization and industrialization were criticized by writers who saw a repetition of what had already struck their own nations happening in a land which was for many in the West the source of their aesthetic values. Yokoyama notes the sorrow in the description of how "A line of railway, not long completed, seams the fair champaign with an ugly scar of "Western Progress" – the shibboleth of New Japan."<sup>xii</sup> The New Japan in these writers' eyes is, Yokoyama notes, "not at all Japan but industrialized Britain, or, in more general terms, modern European civilization itself."<sup>xiii</sup>

Connected to fear over the loss of "true" and "pure" Japan is the desire for and anxiety over "authenticity."<sup>xiv</sup> This is seen in much of the writing about Japan at this time as well as in the movements of tourists and travelers within the country. The modern periphery of treaty ports was regarded as an aberrance, to be navigated as quickly as possible in favor of the timeless, static interior. The "real" Japan that Isabella Bird longed to "get away into" would not be found in the cities of Yokohama or Tokyo. For her, Tokyo is a modern destination: "It would seem quite an incongruity to travel to *Yedo* by railway, but quite proper when the destination is Tôkiyô."<sup>xv</sup>

However, the "authenticity" of writers' accounts of their trips to Nikko, Kamakura and Kyoto needed to be accompanied by visual or material support, and the "bazaars" of Tokyo and Yokohama, as well as the burgeoning of photography studios there, meant that whilst the cities were not the loci of "authentic" Japan, they were the site of its production and propagation. The following section will discuss the specific conventions that had grown up around Japan's artistic representation. The use of the aesthetics and conventions of representing 'Japan' as it was understood in the West appears a more deliberate decision than the 'imperial stylistics' that silently inform these writers' works and are readily apparent in both Japanese and Western representations.

#### PRODUCING JAPAN: THE ECONOMICS OF REPRESENTATION

Japanese art shaped the expectations of visitors to Japan and the content of their writings on it. For most visitors to Japan, there was a gap between the country that had become familiar to them through the *Japonisme* movement in the arts of late-nineteenth-century Europe and America and the country that faced them upon

their arrival. As Yokoyama notes, “in spite of their emphasis on the singularity of Japan...these writers seemed confident that they knew the country fairly well. It was a paradox.”<sup>xvi</sup> The country seemed familiar to many who visited it, and the nature of the representations certainly affected travelers’ reactions to the real ‘subjects’:

“I feel as if I had seen them all before, so like are they to their pictures on trays, fans and teapots.”<sup>xvii</sup>

“Instead of blue and smiling seas backed by a glittering white cone transferred to the horizon from amidst the cherry-blossoms of some fan or screen at home, it was something quite different that we saw when we crawled on deck at sunset.”<sup>xviii</sup>

The domestic context of the representations is important; Japan is at once reduced to something feminine, ornamental – it is all decoration, background, like the “Japanese” interiors of Victorian homes. The expectation is that the role that “Japan” plays “at home” will be continued in the country itself. The reactions to Japan refusing to conform to its image as consumed in the West will be discussed below.

Like their textual counterparts that propagated certain literary, imperialist, and orientalist conventions, the art objects from Japan were responsible for the continued projection of certain images of the country and its people. However as Christine Guth, like many before her, has noted, the agency for this representation is not the curio-collector’s alone; the hunger for Japan and “things Japanese” was “driven as much by supply as by demand.”<sup>xix</sup> This is seen in the role of Japanese in the commercial aspects of representation – the production of ‘Japanese’ goods for export or for a specific tourist market.<sup>xx</sup>

To some extent, travel writers were also complicit in the continuation of an aesthetic vision of Japan begun by the reception in the West of *meisho* prints such as those of Hokusai and Hiroshige.<sup>xxi</sup> Yokoyama notes this in his analysis of Bridge’s descriptions of Japan – they are “not too different from what one could imagine as a typical Japanese scene through the prints of Hiroshige or Hokusai.” The writer is not describing a Hiroshige or a Hokusai but a “typical” scene informed and framed by their aesthetics – he is removed even from Japanese self-representation. In their descriptions of Japan, the experiences of Western writers were shaped by previous expectations, and Western writers matched their experiences to the expectations of a metropolitan audience as a consequence.

Dixon, in his 1882 work *The Land of the Morning*, describes a Tokyo landscape whose “prevailing tints are grey, brown and black...away beyond the house-tops and the undulations of the plain, the matchless cone of the sacred Mount Fuji...”<sup>xxii</sup> The reader’s inner eye moves upwards through the scene, as in one of Hokusai’s Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji, or One Hundred Views of Edo. There are innumerable examples of this placement of Fuji within a Tokyo ‘vista’, perhaps to make up for the frequently noted lack of landmarks within the city itself.

When language fails writers, they rely on the aesthetic conventions of Japanese art to rescue them. Hearn describes the “far faint high promontories...all visible in one delicious view, - blue-penciled in a beauty of ghostly haze indescribable...”<sup>xxiii</sup> The indescribable and the undiscussed are indications of the already rich pool of images and descriptions which formed the Victorian image of Japan, and allowed (or encouraged) such representations.<sup>xxiv</sup> Kipling’s laconic description of the green of the hills above Nagasaki harbor is

perhaps the finest example of this: “It was the green of a Japanese screen and the pines were screen pines.”<sup>xxv</sup> Kipling reverses the relationship between the subject and object of representation. This is similar to Davidson’s disappointment that Fuji is not surrounded by the decorative cherry-blossoms from back home. He highlights the problem facing many who visited Japan – that for them the ‘real’ Japan was not the country but its image.

The development of commercial photography in Japan was closely connected to Westerners as both producers and consumers and thrived in the port of Yokohama, where photographers such as Beato, Stillfried and later Farsari all had studios.<sup>xxvi</sup> As its popularity rose, the aesthetics and technology of photography can be seen to influence the descriptions of Japan within Western writings:

“If you buy nothing else in Japan, and you will break yourself unless you begin as a pauper, you must buy photographs....On the deck of the steamer I laughed at his [Farsari’s] red and blue hill-sides. In the hills I saw he had painted true.”<sup>xxvii</sup>

Kipling again here reverses the image and that which it represents; the hills are confirmations of the accuracy of the photographs of Farsari, contradicting the purpose of the photograph as a validation of the traveler’s narrative whilst emphasizing the fantastical nature of Japan.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Japan itself seems to be exceptionally suited to photography (even to the point of requiring it) – indeed, as suggested by Kipling, the photograph album became a necessary part of the tourist’s souvenir collection. In *An Engineer’s Holiday* (1880), Pidgeon remarks that “The coup d’oeil of a Japanese street” is “a picture whose colour and movement, grace and

grotesqueness cannot be matched in the world, but which no pen or pencil can bring before eyes that have not looked upon the thing itself.”<sup>xxix</sup>

Ten years later, in *Seas and Lands*, Arnold asserts that “nothing but an instantaneous photograph, carefully coloured could impart even an idea of the picturesque population of the Nakadori or of Ginza Street.”<sup>xxx</sup> To “look upon the thing itself” (in the ultimate authenticating souvenir of the photograph) was now possible. However, Arnold was not content to leave all description to photographs (which interspersed his text) but focused on that which photography could not depict; motion, sound and smell: “the endless clatter of the innumerable wooden pattens; the shuffling of the countless waraji; the slow shaggy oxen dragging the bamboo waggons...” However, tradition is not ignored completely by Arnold; at the end of this list of sights and sounds of a Japanese street, we see:

“...at the four-cross way, where a long vista opens westward, Fuji’s grand and perfect peak sixty miles off, towering above the rosy clouds of sunset, lifting itself to our far-off gaze in such majesty of form and colour as no other mountain in the world possesses - a sight that puts on the other sights, as it were, the Creator’s own mark when he made this wonderful, delightful, unique and mysterious Japan.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

The vista of the street scene, created by Arnold, is authenticated by the inclusion of Fuji – a validation of the writer’s excursion from the norms of representation through a nod to tradition. For writers of Japan, the formation of the “tradition of seeing” that informed their work began with the formation of an image of the country prior to arrival, continued in the descriptions of experiences and seeing within the country

itself, and was also present in the logistics of viewing the country.<sup>xxxii</sup> As westerners, travel writers in Meiji Japan were restricted by the limits placed on their travel by the authorities but also by the existence of norms of travel and sites of interest created by their forbears and continued by a burgeoning international tourist industry.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

“YOU CANNOT APPRECIATE SCENERY UNLESS YOU SIT IN A ‘RICKSHAW.’”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

A method of transportation invented in Japan around the beginning of the Meiji period, the rickshaw became synonymous with the tourist experience of the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama.<sup>xxxv</sup> For many it was a sign of Japan learning from the West while retaining the ‘charm’ of the Orient: “The new and the old...have made a compromise in the novel conception of the ubiquitous *jin-rikisha*”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Although it was not restricted to westerners, the master-servant relationship implied by the Western customer and the Japanese “horse” adds a certain colonial dimension to the rickshaw’s use.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Often relinquishing decision-making to their runners, Westerners were free to gaze at the sights that surrounded them whilst being whisked around the city. Guth’s comparison between globe-trotters and “their cousins, flâneurs” informs us of the nature of their gaze; they too are free to “roam the city observing and being observed without actually interacting with those they encounter.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Lafcadio Hearn appears to agree: “traveling by kuruma, one can only see and dream.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Eliza Scidmore, in her aptly named *Jinrikisha Days in Japan*, talks of the “flying glimpses...caught from a jinrikisha”.<sup>xl</sup> A. B. Mitford, himself a writer of Japan, criticizes travel literature on Japan as being no more than “sketchy impressions of passing travellers” - this suggests the

extent to which the logistics of travel affected the nature of the genre.<sup>xli</sup> Riding in a rickshaw, there is no sense of continuity or relationship with the geography of the place; everything is a vista, a snapshot, a vignette.

For Hearn, the rickshaw not only affected his mode of seeing but framed his views of the city:

“the jinrikisha...is the most cosy little vehicle imaginable; and the street vistas, as seen above the dancing white mushroom-shaped hat of my sandaled runner, have an allurement of which I fancy that I could never weary”<sup>xlii</sup>

The contrast between the very close and the distant as embodied in the the runner’s hat and the vist, is reminiscent of Hiroshige’s playful perspective in compositions such as *Haneda no watashi benten no yashiro*, where the hairy legs and arms of the ferryman frame the view of the shrine across the water.<sup>xliii</sup>

In a letter to the *Pioneer*, Kipling’s dry wit hints at both the connection between the viewer and the viewed which the rickshaw enables and also the exaggerated quality that this has taken on as a tourist “must”: “you cannot appreciate scenery unless you sit in a ‘rickshaw.’” There is a strange logic at work here – Kipling’s comment requires unpacking – he mocks the hyperbole of tourist conventions, but also highlights the extent to which the trappings of tourism were connected to the act of seeing. Without riding a rickshaw, one is not engaging with the scenery in the correct way – one is not appreciating Japan properly; the key responsibility of a tourist. The conventions of tourism also become the conventions of travel writing; no account of the time was complete without a rickshaw ride through the narrow streets of Tokyo, or out to Kamakura or Nikko.

As discussed above, in *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt highlights an important function of the landscape to the Western ‘seeing-man’ – it is fodder for the travel writer’s (or traveler’s) “powers of taste to work upon.”<sup>xliv</sup> In Meiji Japan, the traveler’s powers of taste alone were not enough; intervention of some sort was required to assure full appreciation (firstly by the visitor and secondly their audience) of the scene; whether the jinrikisha runner, the photographer or the unknown artists and collectors involved in the transmission of a Japanese aesthetics of looking. There is mediation between the seer and seen – an economics of representation. Ono states that “both the subject and object participate in the creation of the image of the object.”<sup>xlv</sup> In the next sections I will argue for the complexity of this participation.

#### ATAGOYAMA: A “RED-FUR-LIKE 40KM SIGHT”<sup>xlvi</sup>

“The first thing a stranger tries to do, is get a general idea of the town.”<sup>xlvii</sup> In her discussion of the imperial stylistics of travel writing in the colonial period, there is one key trope in the text of ‘discovery’ that Pratt refers to as the “promontory description” – already a common trope in Romantic and Victorian literature.<sup>xlviii</sup> In the travel writing on Meiji cities, the promontory description is a point of intersection between Western and Japanese traditions of seeing. Japan is not a virgin land, the “possessive or civilizing fantasies” inspired by promontory scenes in colonial writing are replaced here by other desires.<sup>xlix</sup> Using the paradigms set up in the previous two sections – the colonial/Orientalist gaze and the “traditions of seeing” associated with Japan – I want to look at the promontory description as a study of a “contact zone” between Western attempts to see the city and Japanese ones to show it.

As Bird notes above, the desire to get a “general idea” of the city, which from within its narrow streets would have been impossible, led newcomers to high points around the city. Chamberlain counts “the view over the city from the tower on Atago-yama” as one of the principal sights of Tokyo.<sup>l</sup> Almost every description of the city involves such a description; with mixed reactions. Scidmore is taken there by her rickshaw runner, and Whitney calls it a “popular place for sightseers.”<sup>li</sup>

The concept of a panoramic view is connected to not only the colonial gaze but also the photographic. Felice Beato took a five-photograph panorama from Atago-yama in 1865. The site had long been associated with various ‘native’ gazes; as a moon-viewing spot and also as a shrine to the fire-god due to the clear view of the houses below.

As an observation station, Atago-yama is a response to a Western phenomenon; the panorama or *heirin* (descending spread view).<sup>lii</sup> Telescopes were placed there from the early nineteenth-century; As Screech argues in *The Lens within the Heart*, Western ways of seeing had become popular with the Japanese before the opening of Japan to the West in the 1850s. The ‘authentic’ view of the city, a must-see for visitors to Tokyo, was perhaps less ‘native’ than they realized. Menpes seems determined to distinguish between the Western and Japanese appreciation of “expanse of view”. For Japanese, “it is one of their greatest joys to look from the top of a mountain downwards, but only at certain times of the day.”<sup>liii</sup> For the naturally artistic Japanese, the material aspects of the view are not as important as the aesthetics of seeing.

The Western “discovering” of Tokyo from promontories such as Atago-yama is therefore complicated by the history of such places of viewing. It is further complicated by the nature of the view; not virgin land, not picturesque waterfall or

lake, Tokyo as panorama is not sufficient “material” for many Westerners’ “powers of taste”:

“No view of Tokiyo, leaving out the impression produced by size, is striking, indeed there is a monotony of meanness about it. The hills are not heights, and there are no salient sights to detain the eyes for an instant. As a city it lacks concentration. Masses of green, lined or patched with grey, and an absence of beginning or end, look suburban rather than metropolitan. Far away in the distance are other grey patches; you are told that those are still Tokiyo, and you ask no more. It is a city of ‘magnificent distances’ without magnificence.”<sup>lv</sup>

Bird’s impression of the city from Atago-yama constantly compares Tokyo to some kind of aesthetic ideal for a city; what it lacks is described in more detail than what it reveals. Upon what is this expectation based? If we compare Bird’s description with one by Francis Hall from 1862, who wrote about Atago-yama twice in his memoirs, the material is surprisingly similar:

“There it lay, spread before us in the afternoon mist, streets and palaces, gardens and groves...the city’s sea of roofs broken here and there by the loftier roof of a temple, til its boundaries were indistinguishable from the plains beyond. I had a clearer perception than ever of the formation of the ground on which Yedo stands...a wide margin of turf, copses and hedgerows still divide the houses and streets asunder, so that the city viewed from an eminence appears an aggregation of villages.”<sup>lv</sup>

The reaction, however, is different. The interval of over two decades brought changes to Japan itself but also changes in expectations of it. What charmed Hall frustrates Bird. Hall’s description has an appreciation of the change that Edo will be subject to. For now the city is “spread before” him – the relationship between the city and the viewer is a happy one; a meeting of expectations. For Bird, the city, as a view, fails. What is revealed does not allow total comprehension. Whilst Hall is happy with the misty picturesque view, with its fading distances, Bird requires detail, composition. A shift in expectations is connected to a shift in traditions of seeing. Bird is writing at the time of the accurate, all-seeing photograph, Hall is still connected to the aesthetics of the Japanese landscape print.

#### TOKYO AND YOKOHAMA: THE TOPOGRAPHY OF MODERNITY

“As scenery, Yokohama does not exist, so we will not talk about it.”<sup>lvi</sup>

The “contact zones” of Tokyo and Yokohama presented visitors during the Meiji period with a study in the process of “civilization and enlightenment”. The remarkable ability of many Western visitors, (like Fraser, quoted above) to simply elide these articulations of modernity is an indication of the power of the Orientalist and aesthetic paradigms still at work in their writing. What was familiar was not worth reporting; in their search for the “extraordinary” the traveler-writer omits descriptions of that which the Meiji government hoped would impress them.<sup>lvii</sup>

Recorded reactions to the attempts at modernity within the city were mixed. Descriptions of the modern quarters such as Ginza brick town, the modern buildings of new institutions described by Dixon, and the failed “foreign colony” of Tsukiji are shaped by a need to relate them to the reader - Ginza’s shops are

“quite as modern as those on Broadway” - but also by an overwhelming refusal to allow their assimilation with “real Japan.”<sup>lviii</sup>

“the much talked of Europeanization of Japan has been...a mechanical rather than chemical process. The two streams, where they co-exist at all, seem to flow side by side, like oil and wine – each remains distinct...The telegraph may run overhead, but the houses beneath are not other than they were in the days of the Shogunate; within a stone’s throw of the big foreign hotel there is a Buddhist temple...”<sup>lix</sup>

The fact that many of the modern buildings in Tokyo and Yokohama were designed by Westerners further complicated the reactions of travelers to representations of Japanese modernity. The work of Josiah Conder, for example was commissioned by the Meiji government to be specifically Western in style. Conder’s designs for the Rokumeikan (1883) and Ueno Imperial Museum (1882) in a “Western” style with “Oriental” features were continuations of the “High Victorian ideology of British colonial architecture”.<sup>lx</sup> The representation of a modern national identity through the prism of a “Western notion of the Orient” understandably produced mixed reactions.<sup>lxi</sup> Pierre Loti thought the Museum ugly for its newness and foreign style. (Western articulations of Oriental aesthetics lacked the sought-after “authenticity” of indigenous architecture.) An anonymous Japanese journalist thought it “limpidly elegant, vividly beautiful and magnificently spectacular...”<sup>lxii</sup> However, are we to see this as a reaction to its foreignness or its articulation of a new Japanese-ness?<sup>lxiii</sup> For one thing the Museum cannot be

described as modern. Conder’s description of his thought process reveals this:

“So far as my studies of the national styles went (and I was an enthusiast in the beauties of Japanese art) there were no decorative or ornamental forms...which lent themselves constructionally to a ligneous or wooden style, and it became necessary to seek in Indian or Saracenic architecture for forms which...would impart an Eastern character to the building.”<sup>lxiv</sup>

In choosing a Western architect to conceptualize a national architecture, the Meiji government’s desires for modernity were co-opted by a Victorian desire to root Japan in its Oriental past.

This is further seen in writers who saw the signs of “young Japan” as being imitations of the West rather than indigenous articulations – the synonymy of modern with European or American seen in many texts betrays a reluctance to relinquish ownership of the spoils of modernization – informed by both Orientalist desires for stasis but also repulsion at the ugliness and uncanny familiarity of the new.

“Suddenly we crossed a muddy creek by a hideous iron bridge; and where were Europe and America then? Surely that dirty canal must be wider than the great Pacific, for at the hotel one was still in America, but crossing it one was unmistakably in Japan”<sup>lxv</sup>

The bridge and canal, usually symbols of the flowing city of Edo and its networks of water transport, now act as a division (the canal wider than the Pacific) but also a link (the bridge, hideous, presumably, because it is an example of modern iron construction) between traditional “Japan” and Japan as “America”. The iron bridge

both replaces the canals of old Edo as arteries of the city and denies them the power to separate traditional Japan from the progress it represents.

The colonial desire for authenticity and the “Japoniste” desire for aestheticism are both unsatisfied by Japanese articulations of modernity. Japanese modernity is an imitation of the West, neither authentically Japanese nor authentically European, and, what is more, it has lost the original elegance and beauty of “Japan”. The Japanese who choose to wear Western clothing are figures of ridicule, as shown in the Kipling quotation above. They are clever mimics, like Carroll’s White Rabbit, but not modern, not quite.<sup>lxvi</sup> Importantly, they are also ugly:

“The Japanese look most diminutive in European dress. Each garment is a misfit and exaggerates the miserable physique and the national defects of concave chests and bow legs.”<sup>lxvii</sup>

Attempts to appear modern simply reveal the Japanese’s “national defects”, a reassurance to the Western audience that the very bodies of Japanese prohibit change.

These mixed reactions to modernity as articulated by the architecture and inhabitants of Japanese cities are all centered on the concept of control. Modernity is mediated through the Western text by omission or dismissal. In the city itself it was mediated through Western architects like Conder who had their own “ideological baggage” and agenda.

W. Gray Dixon, in the chapter from *The Land of the Morning* on “Tokiyo and its Institutions” remarks: “a strange kaleidoscopic scene it is, the guises of East and West crossing and re-crossing one another ceaselessly....”<sup>lxviii</sup> The use in several texts of the metaphor of the kaleidoscope in descriptions of a Tokyo

street scene is an accurate representation of the complexity of modernity on display in the Japanese city. It also indicates the refractions and distortions that the concepts of Japan, Japanese-ness and modernity itself were subjected to by the numerous parties – Japanese, European and American – involved in the creation and representation of the works discussed in this paper. The bewilderment that Dixon expresses at the scene in Ginza, which “is such a complication of what is novel to us with what is in imitation of things familiar, that a considerable time is required to take it all in,” is reflected in the complexity found in the attempts to represent these scenes.<sup>lxix</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

What can we learn from Western writers’ approaches to the “kaleidoscopic scenes” of the Meiji city? What did the writers themselves hope to impart, through their descriptions, to their metropolitan readers? To what extent can we see these writers as working in the same “production” of “Japan” as the Japanese producers and sellers of woodblock prints, and later photographic albums? Whilst most of the authors I have analyzed were writing for a readership of “armchair travelers,” their approaches to the subject of Japan’s modernization reflects, I believe, a wider anxiety and tension present in interactions between Japan and Western nations. Whilst the Japanese government’s efforts to modernize were an attempt to reach an agreement over issues of extra-territoriality and fulfill perceived Western demands for “civilization and enlightenment,” these accounts represent the difficulty their projects faced in gaining recognition as both Japanese and modern. Their efforts were frustrated by constructions of Japan that still relied on dichotomous ideas of East and West as synonymous with tradition and progress. In the Meiji cities of Japan, the “guises of

East and West" cross and re-cross each other ceaselessly, but both the producers and consumers of this fabricated "Japan" conspire to ensure that, as Kipling wrote, "never the twain shall meet."<sup>lxvii</sup>

- <sup>i</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, New York: Routledge, 1992) p.4
- <sup>ii</sup> Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in *The Nineteenth Century*, Jan 1889. Quoted in Rudyard Kipling *Kipling's Japan: Collected Writings*, ed. Cortazzi and Webb (London: Athlone Press, 1988) p. 45 n.5
- <sup>iii</sup> Kipling, *Kipling's Japan*, p.79
- <sup>iv</sup> A term coined in Yokohama itself: see "Globe Trotters" in *The Japan Mail* 22 Aug, 1873
- <sup>v</sup> The etymology has colonial roots; from Urdu, meaning embankment or causeway.
- <sup>vi</sup> Isabella Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (London: J. Murray, 1880) p.7. From the Chinese *san* (three) *ban* (board).
- <sup>vii</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* p.9
- <sup>viii</sup> Setsuko Ono, *A Western Image of Japan: What did the West see through the eyes of Loti and Hearn?* (Geneva: Imprimerie du Courier, 1972) p.191
- <sup>ix</sup> Eliza Scidmore, *Jinrikisha Days in Japan* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891) p.59
- <sup>x</sup> Kipling, *Kipling's Japan*, p.68
- <sup>xi</sup> See John R. Black, *Young Japan: Yokohama and Yedo*, (London: Trubner & co., 1880) p.40, and Kipling, *Kipling's Japan*, p.180
- <sup>xii</sup> C.A.G. Bridge, writing in *Fraser*, 1878, quoted in Toshio Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind: A Study of Stereotyped Images of a Nation 1850-80*, (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1987) p.162
- <sup>xiii</sup> Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind*, p.162
- <sup>xiv</sup> Christine Guth, in her work *Longfellow's tattoos: Tourism, Collecting and Japan*, (Seattle; London, Washington University Press, 2004) writes that for Europeans and Americans, visiting Japan would allow them to "come into contact with a culture having qualities either lacking or rapidly vanishing in their own" (xx) Souvenirs and photographs were objects which authenticated this visit.
- <sup>xv</sup> Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, p.14
- <sup>xvi</sup> Yokoyama, *Japan in the Victorian Mind*, p.6
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, p.17
- <sup>xviii</sup> Augusta M. Campbell Davidson, *Present-Day Japan*, (Philadelphia, the J.M Lippincott Co., 1904) p.13
- <sup>xix</sup> Christine Guth, *Longfellow's tattoos*, xv
- <sup>xx</sup> See Anna Jackson, "Imagining Japan: The Victorian Perception and Acquisition of Japanese Culture," *Journal of Design History*, v.5, no.4, (1992) pp. 245-254
- <sup>xxi</sup> Often, as Guth notes, not through the *meisho* tradition itself, but "its impact on designs in lacquer, ceramics and textiles as well as painting and prints." *Longfellow's tattoos*, p.36
- <sup>xxii</sup> William Gray Dixon, *The Land of the Morning*, (Edinburgh: James Gemmell, 1882) p.224
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, (London, Osgood, McIlvaine, 1894) p.21
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ono, in *A Western Image of Japan*, notes how by *not* discussing or describing something, the author depends heavily on readers' preconceived ideas about the Orient.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Kipling, *Kipling's Japan* p.36
- <sup>xxvi</sup> About which there is sadly no space to write at length here, but is discussed in detail in Hirayama and Rousmaniere, eds. *Reflecting Truth: Japanese Photography in the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, Hotei 2004) and Ann Wilkes Tucker et al. *The History of Japanese Photography* (New Haven, CT; London, Yale University Press, 2003)
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Kipling, *Kipling's Japan*, p.131
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Farsari was aided by his team of Japanese hand-tinters, who were responsible for the colouring of the photographs and often had previously worked on the production of woodblock prints.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Quoted in Hugh Cortazzi, *Victorians in Japan: in and around the treaty ports*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p.88
- <sup>xxx</sup> Edwin Arnold, *Seas and Lands*, (London: Longmans, Green & co., 1895) p.194
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Arnold, *Seas and Lands*, p.197
- <sup>xxxii</sup> By "writers of Japan", I mean those who wrote on the subject of Japan, and by doing so were involved in creating its image.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Itself informed by existing domestic institutions of travel and tourism.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Kipling, *Kipling's Japan*, p.132
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Although its inventor remains unknown, many at the time attributed it to a Western resident of Yokohama, Jonathan Scobie, who supposedly designed it for his invalid wife.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Dixon, *The Land of the Morning*, p.205-6
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Dixon, *The Land of the Morning*, p.146
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Guth, *Longfellow's tattoos*, p.66
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, *Out of the East: Reveries and Studies in New Japan*, (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1895) p.71
- <sup>xli</sup> Scidmore, *Jinrikisha Days*, p.64
- <sup>xlii</sup> Quoted in Rand Castile, "Tokyo and the West" in *Tokyo: Form and Spirit*, ed. Mildred Friedman et al. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1986) pp.6-16
- <sup>xliii</sup> Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, p.2
- <sup>xliii</sup> "Haneda Ferry and Benten Shrine", number 72 in Hiroshige's *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* (c.1858)
- <sup>xliv</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p.218
- <sup>xlv</sup> Ono, *A Western Image of Japan*, p.24
- <sup>xlivi</sup> Timon Screech, *The lens within the heart: the western scientific gaze and popular imagery in later Edo Japan*, (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2002) p.230
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, p.175
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p.198
- <sup>xlix</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p.217

- <sup>l</sup> Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Things Japanese: being notes on various subjects connected with Japan for the use of travellers and others*, (London: J. Murray, 1902) p.82
- <sup>li</sup> Clara Whitney, *Clara's Diary: An American Girl in Meiji Japan* (Tokyo; New York: Kodansha International, 1979) p.52
- <sup>lii</sup> Screech, *The lens within the heart*, p.230
- <sup>liii</sup> Mortimer Menpes, *Japan: A Record in Colour*, (London, Adam Charles Black 1901) p.88-89
- <sup>liv</sup> Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, p.171. This proved a popular description, quoted wholesale without reference by Sir Henry Knollys seven years later in his *Sketches of Life in Japan* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887).
- <sup>lv</sup> Francis Hall, *Japan through American Eyes: The Journal of Francis Hall 1859-1866*, ed. F.G. Notehelfer (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001) p.292
- <sup>lvi</sup> Mary Crawford Fraser, *A Diplomatist's Wife in Japan*, (London: Hutchinson, 1899) p.6
- <sup>lvii</sup> Guth, *Longfellow's Tattoo*, p.51
- <sup>lviii</sup> See Isabel Anderson, *The Spell of Japan*, (Boston: Page, 1914) p. 55 and Scidmore, *Jinrikisha Days*, p.46
- <sup>lix</sup> Anderson, *The Spell of Japan*, p.22-23
- <sup>lx</sup> Toshio Watanabe, "Josiah Conder's Rokumeikan: Architecture and National Representation in Meiji Japan", *Art Journal*, v.55, (1996) p.25
- <sup>lxi</sup> Watanabe, "Josiah Conder's Rokumeikan", p.27
- <sup>lxii</sup> Watanabe, "Josiah Conder's Rokumeikan". p.26
- <sup>lxiii</sup> Alice Y. Tseng, in "Styling Japan: The Case of Josiah Conder and the Museum at Ueno, Tokyo" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, v.63, 4 (2004) pp. 472-497 sees an "interest not in architecture that was Japanese but in architecture that he believed to represent Japanese-ness" underlying Conder's conceptualization of a Japanese national architecture, p.487
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Institute of Japanese Architects acceptance speech in 1920, quoted in Tseng, "Styling Japan", p.487
- <sup>lxv</sup> Anderson, *The Spell of Japan*, p.19
- <sup>lxvi</sup> To adapt Homi Bhabha's phrase from *The Location of Culture*.
- <sup>lxvii</sup> Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*, p.27
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Dixon, *The Land of the Morning*, p.205
- <sup>lxix</sup> Dixon, *The Land of the Morning*, p.194
- <sup>lxx</sup> Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West", 1889
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# RE-BALANCING OR COUNTER-BALANCING?

*Assessing America's Response to China's Rise through Bilateral Investment Treaties*

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## ABSTRACT

The rise of China as an economic powerhouse with an aggressive leadership challenges America's status as world superpower. In an international system increasingly dominated by economic relations, scholars have determined that specific international trade measures support strategic policy objectives.

My research addresses whether the United States government seeks to counter-balance China's growing economic influence through bilateral investment treaties (BITs) in a certain set of countries. Using a logistic (logit) regression, I show that Washington is trailing China and signing BITs with the same countries. However, the same logit regression for Canada and Italy shows that they too are signing BITs with the same countries as China. Because following China's BITs is not unique to the United States, there is not enough evidence to conclude that the American government is using BITs as a strategic tool to counter-balance Beijing. Rather, the United States, Canada, Italy, and China are engaging in normal, competitive trade.

My thesis provides empirical analysis of the current U.S.-China strategic and economic relationship. It sheds light on the rhetoric exchanged between the American and Chinese leaderships, hopefully alleviating concerns of Chinese scholars and policy-makers that Washington is seeking to prevent China's rise.

## INTRODUCTION

With the largest economy and most powerful army in the world, the United States

has dominated the international political and economic system since the end of World War II. But for the last 40 years, China has developed into a major power. Today, China is second to the United States in economic size and even exceeds the United States as the world's largest trading partner.<sup>i</sup> In terms of economic power, it is fair to say that China is a primary competitor for the United States. China's rise has engendered uncertainty and concern in Washington, most notably uncertainty for how Beijing will use its economic power and concern for world order stability.<sup>ii</sup>

These developments raise questions about which foreign policy the American government should adopt towards the Chinese. As Chinese and American governments gauge how the other will react, scholars and politicians on both sides have urged for a wide range of foreign policies. Currently, there is the notion that the American government has sought to contain China's influence by hindering its economic and strategic rise. Beyond the question of which foreign policy the United States government should assume towards the Chinese government, a more pressing question asks whether the United States government has already embarked on a policy of economic counter-balancing the Chinese.

American foreign policy towards China has been ambiguous. Nonetheless, three pillars hold the Sino-American relationship together, according to Professor James Hsiung:<sup>iii</sup> [1] the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972, which paved the way for normalization of Sino-American relations, [2] the 2<sup>nd</sup> Communiqué of 1979, when the United States officially normalized

relations with China and recognized the Communist Chinese Party (CCP) as the country's sole, legitimate government, and finally [3] the 1982 joint communiqué, which demanded that the United States government stop selling weapons to Taiwan. These three pillars have framed American foreign policy towards China, allowing bilateral relations to fluctuate between aggravated and peaceful but never severing the tie.

Today, China has become a great power in the international system. The United States perceives it as a substantial strategic and economic competitor. American scholars and policy-makers are engaged in an ongoing debate on whether the United States' political and economic strategies towards China should deviate from the three fundamental pillars. In light of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," will Sino-American government relations change since President Nixon and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger reopened relations with Chinese leaders? Or, will they remain constant, amidst the rhetoric of the United States reasserting its position as a regional Pacific power?

Economic relations dominate world politics as money flows have become more and more globalized. Nations are becoming increasingly economically interdependent, thus making the world economy grounds for strategic ploys. American scholars and politicians are also concerned that as China's economy becomes more important in the international economic system, Chinese leaders will force its influence in international relations.<sup>iv</sup> There is fear that the Chinese government could use its economy to build up an army more powerful than the United States.'

The research put forth in this thesis determines whether the American government is attempting to counter-balance China's economic rise by examining and analyzing if United States bilateral investment treaties (BITs) follow those of the Chinese.

My results show that although there is a significant relationship between the signature of a Chinese BIT and an American BIT, the

United States is in fact not economically counter-balancing China. Using a robustness test, I determined that it is not only the United States that is following China's BIT signature lead but also non-strategic countries such as Canada and Italy.

These results contradict the common point of view that the United States is indeed pursuing a hawkish foreign economic policy against China through trade agreements, such as BITs. By answering that the United States is not economically counter-balancing China, I hope to assuage fears of a renewed Cold War or zero-sum game between the United States and China. I also provide empirical evidence to decide how foreign investment can be used as foreign policy tools.

The first section of this paper is an extensive literature review, covering the Sino-American relationship, the importance of economic relations in the new world order, China's rise to power, and how trade, specifically BITs, is used in international politics. In the second section, I explain my research design model, which includes my theory and descriptions of my independent variable, dependent variable, controls, and sources of data. I will describe my results in the third section and proceed to discuss their impact in the fourth section. Finally, I will discuss the meaning and impact of these results in a fourth section, labeled "Discussion," and end the thesis with a summary of research in a conclusive fifth section.

### Literature Review

#### 1. American Foreign Policy Towards China

Historically, the United States government's policy towards China has come off as sweet-and-sour. The literature addressing American foreign policy towards China expresses the ambiguous continuum of policies that range between containment and engagement.

Most relevant to this thesis is American foreign policy after the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) took over leadership of China's government in 1949. The CCP takeover ushered in twenty years of antagonistic relations between the United States and China,<sup>v</sup> during which the American government followed a rigorous policy of containment towards China. Scholars such as James Peck argue that the United States went beyond containment, conducting policy that forcefully isolated China: "American hostility was driven by a fear of China's attaining a great-power status capable of allowing it to challenge an Asian system shaped by America."<sup>vi</sup> In addition, Washington feared the Chinese for their revolutionary, nationalist fervor: "Chinese nationalism was now viewed as a revolutionary blend of communism and radical nationalism that required an almost pathological fanaticism and hatred for the United States and the Western world."<sup>vii</sup> Washington saw China as a 'double-threat': [1] a leader of revolutionary struggle for the recently decolonized, independent countries and [2] a third great-power rival allied with the Soviet Union.

Containment became policy when the Truman administration refused to recognize the People's Republic of China as sovereign, turning instead to the Republic of China, also known as Taiwan. Washington perceived China to be a "Soviet satellite" ruled by an illegitimate government.<sup>viii</sup> Before the Korean War, Washington's primary containment strategy was withholding China's entry to the United Nations. Once the Korean War broke out, Washington's containment avenues broadened to include Taiwan recognition, an economic embargo on China supported by increased Japanese trade, and placement of the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet in the Taiwan Strait.<sup>ix</sup> Historians, such as Franz Schurmann, explain how the American administration at the time not only needed Chinese revolutionary and communist influence contained but also all of China isolated in order to construct an effective American, capitalist system.<sup>x</sup> Isolating China took a military, economic, and ideological form, leaving China shunned by the international community, insulated from regional neighbors,

and constantly threatened by American intervention. Although Washington dropped the isolation aspect of containment by the 1960s, American leaders still believed in reigning in Beijing's influence on its neighbors.

It was not until the early 1970s that American and Chinese leaders began to consider reopening Sino-American relations. Former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, recalls in *On China* how President Nixon shifted the outlook on China from hostile to neutral, choosing instead to focus on a common enemy—the Soviet Union:<sup>xi</sup>

It was a revolutionary moment in U.S. foreign policy: an American president declared that we had a strategic interest in the survival of a major Communist country with which we had had no meaningful contact for twenty years and against which we had fought a war and engaged in two military confrontations.

The desire for reconciliation was not solely American. In fact, it was Mao Zedong who first addressed the need for re-opening dialogue between the China and the United States.<sup>xii</sup> For Mao, rapprochement was a strategic play. At the time, Sino-Soviet relations were hostile, and it was in China's interest to turn to the Soviet Union's largest enemy—the United States—for potential support. Nixon, on the other hand, saw the opportunity as one to "redefine the American approach to foreign policy and international leadership."<sup>xiii</sup> Thus, both nations believed in a Sino-American rapprochement as a way to obtain their own strategic interests.

In 1972, Nixon carried out the reconciliation when he visited Mao in Beijing and then left China having signed the Shanghai Communiqué of 1972—the first pillar in what frames present-day American foreign policy towards China.<sup>xiv</sup> In signing the 1972 Shanghai

Communiqué, Nixon agreed that the United States would abide by the One China Policy, recognizing the People's Republic of China as the only China. However, the United States government did not actively support the One China Policy until the second joint communiqué in 1978, which effectively normalized relations between China and the United States. Normalization required the United States government to recognize the CCP as the sole legitimate government of China and terminate the mutual security agreement with Taiwan.<sup>xv</sup> The third pillar of America's foreign policy towards China is the 1982 joint communiqué, in which the American leadership at the time agreed to phase out weapons sale to Taiwan. But in retaliation, American congress under the Reagan administration passed the Taiwan Relations Act to salvage the relationship between the United States and Taiwan. The act declared that the United States would continue to sell self-defense weapons to Taiwan on an unofficial basis, allowing interest groups and other parties to maintain trade and cultural ties with Taiwan without formal US government recognition.<sup>xvi</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, China and the United States were quasi-strategic partners as they sought to counter the Soviet Union.<sup>xvii</sup> However, the fall of the Soviet Union altered Sino-American dynamics. Post-Cold War, the United States found itself as the world's superpower, while China had become a major regional power in East Asia.<sup>xviii</sup> Observing this, Washington took the position that "no one power should dominate East Asia," implying that the United States government would seek to prevent China from becoming a regional hegemon. On the other hand, the Chinese government sought out opportunities to becoming a regional leader. McDougall explains how these new positions pitted the United States and China against each other:

With these different perspectives there was scope for both conflict and cooperation between China and

the United States. Conflict would arise if the United States regarded China as essentially a rival to be blocked or contained, or if China viewed the United States as an implacable enemy.<sup>xix</sup>

These tensions still exist today as American leaders struggle to make room for China's increasing influence in the world and Chinese leaders adjust to their increasingly powerful role at the regional and global levels.

The most recent juncture for Sino-American relations has occurred in the last twenty years, during which China's economic growth propelled it onto the world stage. American foreign policy towards China under George W. Bush and Barack Obama has wavered between "the competing notions of China as either a 'strategic partner' or a 'strategic competitor,'"<sup>xx</sup> The discrepancy between these two terms illustrates how conflicted the United States government still is in response to China's rise as a strategic and economic world power.

Most recently, since the United States hosted the 2011 APEC Summit, containment of China seems to dominate discussions about American foreign policy. Out of the negotiations has come a reinvigorated commitment to the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), featuring an outline of a trade agreement including nine countries, several of which are located in Southeast Asia. Its purpose is to "enhance trade and investment among the TPP partner countries, promote innovation, economic growth and development, and support the retention and retention of jobs," as described by the Office of the United States Trade Representative. Coinciding with the summit was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's statement titled "America's Pacific Century" in Foreign Policy magazine. The article confirmed the United States' will to invest a majority of its resources and policies in the Asia Pacific: "Harnessing

Asia's growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests and a key priority for President Obama.”<sup>xxi</sup> The TPP and Clinton's article are key parts of the Obama administration's foreign policy legacy—the “Asia pivot” or “Re-balancing” towards Asia.

## 2. Chinese Reactions to Re-Balancing

In his most recent book, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, China expert David Shambaugh elaborates on the world's most recent perspectives of a rising China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He observes how “China's global reputation has fluctuated over the past decade and has, in fact, declined globally in recent years.”<sup>xxii</sup> Coinciding with the financial crisis of 2008, worldwide views of China have gotten more negative. Interpreting data from the Pew Global Attitudes Poll and British Broadcasting Service (BBC) polling, Shambaugh reports that there is a “globally mixed perception of China”:

China's rise in world affairs has been disconcerting for many, with China often seen as enigmatic, nontransparent, truculent, propagandistic, and dismissive of foreign concerns. China is also seen by many as not comfortably fitting into the existing international liberal order and having a hidden “revisionist” agenda to overturn that order.<sup>xxiii</sup>

These views resonate with Americans. Pew Polling has also reported on American public opinion towards China. As told by China-US Focus, in early 2011, 53 percent of Americans appeared to have a more positive view of China, answering that “it was more important to build a strong relationship with China.” This number compared to 40 percent who believed in a more hawkish approach to China. But by late 2012, 49 percent now supported a hawkish approach versus 42

percent who supported a strong relationship with China.

The United States government emulates these ambivalent views when rhetoric and policy contradict each other. Research fellow for the China Foundation for International Studies Wu Zhenglong notes that the Obama administration “welcomes China's peaceful rise,”<sup>xxiv</sup> giving the example of Secretary of State Clinton urging American policy-makers “to find a new answer to the ancient question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet.”<sup>xxv</sup> On the other hand, the United States government has carried out aggressive policies, such as the announcement that it will deploy “60 percent of its warships to the Asia Pacific region by 2020.”<sup>xxvi</sup> It has also held joint military exercises aimed at deterring the Chinese army, sold arms to allies, such as Taiwan, and taken sides in regional disputes as with Japan and South-East Asia nations.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Chinese leaders see these developments as the resurfacing of antagonistic American foreign policy towards China. A victim of aggressive containment during the Cold War, Chinese leaders since Mao have been especially wary of the American government's motives to reorient foreign policy towards the Pacific theater. Professor Yong Deng of the United States Naval Academy claims that containment is a familiar policy for Washington, and one that Chinese leaders are convinced the United States would renew if directly threatened by China.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Today, American leaders are less apprehensive of China as an agent of monolithic communism as they were during the Cold War. Washington is instead concerned with China's accruing of economic capabilities and whether this increased wealth will compel Chinese leaders to expand the country's military prowess on a regional level and possibly a global one: “Indeed, China's rise has led to fears that the country will soon overwhelm its neighbors and one day supplant the United States as a global hegemon.”<sup>xxix</sup> An added dimension to these concerns is the uncertainty regarding whether the new Chinese

leadership, with Xi Jinping in charge, will accelerate the Chinese government's desire to seek a more powerful stance within the international system or keep with the status quo.

On the other hand, as claimed by Professor Yong, Beijing leaders, including Xi, are all too aware of the United States' increasingly wary perception of China. Chinese leaders view the United States as a "hegemon on the offensive."<sup>xxx</sup> The Chinese government's evaluation of American leaders' grand foreign policy strategy is one that maintains American global primacy. Analyst Wang Jincun expresses Chinese officials' belief that, "the United States will contain, besiege, and even launch a preemptive military strikes against any country which dares to defy the U.S. world hegemony or which has constituted a latent challenge to the United States."<sup>xxxii</sup> Other Chinese scholars conclude similarly: "Most Chinese strategists assume that a country as powerful as the United States will use its power to preserve and enhance its privileges and will treat efforts by other countries to protect their interests as threats to its own security."<sup>xxxiii</sup> The literature conveys how Chinese politicians are convinced that as China continues to rise, the United States will find a way to counter it. According to Yong, the Chinese government has responded by balancing American power in the Asia-Pacific region in three ways: allying with Russia, forging ties with its neighbors, and bolstering the CCP's power.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

However, China's policy-makers would argue otherwise and say that what remains crucial to China, rather than counter-balancing American power, is enhancing the country's economic and technical capabilities. Long-time advisor to the Chinese leadership Zheng Bijian explains in his Foreign Affairs article, "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great-Power Status," how China set itself a goal in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping's leadership: "the development path to a peaceful rise."<sup>xxxv</sup> Zheng explains how Deng, and all Chinese leaders since, have driven China to keep up with economic globalization, carrying out economic reforms to

"foster domestic markets and tap into international ones."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Given this trend, he believes that the Chinese leadership will be primarily concentrating on "securing a more comfortable and decent life for its people."<sup>xxxvii</sup> It is Zheng, in fact, who coined the term China's "peaceful rise." President Hu Jintao confirmed Zheng's analysis of the Chinese national interest in his speech to the opening ceremony of the 2004 Boao Forum for Asia, with the less threatening term: "peaceful development."<sup>xxxviii</sup>

### 3. "Age of Geo-Economics"

As Zheng addressed in his article, the economy is indeed a key variable in the international system's structure. According to Hsiung, the international system is becoming dominated by geo-economics, in which a country's economic security is more important than its military security.<sup>xxxix</sup> Hsiung argues that individual states do not necessarily balance one another. Instead, the power balance is played out between economic blocs, like the Eurozone bloc, the North-American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), and the hypothetical East Asian Summit (EAS). Through this age of geo-economics, Pacific Asia's combined economies have outperformed the world's other economies. Hsiung concludes that, in an age of geo-economics, Pacific Asia will be at center stage of the global economy, with China in the spotlight.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Recent data does not contradict Hsiung's prediction. China and the United States have the world's largest economies, with gross domestic products (GDPs) of \$15.09 trillion and \$7.3 trillion as of 2011 respectively. The countries are also the world's largest trading partners, with China recently surpassing the United States in November 2012. In terms of GDP growth rates, China has seen outstanding growth for the last decade, sustaining growth rates between 7 to 11%. In comparison, the United States has seen growth between 1 to 2% annually. China is also the largest holder of foreign exchange reserves and

has the second largest military budget.<sup>xl</sup> Furthermore, professionals and scholars have predicted that the Chinese economy will overtake the United States in the next 10 or so years.

Given these economic developments, Hsiung's case for the age of geo-economics offers a plausible explanation for why the United States government feels threatened by China's rise as an economic power and would be motivated to follow a policy of economic containment.

#### 4. Trade as a Foreign Policy Tool

The international system is becoming more dominated by economic relations, meaning that a nation can achieve its strategic goals by influencing other countries with its economy. In the case of the United States-China relationship, the question is whether the American government will use its economic prowess to prevent China's rise.

Historically, economic containment can be observed in three fashions: [1] economic warfare through sanctions, [2] strategic embargoes, and [3] tactical linkage. All three strategies have the same goal of weakening the adversary state's economy to diminish its military might.<sup>xli</sup> Given the tight Sino-American economic interdependence, economic sanctions and embargoes would be tactless and unwarranted in today's international politics. However, there is potential for undermining the Chinese economy through tactical linkage where trade is viewed as a tool of foreign policy: "Linkage rewards (or promises to reward) desirable behavior by permitting or promoting trade, and punishes (or threatens to punish) undesirable behavior by prohibiting trade."<sup>xlii</sup> This type of tactical linkage is reserved primarily to bilateral state relations. The economic containment that I will address is subtler than the policy followed by the United States during the Cold War, which is why I will from now on refer to it as economic counterbalancing.

One aspect of economic counterbalancing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the strategic motives behind trade agreements. Trade can be perceived as a foreign policy tool because it can be used as a concealed path for political influence, in the same way as foreign aid.<sup>xliii</sup> Richard N. Cooper and Albert Hirschmann argue how governments do in fact use trade as a foreign policy tool. Cooper asks whether trade policy can truly be classified as 'high foreign policy' versus 'low foreign policy' even if trade issues are only injected in diplomatic matters when leaders want to make them high policy factors.<sup>xliv</sup> He argues that bad trade relations between countries, irrelevant of original categorization, affect high policy foreign relations. Quoting scholar T.C. Schelling, Cooper writes: "Broadly defined to include investment, shipping, tourism, and the management of enterprises, trade is what most of international relations are about. For that reason trade policy is national security policy."<sup>xlv</sup>

This thesis treats bilateral investment treaties (BITs) as trade agreements, as is done by the Office of the United States Trade Representative. BITs serve the purpose of "increasing [a nation's] prosperity through foreign investment."<sup>xlii</sup> The United States government put out a framework in 2012 of model BITs. The document elaborates on the purpose of BITs between the United States and other countries, including the promotion of greater economic cooperation between two nations through investments and the establishment of a "stable framework for investment" to carry out investments more efficiently. One of the document's notable points is the agreement of both investment parties, meaning from both countries, to protect investments.

As discussed by K. Scott Gudgeon, United States BITs were in fact created specifically as foreign policy tools "as a means of strengthening principles of customary international law and practice as observed and advocated by the United States."<sup>xlvii</sup> Another scholar, Kenneth J. Vandeveld, makes the case

that BITs are a form of economic nationalism. He concludes that bilateral investment treaties are tools used more for the protection of state interests than the liberalization of trade. Vandevelde supports his argument by assessing recipient states of BITs and their host states. For the purposes of my research, it is crucial to recognize Gudgeon's point that investment protection measures actually help preserve the host states' interests, and investment neutrality permits it "to dictate the circumstances under which its investors will be permitted to invest abroad."<sup>xlviii</sup>

Taking a step back and looking at all trade as a strategic tool, Hirschmann identifies two effects: [1] the supply effect and [2] the influence effect.<sup>xlix</sup> The supply effect is a positive one through which a participating country's potential military force is enhanced. The influence effect, in contrast, occurs when foreign trade leads countries to depend on and influence one another. When countries decide to trade with one another, they also have the potential to stop trading. If trade stops, then other countries are forced to find other markets and sources as replacement. The stoppage of trade thus incurs costs on the target country: "A country trying to make the most out of its strategic position with respect to its own trade will try precisely to create conditions which make the interruption of trade of much graver concern to its trading partners than to itself."<sup>l</sup> Country A trading with Countries B, C, or D creates a situation in which these countries depend on Country A's trade so much that they would be "content to grant A certain advantages—military, political, economic—in order to retain the possibility of trading with A."<sup>li</sup>

American policy-makers appear to have sought to apply this influence effect. Chuck Hagel writes for the Foreign Affairs magazine: "All nations can share in the prosperity that comes from sound economic governance practices and trade-based growth policies."<sup>lii</sup> Indeed, since the Bush Jr. administration, United States foreign policy officials have aimed to recreate a world order advantageous

for its national interests. Thus, trade with other countries generally comes with conditions for a target country to adopt American norms, such as intellectual property rights, policy concessions, and so on. As a consequence, when studying Sino-US relations, trade agreements, such as BITs, can be seen as foreign policy tools meant to influence countries to adopt American versus Chinese norms for economic or strategic policy.

For now, however, most of the debate about Washington's renewed economic counter-balancing of China is rhetoric, most recently provoked by the 2011 Trans-Pacific Partnership and Obama's announcement that his administration plans to refocus its attention towards the Pacific theater. There has not been a formal, holistic statistical study confirming that the United States is engaged in economic counter-balancing of China. Thus, the bilateral trade investments I analyze open up a discussion, backed by empirical evidence, for whether the United States government is indeed pursuing economic counter-balancing towards China through BITs.

## Research Design

### 2. Theory

I argue that the United States government has the incentive to counter-balance China's rise through economic means, but there is not enough evidence to conclusively say that this is indeed happening through bilateral investment treaties.

The United States' motivation for economically counter-balancing China is due to the changing world order in which economic relations are taking a more prominent role in international relations. In this changing international environment, the world has watched China take the economic lead as its government builds up its economic abilities, catching up to the United States. This turmoil in the world order has led to a renewed fear that China aims to become a regional power and will then seek to usurp the United States'

place as the world's leader of the international economic and political system.<sup>lvi</sup>

In order to prevent China from gaining momentum in the overturn of the American world order, the United States could potentially undermine China's international economic relations by using trade as a foreign policy weapon.<sup>lv</sup> Here is a conceptual example: when the United States government agrees to sign a trade agreement with another country, it allows another country preferential access to its market. Although not all trade agreements require the target country to reciprocate, the United States still ends up having power over that country, as it has the capacity to take that preferential trade treatment away if the target country does not comply with American strategic objectives.<sup>lv</sup>

For my analysis, I chose to test BITs, as they are the best available trade agreement to assess the United States' foreign economic actions. The Office of United States Trade Representative treats all multilateral trade agreements, Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), Trade & Investment Framework Agreements (TIFAs), and BITs as official trade agreements employed by the United States in foreign affairs. BITs are the best indicators for my research because they are quantifiable for both the United States and China, and they are numerous for the purposes of testing. Hence, for the scope of my research, I solely use BITs as representative of foreign trade as a strategic-setting tool.

### 3. Model

To test my theory, I conduct four different analyses, for which I determine whether a relationship exists between the Chinese government signing a BIT and the American government following suit by signing its own BIT with the same country. I analyzed the following research design model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{US BIT}_{i,t} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{CH BIT}_{i,t-n} + \log \text{GDP}_{i,t} \\ & + \log \text{DISTANCE}_{i,t} + \log \text{POPULATION}_{i,t} \end{aligned}$$

In my model, the dependent variable, labeled as  $\text{US BIT}_{i,t}$ , is measured by 1 if a BIT exists between the United States and country<sub>i</sub> and by 0 if no BIT exists between the United States and country<sub>i</sub>. The independent variable, labeled  $\text{CH BIT}_{t-n}$ , is also measured by 1 or 0—1 if a BIT can be observed between China and country<sub>i</sub> and 0 if no BIT is observed between China and country<sub>i</sub>. I also lag the independent variable by n amount of years from year t.

I control for the effects of gross domestic product (GDP)—variable  $\text{GDP}_i$ —of each BIT target country. It is well known that the size of a country's economy could adversely affect the regression between United States BITs and lagged China BITs.<sup>lvii</sup> The variable  $\text{DISTANCE}_{i,t}$  controls for the distance between country<sub>i</sub> and the United States. It is also recognized that the closer in proximity one country is from another, the more likely they are to trade, thus increasing the chances of the creation of a trade agreement. The third control is population of country<sub>i</sub>, which I label as variable  $\text{POPULATION}_{i,t}$ . Population is controlled for because countries with larger populations are generally better at providing for themselves, relying less on trade than smaller countries. As stated by Edward Mansfield and Rachel Bronson regarding international trade and alliances, “Bilateral trade flows will be directly related to the GDP of i and j and inversely related to both the population of i and j and the distance between them.”<sup>lviii</sup>

As aforementioned, the data for United States BITs comes from the Office of the United States Representative, which is listed under their Trade Agreements section on their website. I collected data for China BITs from the International Centre for Settlement of

Investment Disputes (ICSID), which defines itself as “an autonomous international institution” with the purpose of arbitrating and settling disputes between investors and States. I retrieved GDP and population data from the World Bank. The statistics for distance proximity is from Kristian Skrede Gleditsch’s data.<sup>lviii</sup>

I conducted a logistic (logit) regression using country-year as the unit of analysis. My null and alternative hypotheses are as follows:

#### Null Hypothesis:

There is no relationship between an observed BIT between the United States and country<sub>i</sub> and an observed BIT between China and country<sub>i</sub>.

$$H_0: \beta_1 = 0$$

$$H_A: \beta_1 > 0$$

#### Alternative Hypothesis:

There is evidence suggesting that the United States reacts to an observed BIT between China and country<sub>i</sub> by signing its own BIT with country<sub>i</sub>.

I use a logit regression because I am working with dichotomous categorical data rather than data that can be measured continuously. A logistic regression allows me to model how different variables affect changes in a dependent variable that can only take values of 1 and 0. If I were to use a linear regression, my model would not fit the data, giving me negative predictions, which are impossible in this context.

I expect to see a positive and significant relationship between the signature of United

States BITs and China BITs, where I observe the American government rushing to sign BITs within one to two years of China initially signing a BIT with a specific country.

#### Results

Table 1. Logit Analyses of US BITs following China BITs, lagged by 2, 3, 4, 5 years

	(1) Lag: year	(2) 1Lag: years	(3) 2Lag: years	(4) 3Lag: 5 years
BIT China (t-1)	1.890**  (0.619)			
BIT China (t-2)		2.516**  (0.505)		
BIT China (t-3)				2.224**  (0.551)
BIT China (t-5)				1.406*  (0.742)
log(GDP per capita)	-0.085  (0.106)	-0.109  (0.108)	-0.131  (0.109)	-0.173  (0.113)
log(Distan- ce, in km)	-0.287  (0.293)	-0.315  (0.296)	-0.332  (0.296)	-0.362  (0.295)
log(Popula- tion)	0.203  (0.139)	0.218  (0.141)	0.236*  (0.142)	0.273*  (0.143)
Constant	-3.873  (3.066)	-3.368  (3.090)	-2.915  (3.108)	-2.099  (3.143)
Pseudo-R2	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.01

N	6752	6752	6441	5585
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\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05

My hypothesis examines the relationship between China's national government signing a bilateral investment treaty (BIT) with a particular country and the United States' government following suit by signing its own BIT with this same country. Table 1 presents the significance of the relationship between Chinese BITs and American BITs, while Table 3 and Table 4 shed light on Canada and Italy's reaction to Chinese BITs.

Table 2. Predicted Probability Holding All other Values at Median

	(1) Lag: year	(2) 1Lag: years	(3) 2Lag: years	(4) 3Lag: 5 years
No BIT	(0.35%, 0.72%)	(0.33%, 0.68%)	(0.35%, 0.71%)	(0.38%, 0.77%)
China	0.54%**	0.50%**	0.53%**	0.58%**
BIT China	(-0.46%, 7.34%)	(0.73%, 1.11%)	(0.86%, 9.4%)	(-0.93%, 5.77%)
	3.44%*	5.91%**	4.74%**	2.41%

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05

#### US and China BITs

Table 1 shows the logit analysis of the United States government contracting a BIT with country<sub>i</sub> as a dependent variable and China's government contracting a BIT with the same country<sub>i</sub>, lagged by 1, 2, 3, and 5 years, as the independent variable. I coded the variable US BIT<sub>i,t</sub> as "1" for all country-years when the United States government signed a BIT with country<sub>i</sub>. A "0" was coded for all others. The logit analysis ran the variable US BIT<sub>i,t</sub> and all independent variables, including CH BIT<sub>t-n</sub>. As

Table 1 illustrates, all coefficients are positive as hypothesized. Coefficients lagged by 2, 3, and 4 years are significant above the 0.05 level while a lag of 5 years proves significant above the 0.10 level.

In order to understand the magnitude of these effects, I computed the predicted probability that the United States government sign an agreement with given country<sub>i</sub>, holding all other variables at their median. The results are reported in Table 2. For example, for a lag of two years, I recorded a predicted probability baseline level of 0.50 percent. There is 0.50 percent chance that the United States government will sign a BIT with country<sub>i</sub> given the Chinese government has not previously signed one two years prior. However, this predicted probability increases given the Chinese government has indeed signed a BIT with country<sub>i</sub> two years prior. In this case, the United States government is 5.91 percent more likely to sign a BIT with country<sub>i</sub>. The magnitude of this change is statistically significant, as shown in the regression table.

#### Robustness Check: Canada and Italy react to China

To check the robustness of the relationship between US BITs and China BITs, I ran two other logit regressions with Canada BIT and Italy BIT as my dependent variables, respectively, reacting to CH BIT<sub>t-n</sub> with a lag of two years. As Table 3 shows, coefficients for both Canada and Italy were positive and significant, just as they were for the United States. Table 4 illustrates that Canada's government is 3.27 percent more likely to sign a BIT with country<sub>i</sub>, given the Chinese government has signed a BIT with that same country<sub>i</sub> two years prior. With the same two-year lag on China's BIT signature, Italy's government is also more likely to sign a BIT by 4.42 percent.

I chose to run the logit regression for Canada and Italy BITs because both countries are part of the G-7, making them relative economic powerhouses. However, Canada and Italy would not be considered strategic players

on the world stage. Thus, their reasons for following China's BITs are not expected to be geo-political. Because significance for Canada and Italy BITs was indeed found, the significance of the relationship between US BITs and China BITs is not robust.

Table 3: Logit Analyses of Canada and Italy BITS following China BITs, lagged by two years

	(1) Canada BIT	(2) Italy BIT
BIT China (t-2)	2.556***  (0.568)	
BIT China (t-2)		1.610***  (0.483)
log(GDP per capita)	0.202  (0.130)	-0.025  (0.076)
log(Distance, in km)	-0.356  (0.360)	-0.315*  (0.145)
log(Population)	-0.064  (0.168)	0.261**  (0.101)
Constant	-6.310  (4.208)	-5.522**  (1.805)
Pseudo-R2	0.06	0.03
N	6803.00	6803.00

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05, \*\*\* p < 0.10\*\*\*

Table 4: Predicted Probability of Canada and Italy BITs Holding All other Values at Median

	(1) Canada BIT	(2) Italy BIT
No BIT China	(0.13%, 0.39%)  0.26%**	(0.67%, 1.16%)  0.92%**

BIT China	(-0.12%, 6.67%)	(0.46%, 8.38%)
	3.27%*	4.42%**

\* p < 0.10, \*\* p < 0.05

### Discussion

The results show that the American government is more likely to sign a BIT with a country given that the Chinese government has also signed a BIT with that same country. However, this positive progression in the relationship does not indicate that the United States is definitely counter-balancing China. Italy and Canada, which can be considered non-strategic countries in the international system, are also more likely to sign a BIT with the same country as China. Instead, it appears that these target BIT countries have particularly sought-after lucrative markets. The United States government, rather than pursuing an antagonistic economic policy towards China, is instead engaging in competitive economic behavior like other member governments of the international system.

My analysis determines that the United States government is not economically counter-balancing China through BITs, but this does not mean that economic counter-balancing is not happening at a microeconomic level. It is possible that these target BIT countries have particular resources that the United States government wishes to prevent the Chinese government from monopolizing through BITs. However, a microeconomic analysis of critical microeconomic indicators causing rifts in Sino-US relations is beyond the scope of this thesis.

What does this say about American foreign policy? It proves that the United States' motives for signing BITs with the same country of China are neutral at the macroeconomic level. But given that China is second to the United States in economic size, and set to overtake it in the next decade, another puzzle comes to light: what foreign economic strategy should the United States adopt given that it will

soon no longer be the eminent economic world power?

### Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis was to assess the United States' response to China's rise as a strategic and economic world power. From the studied literature, there is evidence pointing towards the American government economically counter-balancing China to prevent it from replacing the United States as the world's superpower. Historically, American foreign policy has wavered between containment and relative engagement. There appears to be a significant amount of consensus among Chinese scholars that the United States would not hesitate to renew an aggressive foreign policy against China in order to prevail as the world's supreme global power. A changing world order, in which economic relations increasingly dominate international politics, puts the United States at risk when faced with China's economic growth. The importance of economic relations also means that power-play in the international system will be subtler, less reminiscent of Cold War zero-sum games. Instead, states might be more tempted to derail rival, strategic powers through trade or monetary policy. My research analyzed whether the United States government has been using trade agreements, specifically BITs, to counter-balance China's growing influence over international economic relations.

To test my theory, I used a logit regression hypothesizing that the United States government has been following Chinese BITs. My results do indeed show that the United States government has been trailing the Chinese government in the signing of BITs with the same countries. However, by conducting an additional robustness test, I observed that non-strategic countries, such as Canada and Italy, which have no geopolitical interests in counter-balancing China, are also reacting to the Chinese government signing

BITs. With a lag of two years, the relationship between Canada and Italy BITs and China BITs is similar to that of United States BITs and China BITs.

Although the United States government is indeed reacting to the Chinese government signing of treaties, Canada and Italy's governments are as well. Because Canada and Italy are non-strategic countries, it seems unlikely that the United States is in fact counter-balancing China through bilateral investment treaties. Rather, countries are all seeking to maximize their economic power by investing in the most attractive markets. The United States government appears to be engaging in an economically competitive behavior towards China, just as Canada and Italy are.

The two-level testing approach to my thesis prevented me from prematurely concluding that the United States government is economically counter-balancing China. However, the research I put forth in this thesis only observes one type of trade agreement, BITs, and only at the macro-economic level. There is potential for future research by looking into microeconomic indicators such as the resources in target BIT countries that are so attractive to major powers such as the United States and China. Once more complete data on China's foreign aid is collected, more research should be done on efforts of the United States to outmatch China's foreign aid donations to key countries.

The research put forth in this thesis provides empirical evidence for the international political economy of BIT use between the United States and China. I find that the United States government is not using BITs as an economic counter-balancing tool against China, but that other economic indicators need to be studied to conclusively argue that the United States government is definitely not engaging in economic counter-balancing against China.

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- <sup>i</sup> Shambaugh, 2013.
- <sup>ii</sup> Hsiung, 2001.
- <sup>iii</sup> Hsiung, 2001.
- <sup>iv</sup> Shambaugh, 2013.
- <sup>v</sup> McDougall, 2007.
- <sup>vi</sup> Peck, 2006.
- <sup>vii</sup> Peck, 2006.
- <sup>viii</sup> Hsiung, 2001.
- <sup>ix</sup> Peck, 2006.
- <sup>x</sup> Schurmann, 1974.
- <sup>xi</sup> Kissinger, 2011.
- <sup>xii</sup> Kissinger, 2011.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Kissinger, 2011.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hsiung, 2011.
- <sup>xv</sup> Hsiung, 2001.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Hsiung, 2001.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Kissinger, 2011.
- <sup>xviii</sup> McDougall, 2007.
- <sup>xix</sup> McDougall, 2007.
- <sup>xx</sup> McDougall, 2007.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Clinton, 2011.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Shambaugh, 2013.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Shambaugh, 2013.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Wu, 2013.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Wu, 2013.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Wu, 2013.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Wu, 2013.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Yong, 2001.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Nathan and Scobell, 2012.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Yong, 2001.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Yong, 2001.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Nathan and Scobell, 2012.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Yong, 2001.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Zheng, 2005.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Zheng, 2005.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Zheng, 2005.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Hu, 2004.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Hsiung, 2009.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Hsiung, 2009.
- <sup>xl</sup> Shambaugh, 2013.
- <sup>xli</sup> Mastanduno, 1985.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Mastanduno, 1985.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Bueno de Mesquita and Smith, 2007.
- <sup>xlv</sup> Cooper, 1972.
- <sup>xlv</sup> Cooper, 1972.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Vandevelde, 1998.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Gudgeon, 2012.
- <sup>xliii</sup> Gudgeon, 2012.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Hirschmann, 1945.
- <sup>l</sup> Hirschmann, 1945.
- <sup>li</sup> Hirschmann, 1945.
- <sup>lii</sup> Hagel, 2004.
- <sup>liii</sup> Shambaugh, 2013.
- <sup>liv</sup> Hirschmann, 1945.
- <sup>lv</sup> Lederman, 2007.
- <sup>lvii</sup> Mansfield and Bronson, 1997.
- <sup>lviii</sup> Edward Mansfield and Rachel Bronson, 1997.
- <sup>lviii</sup> Gleditsch, 2002.
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# **PEARLS OF THE FAR EAST:**

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*Remaking and Reclaiming Vietnam through Cinema*

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## ABSTRACT

I contend that emerging Vietnamese-Canadian filmmaker Cuong Ngo's *Pearls of the Far East* (2011), a series of fictional histories of contemporary Vietnam based on stories by award-winning Vietnamese author Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc, remakes and adapts the visual culture of a country commonly associated with war in the United States. *Pearls of the Far East* both de-territorializes and re-territorializes Vietnam through cinema, exploring themes of forbidden desire and true love through female protagonists whose voices

are both primordial and contemporary. Over the course of seven vignettes, the film presents a multivariate narrative and engages the audience in a de-familiarization of the 'Third World' woman, a commonly marginalized archetype in Hollywood films and other forms of American entertainment that depict Vietnam. Further, each vignette in the film is set in timeless Edens. The busy streets of Hanoi and Saigon are remarkably absent, and the apolitical and diffuse aesthetic of 'Indochic' in the film is indicative of a newly emerging postmodern sensibility within the

Vietnamese diaspora. Ngo's 'nouveau' Vietnam constitutes a post-*Đổi Mới* society and is representative of a larger social and political movement lending to the reconstruction of memory and national symbols in late socialist Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION: THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA

*Since time began, when people leave  
Each leaving represents a truth.*

- Du Tu Le (b. 1942), Vietnamese poet

Since the 'Fall of Saigon' in 1975, Vietnam has witnessed a steady outflow of its population to the West. More than two million Vietnamese left their country in the two decades following the communist takeover of South Vietnam.<sup>i</sup> Its overseas population now numbers less than four million and has settled mostly in the United States, Canada, France, and Australia but also in disparate locations such as Israel and Norway.<sup>ii</sup> Meanwhile, Vietnam's population with its median age of 28 years<sup>iii</sup> is too young to remember the civil conflict that took place for the better part of three decades. They now have to rely on memory and representation to guide them to a homeland that is no longer a battlefield but a container waiting to be filled with certain ways of understanding Vietnam's place in the broader global arena.

In 'Commemoration and Community,' Hue-Tam Ho Tai duly observes, "If a community creates and sustains memory, the reverse is also true: memory creates and sustains the community." But who is most preoccupied with the remembering? And how are overseas Vietnamese, residing in the neoliberal West, regarding their rapidly evolving homeland from a distance? In many instances, the transnational Vietnamese diaspora has

become largely responsible for negotiating an understanding of Vietnam outside the narrative frame of American films. However, and perhaps because of the recent history behind the migration, discourse in the United States still focuses on the experience of refugee "boat people" fleeing persecution or poverty.

It is true that Vietnam's displaced population has had few opportunities to express the sense of loss or grief that has followed in the wake of mass migration. Some refugees recounted their good fortune to leave the country prior to the communist takeover. According to Natalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, who later resettled in Australia, repressed sentiments produced lapses into depression for her displaced South Vietnamese father, a symptom the author directly relates to the larger collective history of Vietnamese.

Vietnamese diasporic histories are often fragmented and incomplete. The reverberations of this experience, in terms of damaged lives, damaged relationships, and the secondary trauma that was transferred to the second and third generations still have to be fully articulated.<sup>iv</sup>

However, against the receding waves of past tragedy, and even as the narrative of the Vietnamese diaspora remains incomplete, a new movement is emerging, chiefly among the more creative members of this dispersed community. In the United States, novelists like Vietnamese American Monique Truong are writing fiction with the aim of reclaiming Vietnamese colonial past.<sup>v</sup> In a parallel development, Vietnam-based writer,

actress and dramatist Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc has been instrumental in connecting with the diaspora through tales of a familiar yet exotic homeland rich in symbolism, fantasy and memory. Her literature embodies *Doi Moi*, Vietnam's policy of economic reforms launched in the late 1980s translatable as "changing for the new."<sup>vi</sup> The "new" in Minh Ngoc's case involves the definition of a social soul drawn from apolitical archetypes positing a cultural unity among Vietnamese.

#### FILM 'PEARLS OF THE FAR EAST' (2011)

Minh Ngoc's short tales of fiction, *Pearls of the Far East*, were recently made into film by a team of Canadian filmmakers, led by director Cuong Ngo. Ngo, a Saigon-born Vietnamese Canadian, represents a new generation of international Vietnamese whose lives and careers have taken a global path, often one which leads them back to Vietnam. Ngo's adaptation is currently making the rounds within the international film festival circuit. The film contains seven tales of Vietnam told from the viewpoints of various women protagonists, a grand narrative underscoring a commonly held Vietnamese belief that women "carry the charged aura of the nation."<sup>vii</sup>

Ngo's previous film, *The Golden Pin*, dealt with themes of homosexuality and marginalization,<sup>viii</sup> but by turning the lens on women in a pastoral Vietnamese landscape, *Pearls of the Far East* becomes a spiritual tribute to Ngo's homeland and to the archetypal women who often dominate the national imagination. The women to whom we are introduced across a span of seven vignettes are the mothers, daughters, and sisters of Vietnam: living their daily lives, falling in love, having

misgivings, dealing with personal grief or regret.

Such a typecasting of women in the postcolonial narrative is not unique to Vietnam. In *Nationalism and the Imagination*, Gayatri Spivak notes that manipulations in literature and the arts "can support an advanced nationalism," with the role of women and their placement in the "reproductive heteronormativity that supports nationalisms"<sup>ix</sup> providing some explanation for a national discourse suffused with gender. If Vietnamese women carry the charged aura of the nation, then it is also a cultural belief that lends women that metaphorical distinction.

But the quotidian images of Vietnamese women in *Pearls of the Far East* (daughter, wife, mother) never quite portray a young victim of patriarchal oppression, an image that has carried weight in post-war Vietnam, where the female condition was utilized to represent war and war losses.<sup>x</sup> The Vietnamese women in *Pearls of the Far East* also underscore the remarkable absence of previous forms of typecasting prominent in the West, a practice perhaps wrought by the history of modern Vietnam, one with colonial beginnings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century marked by foreign incursions (by France, the United States, or China) and subsequent Vietnamese resistance and victory. War, however, as Christian Henriot notes, constitutes a marginal narrative in a country that has faced both war and colonialism as something external to the Vietnamese people, but in the largely American imagination, the war in Vietnam that drew American involvement for the better part of three decades (1955-1975) has also invited a biased range of cinematic roles for Vietnamese women.

#### HOLLYWOOD'S VIETNAM

*In Vietnam, colonial records reveal that human trafficking was a widespread phenomenon. Colonization triggered an acceleration and extension of kidnapping and abduction across the border region with China.*

-Christian Henriot,  
“Supplying Female Bodies: Labor Migration, Sex Work, and the Commoditization of Women in Colonial Indochina and Contemporary Vietnam”

In peace and wartime, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam is filled with poverty. This has compelled the underprivileged to seek a living as sex workers, with “sex work ... one of the most visible forms,” or manifestations, of the commodification of women’s bodies in Vietnam. In Isabelle Tracol-Huynh’s study of colonial era prostitutes in the city of Hanoi, records indicate the loss of individuality for sex workers, with official records unceremoniously noting a sex worker death as “prostitute no. x.”<sup>xi</sup>

In Hollywood depictions of Vietnam and the Vietnam War, we see how this visible and dehumanizing form of sex work is often utilized and exploited to titillate the viewer with images of a colorful alterity and “otherness”, with the gendered Vietnamese subaltern depicted as needing salvation from communism, violence, and their own communities. This protagonist, the Third World woman who needs to escape the wrath of her fellow Third World men, is best represented in the 1993 Oliver Stone film *Heaven And Earth*.

Stone, who understands better than most the role of the image in the production or

rewriting of history, liberally used young Vietnamese women’s bodies to build a narrative around a woman whose life and allegiances are torn in the midst of civil conflict. Rape, unexpected pregnancy, prostitution, and sexual relations with Americans are just some of the primary depictions Stone draws into the tale of Le Ly Hayslip (played by actress Hiep Thi Le), who traverses two continents to rebuild her life in America after the Fall of Saigon. Hayslip’s body is used as a metaphor for a war-torn country on multiple occasions, and her particular narrative segues with Stone’s vision of a wartime Vietnam.

## VIETNAM’S WOMEN

Hollywood has adeptly provided a slice of America’s Vietnam and perhaps a very particular Vietnam no longer in circulation, but in its particular obsession with bringing to the fore the experience of America’s war veterans, mainstream movies of Vietnam often lapse in depictions of the country itself, at least as seen through the significantly different lens of Vietnamese. The reality of womanhood, and its role in national memory and representation, is more complicated, often contradictory, and symbolic of a late socialist Vietnam reconstructing a 21<sup>st</sup> century nation-state that is supposed to combine seamlessly with a global economy.

Contrary to a Western hegemonic narrative of Third World victimhood that demands marginality but also salvation, according to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Vietnamese cultural expectations regarding women’s proper place and responsibilities were so varied”<sup>xii</sup> that women’s deployment in the military was perceived by the then-North Vietnamese state as mutually compatible with their role as wives, mothers, and managers of

the domestic sphere. In many instances, a national narrative that expected women to be both courageous and resourceful rarely left room for the victimized womanhood that is at the heart of Oliver Stone's retelling of Le Ly Hayslip's undue suffering. Vietnamese ambivalence towards women, then, represents a wartime legacy that is still playing a role in contemporary Vietnam.

The presence of women in the public sphere since the war era also correlates with the observation that "women figure prominently in the historiography of modern Vietnam."<sup>xiii</sup> According to Christian Henriot, there is also the "long tradition of equating women's virtues with courage and ardent patriotism."<sup>xiv</sup> Beyond historical notions, it is worth noting women in Vietnam rank second in the Asia-Pacific in the proportion of women in the National Assembly.<sup>xv</sup> Their legal and political status has also greatly improved over time, but according to Catherine Diamond, an enduring problem for Vietnamese women exists not within the realm of the political, but rather in the personal: "What remains problematic are personal relations between men and women,"<sup>xvi</sup> and these problems are often the subject matter of a female-dominated contemporary theatre scene.

In both her writing as well as in real life, Diamond explains, the novelist Minh Ngoc, author of the short stories that inspired *Pearls Of The Far East*, has devoted her work to and personified the relationship "problems" across the sexes in contemporary Vietnam. Minh Ngoc, now in her late fifties, is a Ho Chi Minh city-based writer, actress and playwright. Her unmarried status is the biographical background for a vignette in the film; 'The Awakening,' is based on her novel, 'The Diary of an Abandoned Woman'.

In this vignette, a commercially successful fashion designer (played by Nguyen herself) recounts her numerous, failed attempts at marriage. This roughly fictionalized version of herself, along with other characters in separate vignettes, illustrate the personal but familiar problems of emotional life. Each of the protagonist's six engagements ended in failure, and she has six unworn wedding dresses. However, the elusive nature of romantic love is rarely cast as a gender-construed problem or a patriarchy designed to oppress the woman protagonist.

According to Diamond, another highlight of Minh Ngoc's biography is her rejection of opportunities to leave the country, even as she traveled to France, Australia, and Canada to collaborate on films and plays. This last footnote illustrates the multivariate and mutually contradictory predicament of post-war Vietnamese. While many embody the trauma of refugee status and resettlement, others like Minh Ngoc, who elected to stay in Vietnam, illustrate the possibilities of life in post-war Vietnam. The opportunities provided to artists after the launch of *Doi Moi* to redraft the national narrative, especially with regards to a past or common heritage.

#### REASSESSING 'DAMAGED LIVES, DAMAGED RELATIONSHIPS'

*With Marxism discredited and Leninism increasingly uncongenial to the younger generation, will the Vietnamese at last be able to find their own authentic identity, and with it, true independence and a greater measure of freedom?*

-Frederick Z. Brown,  
"Vietnam Since The War  
(1975-1995)"<sup>xvii</sup>

The multivariate experiences of contemporary Vietnamese post-1986 invite a scholarly reassessment of the Vietnamese diaspora and pose the following questions. Is the secondary trauma of refugee status or the “damaged lives, damaged relationships” of the resettled or displaced population merely a production of a diaspora’s memory? If a life of exile is purely voluntary, to what extent is history and country, versus personal but tremendous life decisions, responsible for the emotional outcomes of the transnational Vietnamese experience?

The *Doi Moi* reforms within Vietnam have not only influenced policy but also shaped public memory inside the country, which according to Hue-Tam Ho Tai is “characterized as much by confusion as by profusion,”<sup>xxviii</sup> and is symbolized by a state simultaneously erecting monuments to the Communist victory and moving away from the old socialist vision. Hue-Tam Ho Tai places this confusion in the context of Vietnam’s 20<sup>th</sup> century history, where each new uprising, or attempt to shape the future, was justified by redefining history, or remaking the past. “The past, like the future, is an eternally unfinished project,” Hue-Tam Ho Tai notes, “(and) relative prosperity and prolonged peace have encouraged other actors besides the state to try to occupy the space of memory.”<sup>xxix</sup>

The actors Hue-Tam Ho Tai speaks of are not necessarily defined by the boundaries of geography, especially in a 21<sup>st</sup> century where “diaspora and transnationalism have exploded the boundaries of identity and community.”<sup>xx</sup> The *Viet Kieu*, or overseas Vietnamese, she reminds us, are playing a prominent role in the reconstruction of the past and the economy as they continue to repatriate or

visit Vietnam in rising numbers. For many exiles who repatriate, “the past is a familiar place and a familiar time; it is the present that is strange,”<sup>xxi</sup> an observation that could explain why a repatriating Vietnamese Canadian filmmaker would choose to reimagine Vietnam through imagination and memory rather than through negotiations with Vietnam’s reality, and why so many scenes in *Pearls of the Far East* are bucolic and define themselves as sites of Indochic and material abundance. The heavily feminine focus also aligns with Hue Tam Ho-Tai’s observation of *Doi Moi*: with the expansion of the private trading sector, a “traditional feminine domain,”<sup>xxii</sup> the postwar economy has “reversed traditional equations between gender and power and has emasculated once powerful males.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

*Pearls of the Far East* then represents a new wave of transnational Vietnamese collaboration, in this case between a *Viet Kieu* filmmaker and a Ho Chi Minh City-based writer. As artists, they are concerned with new visions, not necessarily of the past, but of a time and place more aligned with the essence of a neo-traditional present. For Ngo, the film as love letter to Vietnam, a place that can only reside within the filmmaker’s emotional retelling, secures the most accurate description. For Minh Ngoc, the stories of the personal rather than political provide an opportunity to reimagine Vietnam through storytelling, but without challenging her country’s official narrative. Their transnational collaboration signifies the possibility that together they are “emissaries of a future still waiting to be born, the future that is supposed to replace the Communist utopia of yore.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

## PEARLS OF THE FAR EAST: COUNTER-CONDUCT CINEMA OR REVISIONIST EXCESS?

*“Now we are at peace, we need a new theme around which to organize a historical narrative.”*

*-From The Country Of Memory: Remaking The Past In Late Socialist Vietnam*

The veiled but very present movement of reinvention that continues in late socialist or post-socialist Vietnam has led to various reexaminations of collective and individual memory. *Pearls of the Far East* is concerned in both style and substance with the creation of an apolitical past and reflects how this ongoing reexamination could be a transnational manifestation of *Doi Moi*. Rather than raising provocative questions, the film placates the viewer with halcyon scenes of Vietnam's beaches, mountains, and general vistas of 'Indochic.' The frequent loneliness of the women protagonists induces viewer sympathy, but not much more. The film's largely pleasant demeanor enables critical viewers to dismiss it as stylistically memorable but underwhelming in its refusal to address the politically charged themes that come to mind when describing 'Vietnam' as a country and a concept.

However, as much as official Hollywood memory of Vietnam is painted in the broad brushstrokes of undue suffering of women, treacherous Viet Cong, and general one-sidedness, it is equally possible a *Viet Kieu* artist-filmmaker like Ngo should want to rectify this war film perspective. Ngo's film is an act of individual resistance to this frequently cited American memory of a country synonymous with belligerence, rather than the prolonged peace of recent decades. It is this use of memory and Ngo's independent, artistic resistance to official hegemonic memory that is crucial to examining his film and the larger context

of *Doi Moi*. Ngo's film also points to a *Viet Kieu* negotiation of identity outside the grand narrative of Hollywood. It proves Maurice Halbwachs' assertion that "individual memory is not permanent and complete, but socially produced, formed and re-formed in interaction with others' conceptions of the past."<sup>xxv</sup> That this interaction for the filmmaker leans heavily towards a turn towards Vietnamese literary imagination and a search for a common past shows early signs of a creative effort to move beyond a Hollywood narrative that demands Vietnamese marginality. *Pearls of the Far East*, then, draws significance if regarded as a renewed search for identity in a diaspora seeking alternative answers while increasingly looking ahead.

## APPENDIX

The seven vignettes in 'Pearls of the Far East' are based on six original short stories and one novel written by Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc.

*Chapter 1 Childhood* is based on 'Between the Two Mountains of Love'

*Chapter 2 The Message* is based on 'The Package of Cam le Tobacco'

*Chapter 3 Blood Moon* is based on 'Blood Moon.' The original story took place in urban Vietnam, and had other characters including the siblings' mother.

*Chapter 4 The Boat* is based on 'Beauty'.

*Chapter 5 Awakening* is based on Nguyen's novel, 'The Diary of an Abandoned Woman'

*Chapter 6 The Gift* is based on 'Love Is Out Of Mind'

*Chapter 7 Time* is based on 'Beyond The Truth'

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<sup>i</sup> Nguyen, Nathalie Huynh-Chau, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*, ABC-CLIO LLC, 2009, p. 4

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<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>iii</sup> CIA World Factbook, 2012  
(<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html>)

<sup>iv</sup> Nguyen, Nathalie Huynh-Chau, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora*, ABC-CLIO LLC, 2009, p. 5

<sup>v</sup> Benfey, Christopher, *Ordering In*, The New York Times, April 6, 2003

<sup>vi</sup> Hue Tam Ho-Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, University of California Press, 2001, p. 1

<sup>vii</sup> Henriot, Christian, *Supplying Female Bodies: Labor Migration, Sex Work, and the Commoditization of Women in Colonial Indochina and Contemporary Vietnam*, Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 1-9

<sup>viii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Golden\\_Pin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Golden_Pin)

<sup>ix</sup> Spivak, Gayatri, *Nationalism and the Imagination*, Seagull Books, 2010, p.42

<sup>x</sup> Hue Tam Ho-Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, University of California Press, 2001, p. 171

<sup>xi</sup> Henriot, Christian, *Supplying Female Bodies: Labor Migration, Sex Work, and the Commoditization of Women in Colonial Indochina and Contemporary Vietnam*, Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 1-9

<sup>xii</sup> Hue Tam Ho-Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, University of California Press, 2001, p.176

<sup>xiii</sup> Henriot, Christian, *Supplying Female Bodies: Labor Migration, Sex Work, and the Commoditization of Women in Colonial Indochina and Contemporary Vietnam*, Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 7, No. 1, p.1

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid., p.1

<sup>xv</sup>

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<sup>xvi</sup> Diamond, Catherine, *The Supermuses of Stage and Screen: Vietnam's Female Dramatists*, Asian Theatre Journal, Vol. 16, No. 2

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<sup>xvii</sup> Brown, Frederick Z., *Vietnam Since the War (1975-1995)*, The Wilson Quarterly, Vol. 19, No. 1

<sup>xviii</sup> Hue Tam Ho-Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, University of California Press, 2001, p. 2

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid., p. 3

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid., p. 228

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., p. 229

<sup>xxii</sup> 182

<sup>xxiii</sup> 185

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid., p. 229

<sup>xxv</sup> Ibid., p. 137

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