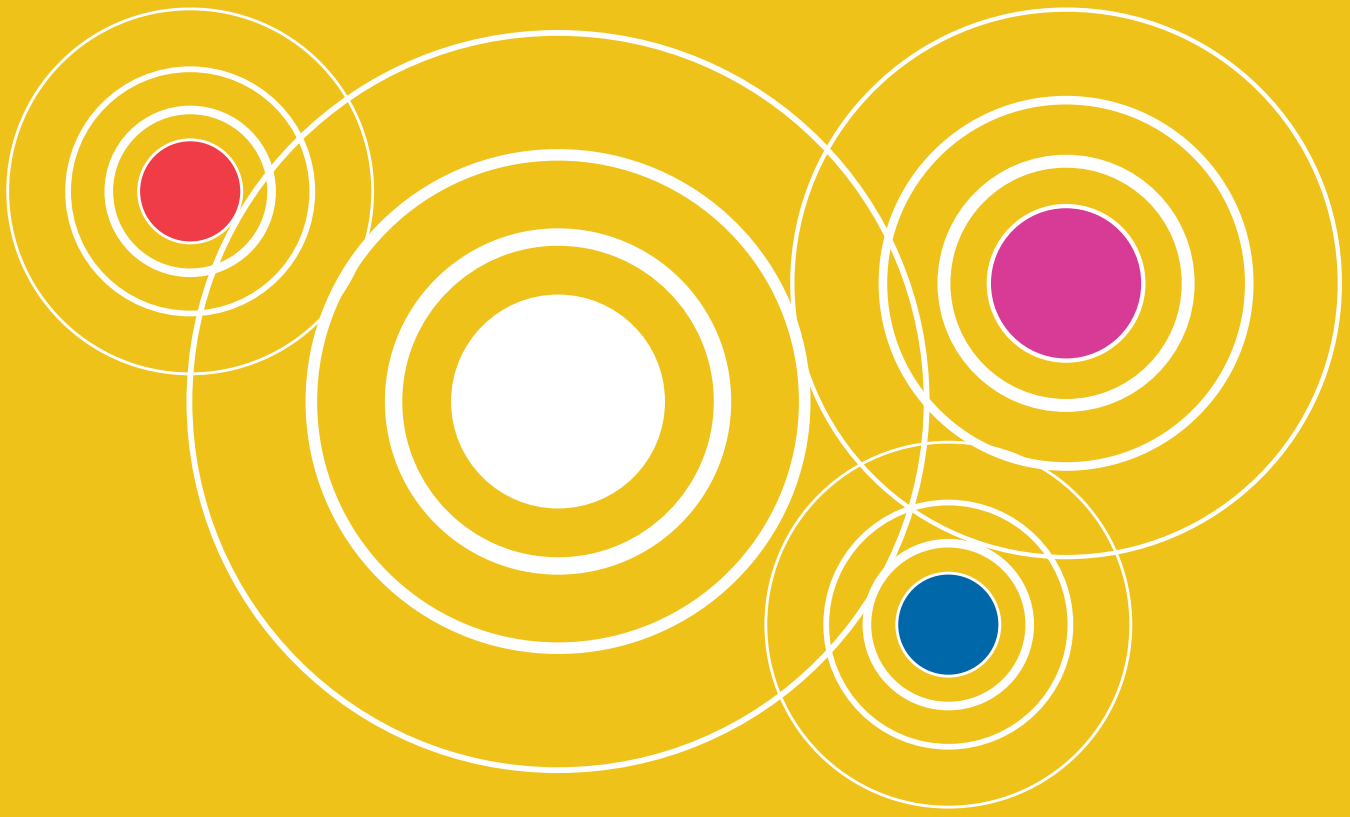

DIVE-IN
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Resemantizing Gender Stereotypes:
Reproductions, Experiments and Challenges in China and Japan

DIVE-IN – An International Journal on Diversity and Inclusion is a scholarly journal that takes a comparative and multidisciplinary approach to cultural, literary, linguistic, and social issues connected with diversity and inclusion.
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Resemantizing Gender Stereotypes: Reproductions, Experiments and Challenges in China and Japan. Editors' Introduction

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Gender is at the center of public debate all over the world. In Euro-American societies, it is particularly evident how a rollback on gender-based rights, anti-discrimination policies, and liberatory movements is a fundamental part of reactionary or 'populist' agendas. At the same time, those very nondiscriminatory policies, including Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks, have been used as instruments for pink- and rainbow-washing by governments, institutions, and corporations, easily cast aside at a turn in the sociopolitical climate. Furthermore, waging 'culture wars' based on identity politics is increasingly showing its limitations. In fact, they end up being either a means for conservative forces to gain political advantage or an attempt by progressive movements to combat discrimination through symbolic, cultural, or moral change in politics, education, and society at large. Both sides obscure (or conveniently distract from) the material and socioeconomic roots of the problem, such as the need to respond to the demographic crisis, and make up for the reduction of public welfare by firmly reestablishing the family, which is based on women's domestic labor, as the site for the reproduction of the domestic workforce. Gender stereotypes emerge as the cultural canonization of patriarchal gender hierarchies that prop up a certain mode of production, piling up on stereotypes left over by previous societies. Clearly then, in the process outlined above, which is going on today, gender stereotypes are not simply reproposed, but also subjected to processes of resemantization.

Although less visible in the media and the public debate, the same concerns are present in East Asia as well. This special issue of *DIVE-IN*, a journal devoted precisely to questions of diversity and inclusion (also from a critical perspective), aims to address these pressing contemporary issues, starting with the examples of China and Japan. We are convinced that they are extremely valid cases to increase our understanding of how gender stereotypes are rearticulated, reproposed and ultimately resemantized in a crucial part of Asia, and particularly in one country – Japan – that is generally considered the most 'westernized' of East Asia, and another – China – that is increasingly advancing an alternative modality of capitalist rule. Furthermore, they help us expand that understanding, both geographically, by taking us beyond the Euro-American hemisphere, and thematically, by identifying the particular/local cultural and social aspects on which these processes hinge. Ultimately, these cases highlight the transnational and transcultural character of the processes of resignification of gender roles and stereotypes. East Asia is often a 'mirror' that "blows a model, which is also our own, out of proportion", as the late journalist Angela Pascucci wrote with reference to China (Pascucci 2013: 131).

Throughout the 20th century and the early decades of the 21st century, Asian societies have been through processes of articulation and rearticulation of gender stereotypes and roles. The different patterns of modernity experienced by Asian countries have impacted the speed, dynamics, and actors of these processes, particularly with reference to women's function within the family and their participation in the labor-force (Ochiai 2020). Contestations of erstwhile established models of gender disparity based on cultural tradition (Mann & Cheng 2021) have also been substantially different: while Japan has seen significant bottom-up participation (Mandujano-Salazar 2016), China has grappled with the complex legacy of a state that promoted top-down emancipatory policies until the 1970s before reproposing traditional family roles following the market reforms of the 1980s and marginalizing women's and feminist groups in the wake of the authoritarian turn in the last decade or so (Zhu & Xiao 2021).

In general, in both China and Japan, the processes of emancipation that characterized the second half of the 20th century are now counterbalanced by state-enforced policies that go in the opposite direction. These policies, responding to population declines or to actual or perceived shifts in family models, aim to reaffirm pre-existing stereotypes in the form of hegemonic masculinity and subservient femininity (see, e.g., Nakamura 2023; Song & Hird 2013; Wu & Dong 2019).

In China, the increasing age at which women are choosing to marry corresponds with a cultural (particularly media-driven) reproduction of the image of women as wives and caretakers (Sun 2004; Feldshuh 2018). This phenomenon is compounded by the stigma surrounding so-called 'leftover women', i.e. those who are unmarried and childless (Fincher 2014). Particularly over the last decade, this discourse has been joined by concerns about a supposed 'masculinity crisis' in Chinese society, which is thought to exacerbate the demographic challenges (Song 2021). Stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are reproduced amongst LGBT+ individuals and relationships as well (Zheng 2015) and, almost paradoxically in a country where gender non-conforming subjects are still marginalized, even in surreptitious forms of 'transnormativity' (Ma 2025).

In Japan, it is worth noting how the economic crisis that began in the 1990s significantly altered the social fabric, contributing to population aging, declining birth rates and a growing distrust of the state. Unsurprisingly, during this period, women became the targets of harsh criticism as more and more of them expressed reluctance to marry and have children (Kingston 2016). Today, more than twenty years later, it is significant to observe how certain forms of media-driven discrimination persist, perpetuated by those in power (notably the political and economic elites) through gender stereotypes (Saitō 2007). It is important to highlight that these stereotypes also apply in distinct ways to men (SturtzSreetharan 2017; Vitucci 2023).

Against this background, this special issue draws on and expands a fruitful and engaging discussion that took place at the workshop on "Resemantizing Gender Stereotypes in 21st-Century Asian Societies: Reproductions, Experiments and Challenges in China and Japan", held at the University of Bologna on 19 March 2025 and organized by the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures. The six scholarly articles included in the issue, emphasizing suggestions raised during the workshop, analyze recent reproductions of stereotypes surrounding femininity, masculinity, gender conformity and non-conformity, and sexuality, as well as cases or experiments of resistance and questioning. To maintain an interdisciplinary approach that is vital to capture the complexity of the issues scrutinized here, the articles move across a variety of fields – cultural studies, film, literature, media, and translation. Finally, although we focus on present-day societies and how gender stereotypes are resemantized in the contemporary environment, the issue is also based on a solid understanding of how they originated and evolved throughout history.

In line with this overarching approach, Sabrina Ardizzoni's essay, "From Confucian Archetype to Neoliberal Resemantization: The Resurgence of the Ideal 'Good Wife and Wise Mother' (Xiánqī Liángmǔ) in Contemporary China" investigates the genealogy of the quintessential concept for women's confinement to domestic reproductive labor in China's historical culture and how it is reused today by the state and within society, also provoking critical responses within society. Setting off from a chronologically closer period to us but still adopting a rigorous historical perspective, Marco Taddei's "Homoerotic Desire and Masculine Identity in Tachibana Sotō's Narrative" examines little-known literary works by writer Tachibana Sotō and how he managed to skillfully employ fictional literature to negotiate homosexual desire in 20th-century Japan, particularly connecting to the tradition of homoeroticism present in Japanese culture (itself, however, not devoid of stereotypes). In "To My Dear Friend: Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 Letter and the Subversion of AIDS", Marco Del Din connects to yet another dimension of stereotypes, namely their resemantization during the tragic AIDS pandemic, and explores a case of their subversion through the outspoken and transgressive work of the artist Furuhashi Teiji, which maintains a certain topicality. What these articles variously demonstrate is that the evolution of gender stereotypes is not linear, nor does it necessarily move from a condition of oppression to one of liberation, but is fundamentally dependent on structural and societal processes, where artists, activists and other actors attempt to carve out spaces to question or negotiate the prevailing gender hierarchies.

Engaging with pressingly contemporary contexts, a sociolinguistic perspective is adopted by Francesco Vitucci with reference to the depiction of foreign women in Japanese TV news. His article, "Resurgences of Women's Language in Japanese TV News: Shirabete Mitara and the Representation of Foreign Women", shows how the bodies of foreigners themselves are subjected to a process of resemantization that places them within the stereotypical image of femininity, actively excluding alternative possibilities. There are, however, examples of contestation and agency by those oppressed by persisting stereotypes. In "(Not) Becoming Mothers: Fertility Intentions and Reproductive Agency During the Three-child Policy", Cristina Manzone investigates how Chinese feminist activists online have responded to the shifting policies on fertility and family amidst China's growing demographic crisis and the abolition of the (in)famous one-child policy, elaborating on what she considers the disjuncture between ordinary Chinese families' (and women's) material conditions and the traditional cultural and societal imperatives, now

picked up again by the state. Last but not least, Martina Renata Prosperi's essay, "A Time that Goes Nowhere: The Resemantization of Time as an All-Human Language in Zheng Xiaoqiong's Poetry and Our Contemporaneity", elaborates on the powerful verses of Chinese poet Zheng Xiaoqiong to point out how the resemantization of gender is carried out through a complex construction of time and rhythm that ultimately reveals interdependent ways of life for all human – and living – beings.

Complementing these contributions, the issue features an interview with another Chinese poet, Zhang Huijun, conducted by Martina Benigni. Setting off from Zhang's latest collection, the interview discusses the presence of gender stereotypes in the field of poetic construction in China and the spaces for women-authored poetry to question them.

We will use the closing words of this introduction to express our belief that, given the worldwide relevance of themes such as the demographic crisis and the resurgence of gender stereotypes, this project will serve as an exploratory step towards developing future collaborative research initiatives, also involving other areas and regions.

Finally, we thank the editorial team at *DIVE-IN* for their careful work, the anonymous peer reviewers who have agreed to work under very tight deadlines, and the Joint Committee (*Commissione paritetica*) of the Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Bologna for its financial assistance in organizing the aforementioned workshop.

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From Confucian Archetype to Neoliberal Resemantization: The Resurgence of the Ideal "Good Wife and Wise Mother" (*Xiánqī Liángmǔ*) in Contemporary China

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Abstract This article traces the historical evolution and contemporary resemantization of the Virtuous Wife and Good Mother (*xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母) ideal in China, from its origins as a Confucian archetype to its neoliberal resurgence under Xi Jinping. Ideologically rooted in Confucian texts such as the *Book of Rites* (*Li Ji* 礼记), the *xianqi liangmu* (XQLM) model has long functioned as a patriarchal mechanism confining women to the domestic (*nei*) sphere. Rejected as 'feudal' during the Maoist period, the ideal has since been revived and adapted to align with contemporary state policy and market imperatives. This study examines the nexus between the neoliberal resemantization of XQLM and traditional ethics, showing how it reasserts moral and structural constraints on women's agency in private, professional, and familial domains. The article considers counter-discourses and emerging feminist subjectivities in art, literature, and activism — both within and beyond China — as sites of resistance against this coercive revival. The aim of this analysis is to bring to the foreground the discursive structures and traditional gender categories that, across centuries, have constrained women's identity and agency, inscribing them within the boundaries of Chinese patriarchal tradition, leading to the formulaic expression of XQLM to its contemporary interpretations.

Keywords *xianqi liangmu*; Confucian moral; *ryōsai kenbo*; patriarchal discourse; gender risemantization.

1. Theoretical Framework: From Coercion to Agency

The *xianqi liangmu* (XQLM) ideal is examined here as a device of power in Foucauldian terms, rooted in Confucian 'ideational traditions' — to borrow Jana Rošker's expression (Rošker 2017: 44) and their historical sedimentations, yet also as a discursive site where possibilities of subjectivation emerge. This framework thus moves from the analysis of coercive gender regimes to the exploration of the subtle forms of negotiation and resistance enacted by women. The patriarchal system, by defining women as 'inferior and weak' (*beiruo* 卑弱),

institutionalizes submission (*zhongnan qingnü* 重男轻女) and confines female identity to reproduction and lineage continuity (*rending xingwang* 人丁兴旺). Although the formulation XQLM is a modern one (as will be seen in the following paragraphs), it carries the ideological legitimacy of a long Confucian genealogy.

This study critically examines gendered structures through an interdisciplinary methodology informed by both Chinese feminist scholarship and post-structuralist theories, revealing how gender constructs function as sites for both constraint and potential subversion. It draws from both modern and contemporary Chinese feminist critiques (Qiu Jin, He-Yin Zhen, Ding Ling, Dai Jinhua, Wang Zheng, Lü Pin) and post-structuralist researchers on gender studies (Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tani Barlow, Harriet Evans, Elizabeth Croll, Doroty Ko, Rebecca Karl, Susan Mann, Bret Hinsch, among others). This 'polyphony of voices' allows us to trace how structures of coercion — through exclusion, confinement, and naturalization — also contain the potential for agency, as women reinterpret or subvert these inherited roles. As Liu, Karl & Ko (2013) demonstrate, the man/woman distinction in the concept of *nannü* (male/female) is not a neutral description of social relations but a cognitive mechanism through which the world itself is gendered. This ontological asymmetry supports hierarchically predetermined and unjust structures, articulated in socio-economic abstractions (e.g., *nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外，女主内, men rule the outside, women rule the inside) and cosmological ones (*yang/yin,* 阳/阴 and *qian/kun* 乾/坤*).* From a feminist perspective, *nannü* must thus be read as a mechanism of division — but also as a site where women's re-signification of gendered identities can begin.

From the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 CE) onward, prescriptive ethics transmitted ideals of wifehood and motherhood that confined women to the 'inner' domain (*nei*).[1] The XQLM model crystallizes these norms into an ideology of submission embodied in the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues (san cong si de* 三从四德*).* Yet even within such coercive frameworks, historical and literary records, such as those analyzed by Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936) and Xiao Hong 萧红 (1911–1942), reveal spaces of suffering that lead toward self-awareness and critique.

In sum, both Chinese and Western feminist analyses expose the coercive power of categories like *nannü zhibie* 男女之别 (gender differentiation), *xianqi*

[1] In early canons, women occupied a liminal space. See Ardizzoni (2020).

liangmu, *nei/wai*, and *yin/yang*, which naturalize subordination. Yet this very discursive rigidity has also generated counter-discourses, enabling women to transform the language of virtue into a language of critique — marking the theoretical and historical transition from coercion to agency.

2. The Confucian Archetype: The Role of Rites and Texts

The ideological foundation of the rigid socio-spatial binaries upon which woman's social construct is built can be traced back to the *Li Ji* 礼记 (Book of Rites), which dates back to the early third century BCE (Mair 2001: 92). The *textus receptus* is the edition prepared by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 CE), who composed his commentary during the early part of the first century BCE (Wang, 2003: 48). The *Li Ji* fixes the sacrality of rituals: birth, marriage, funerals, but also everyday actions. The 12th chapter, named *Family Conduct* (*Nei Ze* 内则) establishes the normative principle of gender differentiation through the separation of spaces and spheres of action, inside and outside, as well as through differences in learning, ceremonial performance, clothing, and family relationships.

This is the narration of a normal day for a woman:

> At the first crowing of the cock, they [women] should wash their hands, and rinse their mouths; comb their hair, draw over it the covering of silk, fix this with the hair-pin, and tie the hair at the roots with the fillet. They should then put on their jacket, and over it the sash. On the left side they should hang the duster and handkerchief, the knife and whetstone, the small spike, and the metal speculum to get fire with; and on the right, the needle-case, thread, and floss, all bestowed in the satchel, the great spike, and the borer to get fire with from wood. They will also fasten on their necklaces [meaning doubtful], and adjust their shoe-strings (Legge 1885: 450).

The central concept of *Li* 礼 (rite/ritual) is conveyed specifically through the relationship between husband and wife:

> Rite begins with attending to the relationship between husband and wife: within the household, a distinction between inside and outside is made. Men are positioned outside; women inside (*Nei Ze*, 57).

It regulates that:

> Men and women do not sit mixed together; they do not share the same clothes rack or the same combs and towels, nor do they hand things directly to one another. Sisters-in-law and younger brothers-in-law do not engage in mutual inquiries; aunts and nephews do not wash garments together. Words from the outside must not enter into the inner quarters, and words from the inside must not go out beyond the threshold (*Nei Ze*, 38).

Boys and girls are allowed to play and study together, but:

> A girl, until the age of ten, does not go outside. Her governess instructs her in gentleness and obedience, in handling hemp and flax, in processing silk cocoons, in weaving and braiding, in needlework and sewing, so that she may learn the womanly task of providing clothing. She observes the rites of sacrifice, assists by presenting wine and food offerings — grain, beans, pickles, and sauces — and, according to ritual, helps in arranging them upon the altar (*Nei Ze*, 81).

The *Record of Ritual Matters* by Dai the Elder (*Da Dai Li Ji* 大戴禮記), compiled in the first century CE, transmits several passages from the *Li Ji* and expands upon its substance. In the chapter *Benming* 本命, we read:

> A woman (*nü* 女) is one who conforms (*ru* 如); a son (*zi* 子) is one who increases and continues (*zi* 孳). A "woman" (*nüzi* 女子) therefore signifies one who, in conformity with the teachings of men, extends and carries forth the principles of morality. Thus, she is called *furen* (妇人). The term *furen* means 'one who submits to another.' For this reason, she is not to possess authority of her own, but to follow the Three Obediences: in youth, she follows her father; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband dies, she follows her son, never daring to act according to her own will (*Da Dai Li Ji* – BM, 11).

The same passage further defines the roles and functions of women within the family:

> Her instructions and commands must not go beyond the inner chambers; her proper affairs lie in the preparation of food, and therein lies her rectitude. Thus, a woman remains within the inner quarters throughout her days, not traveling a hundred *li* except for mourning rites. She does nothing on her own, accomplishes nothing independently. Only after consulting

> others does she act; only after confirmation may she speak. When moving about at night, she must carry a lamp; in matters of the household, she must measure with care. When livestock prospers within the household, this is called fidelity (*xin* 信). Such is the way by which a woman's virtue (*fude* 妇德) is to be rectified (*Da Dai Li Ji* – BM, 11).

In these early Confucian texts, female socialization is structured around two complementary domains: domestic labor and textile production (spinning, weaving, sewing), which ensured the material reproduction of the household, and participation in ritual economy, through auxiliary roles in sacrifices, where women's labor is incorporated into the moral and spiritual order of the family. Philosophically, the canonical literature establishes women's identity as ontologically dependent and socially derivative. Women's agency is circumscribed by rules of propriety and prudence (e.g., when walking at night, carry a lamp), practical household duties (e.g., manage livestock), and ritual obligations (e.g., do not travel even a hundred *li* for mourning), all framed as expressions of *xin* 信 (trustworthiness/fidelity). The boundaries of female agency are defined as simultaneously productive and ritual, but always derivative and supportive of male-centered authority. The instructions emphasize spatial enclosure as a foundational element of female identity, while the stress on obedience and gentleness codifies virtue as submission. In Mencian terms, the most crucial role of a woman, one that also involved the man, was to ensure lineage continuity. As *Mengzi* stated:

> Mencius said: "There are three forms of unfilial conduct, and the greatest is to have no descendants" (*Mengzi, Li Lou* I, 26).

Foucault describes the emergence of 'docile bodies' shaped by disciplinary mechanisms that render individuals both obedient and productive. Through disciplinary discourse, institutions such as the school, and education in general, generate forms of knowledge that normalize conduct (Foucault 1977: 135–169). Thus, in Foucauldian terms, these canonical passages may be read as instances of 'disciplinary discourse,' producing 'docile bodies' through normative injunctions that regulate space, speech, labor, and desire. Dorothy Ko (1994: 17) distinguishes between the 'official ideology,' embodied in texts addressed to the literati class (*shi* 士), and the 'applied ideology,' referring to the practical strategies through which women negotiated this discursive framework. The earliest and most influential text aimed at guiding women's everyday conduct was written by Ban Zhao (45–115 CE). In the introduction to her *Admonitions*

for Women (*Nüjie* 女诫), a foundational work that served as a model for later women's manuals, Ban Zhao explicitly stated that her purpose was to help women avoid being reprimanded 'for no apparent reason', by providing them with knowledge fostering social and ethical awareness (Ban Zhao 2011; Ardizzoni 2020; Pang-White 2018). In her manual, Ban Zhao expounds upon the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues*, providing a pragmatic interpretation of these moral precepts. In the second chapter, which addresses a woman's relationship with her husband, she asserts that a wife must be *xian* 贤 (worthy or virtuous); otherwise, she cannot adequately serve him. Here, xian does not signify an inherent moral quality but rather a relational condition — one that defines female virtue through the act of service and thereby reinforces its subordinate, instrumental nature.

If the *Li Ji*, together with the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女传), Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women* and other canonical texts were the official channels through which the ethical framework of the XQLM model was transmitted, its diffusion was by no means confined to the elite domain of classical readership (Kinney 2014; Ardizzoni 2020). From the late imperial period onward, the ethical message of female virtue and obedience reached a much wider audience: through an expanding corpus of popular manuals, referred to as the "Women's Elementary Learning" (*Nüzi mengxue* 女子蒙学), as well as through oral traditions including folk songs, rhymes, and didactic poems, which were often reproduced in genealogies and local family records (Ardizzoni 2024). This broad spectrum of textual and oral didacticism ensured that the principles of female morality were disseminated across all strata of society, regardless of levels of literacy or social standing.

Although most prescriptive texts for women were composed by Confucian scholars, a significant number were authored by women of high social rank who sought to articulate, transmit, or occasionally negotiate these moral expectations. Once received by communities at the lower end of the social hierarchy, these prescriptions were frequently transformed and domesticated into more accessible forms — oral verse, popular ballads, mnemonic rhymes — ensuring their integration into everyday life. From the Ming dynasty onward, with the expansion of the printing industry at both commercial and local levels, many of these orally transmitted forms were fixed in print, thereby consolidating the range of gendered moral instruction.

Women and children's education developed significantly during the Ming–Qing period, when moral didacticism became increasingly systematized,[2] and continued to evolve in the Republican era, when discourses of female virtue were rearticulated in light of modernizing reforms, nationalist projects, and new forms of print culture (Ko 1994; Mann 2007). In this *longue durée*, the XQLM formulation, at the end of the 19th century, functioned not only as a moral prescription but also as a 'cultural technology' (Foucault 1977; 1978) for lineage perpetuation, embedding the Confucian gender order into the daily lives and affective structures of Chinese women across time and space. In that time, as we know, there was a wave of modernization that introduced new elements in gender culture.

3. Challenges to the Ideal: From Modern to Revolutionary Critique

At the turn of the 19th century, China underwent a profound wave of modernization that proved essential to the construction of a new society. This process entailed the systematic inclusion of women in scholarly and intellectual life, a movement that emerged simultaneously from multiple quarters. First in the Yangwu 洋务 movement (1898) and then in the 1915–1921 New Culture Movement (*Xin wenhua yundong* 新文化运动), progressive modernists, anarchists and young Communist intellectuals were all attentive to international developments. Internationally, influences from the West and Japan played a significant role, particularly through the diffusion of ideas concerning universal education, gender equality, scientific pedagogy and democratic movements ("Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" personified the new configuration of Chinese thought in the second decade of the twentieth century). Internally, a growing generation of young Chinese — students, writers, and activists — called for cultural renewal that would break rigid Confucian hierarchies, challenge traditional gender roles, and promote critical engagement with knowledge and society. In these debates at the turn of the century, the Confucian model of the

[2] It is worth mentioning here the *Four Books for Women* (*Nü si shu* 女四书) assembled and printed in 1624 by Wang Xiang. This collection, that mirrored the *Confucian Four Books* (*Si shu* 四书), included, besides Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Women*, the *Song Sisters' Women's Analecta* (*Nü Lunyu* 女论语), *Empress Xu's Instructions for Women* (*Nüxun/Neixun* 女训/内训), *Lady Liu's Quick Guide for all Rules for Girls* (*Nüfan Jielu* 女范戒律) by Wang Xiang's own mother. A complete translation of the *Nü Sishu* is in Pang–White (2018).

cainü 才女 — an élite woman who received specific education within the domestic chambers and whose artistic and literary accomplishments were cultivated as leisurely pursuits — was increasingly questioned. A vivid reformist energy responded directly to this model and to the popular Ming–Qing saying, "Ignorance is a woman's virtue" (*nüzi wucai bianshi de* 女子无才便是德). On one side, this perspective continued to be firmly upheld by modernist reformers such as Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837–1909), who participated in the post-1898 reform of the educational system which lead to the abolition of the imperial exams (*keju* 科举 system) in 1905. The reform envisaged the establishment of female schools designed to train *baomu* 保姆 — nannies or early childhood instructors[3] — through the use of traditional educational texts (*mengxue* 蒙学), but it essentially kept women confined to the domestic sphere and did not introduce any new curricula in female education. Against this position, among advocates of women's emancipation, Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), one of the main protagonists of the 1898 Reform movement, in his *General Discussion on Reforms* (*Bianfa tongyi* 变法通议) argued that a new model of XQLM through female education would strengthen the nation even before benefiting women themselves (Liang 1941: 41). Reformers sought instead a new ideal of womanhood aligned with the needs of national renewal. In 1906, following the establishment of a Department for Education, the imperial government yielded to demands for the opening of private schools. In 1907, the Qing government promulgated regulations for private education, thereby granting official recognition to women's schools.

The establishment of modern schools facilitated the dissemination of new educational materials, which incorporated both indigenous reformist ideas and selected concepts from foreign intellectual currents. These texts became instrumental in promoting literacy, moral education, and socialization aligned with the emerging vision of a modern nation, while simultaneously reshaping the role and identity of women in domestic and public spheres.

One of the responses that at this stage seemed to meet the needs of the time came from Japan, where similar debates were underway. In 1875, Nakamura Masanao 中村正直 (1832–1891), a Confucian scholar sent to study Western culture, coined the term *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母 (good wife, wise mother). He envisioned women as devoted to family, frugal, educated, and responsible for raising healthy children: an effort framed as patriotic service, cultivating citizens who would strengthen the nation. A woman's efforts in managing the household

[3] *Baomu* was one among the numerous neologisms and cultural phrases that entered Chinese from Japanese, along with the terms for 'male' and 'female' (*nanxing* 男性 / *nüxing* 女性).

and raising healthy, intelligent children were seen as a form of patriotic service: by educating her sons and daughters, she would help produce future citizens capable of strengthening the nation.

According to Nakamura, women were naturally inclined toward child-rearing, a quality that was to be recognized, cultivated, and placed at the nation's service. Moreover, Meiji women were expected to abandon the passivity that had characterized them in the past and become autonomous individuals capable of contributing to and defending the nation. Better education for women would provide them with the tools to educate their children more effectively. This aligned with Liang and his legacy's vision. Within this context, a large group of new intellectuals sought to improve women's condition, integrating the label of *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母 — sinicized, with a reversal of morphemes, into *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母 — into the social and cultural modernization discourse that was taking place.

Within this evolving intellectual and educational landscape, the *ryōsai kenbo* or XQLM model was not the only emerging rearticulation of womanhood that came to front. Among these rearticulations, figures such as the new woman (*xin nüxing* 新女性) and the modern woman (*modeng nüxing* 摩登女性), along with the *xianqi liangmu*, embodied an attempt to reconcile tradition with the ideals of progress. Far from representing a complete rupture, the new models blended traditional morality with emergent cosmopolitan and romantic ideals, embraced love marriage and urban sophistication, remaining tethered to patriarchal expectations. They perpetuated the image of the urban, cultivated woman who embraced love marriage as an alternative to arranged unions, while drawing inspiration from Western notions of romantic individualism and self-expression.

In 1927, Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986), with her *Miss Sophie's Diary* (*Shafei nüshi de riji* 沙菲女士的日记), introduced a new model of womanhood that, while not overtly rejecting patriarchy, further interrogated the patriarchal framework by exploring the intersections of individual subjectivity, traditional morality, and emerging political consciousness. Women's interiority became a site of negotiation between personal desire and societal expectation, foreshadowing debates that would intensify in the Republican and Maoist eras.

In this phase, the redefinition of women's roles often occurred within the same discursive space that linked female education to moral refinement and, ultimately, to national regeneration. The most significant critiques of these models arose in Anarchist or pre-Communist — and then Communist — intellectual movements. A paradigmatic event was during the New Culture

Movement, with the translation and publication in 1918 of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, in *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian* 新青年). This ignited a vivid debate on women's destiny beyond marriage and the broader question of female autonomy in a rapidly transforming cultural and political environment.

4. Nationalist and Maoist Transformations

During the 1930s, political divisions sharpened approaches to women's roles. Aligned with international conservative and Fascist models, including that of Fascist Italy, which celebrated the 'pluriactivity' within the family, depicting women as loving mothers and good wives under a strict control of the male head of the family, the Guomindang (GMD) government issued directives encouraging women's return to domestic chores. After decades of female participation in industrial and urban production during the 1920s, this policy sought to reassert the image of woman as *fattrice*, the nurturing mother and 'queen of the household' (*regina del focolare*).[4]

During the same period, within the framework of the New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運), Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蒋介石, 1887–1975) articulated a vision of national reform in which the moral regeneration of Chinese society was to be realized through the family, and in particular through women. In his programmatic speeches, such as the *Outline of the New Life Movement* (*Xin shenghuo yundong gangyao* 新生活運動綱要),[5] he explicitly entrusted women's associations with the task of disseminating moral and domestic norms grounded in the Confucian principles of *li, yi, lian, and chi* (礼, 义, 廉, 耻), that is, propriety or ritual decorum, righteousness, integrity and sense of moral shame. These associations were also responsible for implementing programs aimed at encouraging women to return to the

[4] I use Italian expressions here because these concepts resonate in both Italy and China. See, for instance, the words of the Italian Minister of Education Giovanni Gentile in his 1934 speech: "In the family, a woman belongs to her husband and is what she is by virtue of belonging to him […]. A woman is one who devotes herself entirely to others, to the point of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation; she is, above all, an ideal mother before being a biological one […]. A mother to her children, to the sick, to the young entrusted to her care — in every case, to all those who may benefit from her love and draw upon her innate, original, and essential motherhood." (Gentile, Giovanni. (1934) *La donna e il fanciullo: due conferenze*. Firenze: G. C. Sansoni.)

[5] Original text in http://www.ccfd.org.tw/ccef001/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=351:0001-67&catid=210&Itemid=256.

household (*funü huijia* 妇女回家) and to cultivate feminine morality according to the ideal of XQLM. The New Life Movement redefined female patriotism in terms of moral domesticity and 'motherhood nationalism.' The GMD ideology reinterpreted the traditional model of XQLM aiming to produce disciplined "Republican mothers" rather than emancipated women. The rhetoric of Chiang and his wife Soong Mei-ling (Song Meiling 宋美齡, 1898–2003) positioned women at the center of the nation, yet always within the confines of Confucian order and marital duty.

In contrast, Communist Party leaders critiqued the XQLM ideal as a patriarchal constraint. On September 25, 1942, Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898–1976) published an article in the *Xinhua Ribao* entitled "On the 'Good Wife and Wise Mother' and the Duties of Mothers" (*Lun XQLM yu mu zhi* 论贤妻良母与母职), in which he argued that it functioned as a 'chain binding women,' denying them public participation while preserving patriarchal power structures. He wrote:

> In every society, it is natural for a mother to be good and for a wife to be virtuous. The same is true of fathers and husbands, who should also be good and virtuous; these are fundamental and unchangeable principles. […] In the past, women's virtue was defined by the 'three obediences and four virtues' and by the 'three Cs' — Church, Cooking, and Children.
> Yet today, the expression 'good wife and wise mother' has become a fixed formula whose meaning has been distorted. Within patriarchal society, it functions as a chain, binding women, representing only the interests of conservative men. Under this label, women's roles are rigidly defined: confined to the home as wives who serve their husbands and mothers who rear their children, they are denied any position in public life. In all countries where this ideal is promoted — Japan, Germany, and others — women occupy no political role, and these are societies that perpetuate a strong patriarchal tradition. (*Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao* [Historical Materials of the Chinese Women's Movement, 1937–1945], Beijing: Zhongguo Beijing chubanshe, 1991 [1943], 647–54).

With the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), gender discourse shifted from traditional morality to class struggle. Legal reforms, such as the 1950 Marriage Law, abolished arranged marriage, along with children marriage, concubinage, and coerced suicides, declared possible the divorce on women's side, thus creating the legal conditions for a formal gender equality. The XQLM ideal was recast as bourgeois and individualistic, incompatible with the collective ethos of Socialist society. In the drive to eliminate all social and

gender inequalities, the new model of femininity was embodied in the figure of the "Iron Girl" (*tie guniang* 铁姑娘), a strong worker, equal to men in labor and revolutionary spirit. The urban figures of the XQLM and the modern woman were supplanted by the idealized image of the smiling peasant or factory-worker woman, rosy-cheeked and vigorous, laboring alongside men in agricultural and industrial production. The emphasis was no longer on family or lineage, structures associated with the 'cannibalistic' traditions of the past, but on collective participation in Socialist labor units such as the *commune* (*gongshe* 公社) in the countryside and the work unit (*danwei* 单位) in the city. In this context, female identity was redefined primarily through the lens of productive labor, proletarian consciousness, and revolutionary commitment, subsuming the personal and the domestic into the collective project — once again — of national transformation. As Wang Zheng notices,

> Iron Girls became the symbol of 'masculinization' of women in the socialist period. This discursive maneuver powerfully operated in a politics of erasure, erasing a socialist feminist history, and constituted a crucial part in the production of a post- (and anti-) socialist hegemonic discourse that enabled China's dramatic turn to capitalism (2017: 221).

This will be described in the next paragraph.

5. Neoliberal Resemantization: Literary and Cinematic Transmission

The reforms initiated after 1979 and the current valorization of traditional culture constitute the core of a neoliberal resemantization, through which the dominant ideology consolidates patriarchal control by promoting a state-sanctioned morality and the popularization and commodification of women's double burden, as well as the pressures related to marriage and physical appearance. These dynamics contribute to modernizing and at times implicitly legitimizing, the XQLM rhetoric. At the same time, heterogeneous voices have emerged that challenge and problematize this hegemonic ideology. These counter-discourses found expression in the diverse artistic forms that proliferated from the 1990s onward, when literature, theater, music, cinema, and other visual arts witnessed the rise of women artists who set forth new trajectories of female subjectivity. Through autobiographical and gender-

conscious narratives, often framed as *herstories*, women writers animated subjective reflections on the evolving relationships between the self, family, state, and traditional morality within a rapidly modernizing society. Authors such as, Zhang Ailing 张爱玲 (1920–1995), Zhang Jie 张洁 (1937–2022),Can Xue 残雪 (1953–), Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954–), Tie Ning 铁凝 (1957–), Chi Zijian 迟子建 (1964–), Mian Mian 棉棉 (1970–) and Guo Xiaolu 郭小橹 (1973–) critically engaged with entrenched patriarchal structures embedded in both Socialist and Confucian frameworks, while exploring new modes of agency and selfhood shaped by market reforms and globalization. Male writers including Mo Yan 莫言 (1955–), Yan Lianke 阎连科 (1958–), Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958–) and Su Tong 苏童 (1963–) likewise depicted women negotiating liminal spaces between traditional expectations and the pressures of life in a transforming social landscape.

In cinema, filmmakers began portraying women as complex, contradictory figures — strong, resilient, and pragmatic — negotiating the tensions between private obligations and public visibility. Many scholars agree in considering Huang Shuqin's 黄蜀芹 (1939–) *Woman · Demon · Human* (*Ren · Gui · Qing* 人·鬼·情, 1987) as the highest achievement of Chinese feminist cinema (Qu, quoted in Wang, 2011: 195); a film that, by crystallizing the very concept of female consciousness, marks a critical transition not only in cinematic language but also in the social positioning of gender constructs in post-Mao China. The film features a female protagonist who performs male roles in traditional Chinese opera, thereby challenging normative gender boundaries deeply rooted in both Confucian hierarchies and revolutionary discourses. Yet, the women intellectuals and filmmakers of the 1980s and 1990s consistently emphasized in their statements that their reflections were grounded in the revolutionary premise of gender equality: that women 'hold up half the sky,' and that their interventions were not intended as political claims but as explorations of identity, subjectivity, and the evolving roles of women in contemporary Chinese society. A paradigmatic example is 1992 Zhang Yimou's 张艺谋 (1950–) *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju da guansi* 秋菊打官司), in which the protagonist's struggle is not directed toward revolutionary transformation but toward justice within the intimate sphere: the defense of her husband, disabled after a bullying encounter with the local officer. Qiu Ju, portrayed as a tenacious rural woman in the advanced stages of pregnancy, embodies a new ideal of the XQLM: a woman who, through her perseverance and strategic negotiation with the bureaucratic system, transcends the boundaries of the domestic (*nei*) to confront a hostile public (*wai*). Her journey illustrates both the continuity and

redefinition of feminine virtue in the post-socialist context: domestic devotion intertwined with a growing sense of civic agency. The previous year, the same Zhang Yimou had presented another striking exploration of female subjectivity in *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gao gao gua* 大红灯笼高高挂, 1991), a film that won international acclaim at the Venice Film Festival. Here, the story of Songlian exposes the claustrophobic logic of patriarchal power and the psychological alienation it produces among women trapped within its hierarchical structure. The rivalry and cruelty that emerge among the women (wives, concubines and servants) are not expressions of inherent malice but the consequences of a system that turns female bodies and affections into instruments of control. The film underscores the deep entanglement between gender, discipline, and desire in traditional society, offering a scathing critique of how patriarchy perpetuates psychic fragmentation and social paralysis among women.

Both films, though set in vastly different social contexts, converge in their interrogation of female agency and moral constraint. They reveal how, in post-socialist China, virtue embodied by women becomes a crucial site for negotiating tensions between tradition and modernity, domesticity and public assertion, submission and autonomy.

Together, literary and cinematic practices contributed to a broader cultural landscape in which female subjectivity was not only represented but actively reimagined, negotiating the complex intersections of tradition, modernity, and personal agency.

6. Contemporary Revival

In 2020, five years after the abolition of the One Child Policy,[6] the average household size in China dropped to 2.62 people, a decrease of 0.82 people from 2000. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the population decreased by 850,000 at the end of 2022 compared to the end of the previous year, with a natural growth rate of -0.60‰. This marked the first negative growth in China's population in over 60 years. The declining interest in marriage and children in today's China prompted the government to issue a series of policy changes which emphasize the need to promote family culture. Therefore, over the past decade, the values embedded in the XQLM narrative have been actively

[6] In the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee (26–29/10/2015), the central government issued the decision on allowing married couples to have a second child.

promoted at both governmental and societal levels, reflecting a broader attempt to reinforce normative ideals of femininity and domestic virtue, and, on the last run, enhancing the double burden on women. Wang Pei'an 王培安, at the time when he was Vice-President of the China Family Planning Association (*Zhonghua jihua shengyu xiehui* 中国计划生育协会), an organization affiliated with the Central Committee and State Council, in a 2023 interview to the China Daily lamented that fewer births and aging have become the new normal in Chinese society. The government, therefore, issued a plan aimed at "building a marriage and childbearing culture for the new era, promoting the social value of childbearing, and highlighting the social function of family care for the elderly".[7] On the other hand, the policymaker also warned that:

> Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, the division of roles — with men as the main providers and women responsible for domestic duties — has persisted. Employed women face the dual burden of work and household responsibilities, which increases the cost of childbearing. Women who are advancing in their careers are often reluctant or even afraid to have children (China Daily 23/06/2023).

In the same interview, he further noted that, in response to these challenges, the government had launched a series of public campaigns — issuing advocacy statements, collecting promotional slogans, organizing knowledge contests, producing promotional films, and distributing posters — aimed at promoting what was termed the "marriage and childbearing culture of the new era." These initiatives had a significant impact on cultural production, which, during the same period, came increasingly under state supervision and ideological control. The diffusion channels of these values were a variety of national-popular cultural forms, including songs, films, slogans, artistic performances, and even the conferral of honorary titles celebrating exemplary women. Moreover, so-called 'schools for virtuous girls' (*nüde ban* 女德班) were established, where the figure of the 'good wife and wise mother' was presented as a normative social ideal and a model of moral citizenship.[8] Framed as essential for social harmony (*hexie* 和谐), family ethics were promoted as core Socialist values, and women's organizations were called to the propagation of these messages, just as during the Nationalist period.

[7] https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202306/13/WS648811e2a310dbde06d232a3.html.
[8] As early as 2017, the BBC website published an article "China closes school 'teaching women to be obedient'". https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-42218618.

The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) (*Zhongguo Quanguo Funü Lianhehui* 中国全国妇女联合会, abbrv. *Fulian* 妇联), operating at both national and local levels, links female virtue, particularly filial devotion to the elderly, to national legislation, cultural heritage, and children's education. Moreover, it enforces gender-specific business, such as women's healthcare products, as an important factor towards enhancing national market:

> The seventh national census data showed that China's women population stood at 688 million by Nov 1, 2020, among which 436 million were between 15 and 59 years of age, therefore contributing to strong consumption potential. [...] With the emergence of new companies and new technologies, the women's healthcare management sector is expected to flourish (Women of China, 14 Sept 2023).

Fulian actively disseminates XQLM values targeting both rural and urban women through differentiated campaigns tailored to their social contexts. Rural campaigns often emphasize traditional caregiving roles, family continuity, and participation in local reproductive and postpartum services, such as modern *yuezi* 月子 centers, reinforcing women's centrality in domestic and intergenerational care (Ardizzoni 2021). Urban campaigns, by contrast, combine moral guidance with modern expectations of education, career management, and social visibility, while still promoting filial and maternal responsibilities. Across both contexts, the Federation reinforces the ideal of motherhood through monetary awards and honorary recognitions for women with three or more children, thereby embedding XQLM values within a network of social incentives and moral expectations. Numerous highly commercialized education and parenting manuals and popular guides were published in the 2010s–2020s,[9] encouraging modernized prescriptions for producing 'well-educated, well-married' daughters. This is an important substantiation of the commercialized education channel that repackages XQLM values, promoting the XQLM ideal in modernized terms: how to raise a well-educated, well-employed, well-married (*wang nü cheng feng* 望女成凤) girl. On a popular level, visual and folk culture, such as songs, films, and slogans, depict the 'urban woman' as one who successfully participates in the workforce while

[9] The controversial book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua (2011) became a symbol of Chinese mother commitment in raising a perfect Confucian-style child. Translated into Chinese with the title "我在美国当妈妈" (I am a mother in America), it followed a wave of publications on parenthood and successful education.

remaining devoted to her domestic roles. The valorization of marriage and childbirth is powerfully rehearsed in the institutional discourse, and widely encouraged at a commercial level. Right alongside comes a radical condemnation of non-heteronormative life choices, such as no-marriage, especially for women — who, when unmarried after reaching thirty years of age, get labelled as *shengnü* 剩女 (Fincher 2014; 2018) — or homosexuality. At the same time, these traditional values have also become the target of largely covert or indirect criticism, particularly in the realms of popular media and online discourse.

However, when the XQLM model is negated and an alternative one is promoted, as in the works of actress and director Jia Ling 贾玲 (1982–), it often serves to expand the practical pathways of family-value ideology rather than reject it outright. Her *Hi, Mom* (*Nihao, Li Huanying* 你好，李焕英, 2021) is a time-travel narrative in which the protagonist meets her mother in the past, when she was a student. Her more recent *YOLO: You Only Live Once* (*Re la gun tang* 热辣滚烫, 2024) depicts the physical and personal transformation of an overweight woman into a boxing athlete, impersonated by the director herself, who is popularly recognized for her non-conformity to traditional beauty standards. These foreground the mother-daughter relationship while simultaneously highlighting and satirizing societal attitudes toward non-normative female bodies. Such narratives negotiate familial affection, filial responsibility, and gendered expectations, illustrating how contemporary media can reframe, parody, or subtly reinforce traditional moral ideals. In doing so, Jia Ling's films participate in a modern iteration of the XQLM discourse, demonstrating how popular culture mobilizes humor, bodily transformation, and maternal devotion to rearticulate the moral and social significance of women's roles in family and society. This rhetorical operation echoes the subversive strategy found in the traditional *The Ballad of the Lazy Woman* (*Lan fu ge* 懒婦歌), a popular folk song orally transmitted since late Qing Dynasty that humorously inverts the daily obligations imposed upon women as prescribed in the classical *Nei Ze*. Through irony and exaggeration, the ballad exposes the moral expectations and relentless domestic pressures that have historically defined women's virtue. As the text recites:

> Everyone laughs behind the lazy woman's back. She wakes up around midmorning, she immediately wastes time in idle talk; she does not tie her hair, allows the pot to get cold, lets the fire die out; she does not wash her face or scrub the floor [...] (translated in Ardizzoni 2022: 176).

By parodying prescriptive moral codes, the ballad transforms the figure of the 'lazy woman' into a vehicle for resistance, undermining the ideal of the diligent and self-sacrificing wife. But in doing this, it still reinforces the hegemonic discourse. In 2024, this strategy of reappropriation has reappeared in digital popular culture, notably in the work of Zhou Linfeng 周林枫 (1998–), an online singer celebrated for her performances in traditional costume *Hanfu* 汉服 and her compositions in the classical *gufeng* 古风 musical style. Her songs revisit traditional Confucian and patriarchal motifs while subtly reframing them through contemporary sensibilities. Titles such as *Buxiao you san* 不孝有三 (There Are Three Forms of Unfilial Conduct), echoing the *Mengzi, Zhaodi* 招娣 (Calling for a Younger Brother) referring to a custom in which a young bride was married into a family to 'invite' the birth or rebirth of a son), and *Ji* 祭 (Offering Sacrifices to the Ancestors), which addresses the *Three Obediences and Four Virtues*, all foreground the persistence of traditional gender expectations. Particularly significant is her song *Xianqi liangmu*, which revisits Confucian womanhood. Through its nostalgic aesthetics and stylized vocal delivery, the song reactivates a moral lexicon of virtue and obedience, yet simultaneously invites critical reflection on the continued cultural authority of these ideals in contemporary Chinese society. Zhou's engagement with these traditional tropes — performed in an ostensibly conservative idiom but circulated through digital media — embodies a nuanced form of cultural negotiation: a simultaneous citation, parody, and critique of the patriarchal narratives that continue to shape gendered identity. This is the text:

After midnight, when everyone is already asleep, she blows out the candle. At dawn she rises, gathers firewood for cooking, and starts working again. The baby cries, lunch is still simmering on the stove. The dog barks, words of reproach still echoing. She, too, cries. She must manage both the living room and the kitchen, yet not a single praise is given to her.	A "good wife and loving mother" how many hidden constraints bind her! Her parents always tell her to give more, to always stay one step behind. In the end, her in-laws are never satisfied. A "good wife and loving mother" how much suffering must she endure: washing, cooking, caring for everyone. Even if she swallows her broken teeth, no one cares about her tears.

Table 1 "Xianqi liangmu" translated by the author.

It is, in essence, a lamentation and an indictment of the woman's fragile destiny — an accusation formulated on a precise blueprint of the *Nei Ze*, echoing moral discourses articulated nearly a century ago. The woman depicted in this song bear little resemblance to the 'iron girl' who once 'held up half the sky'. Nevertheless, at the same time, Zhou also performs a song titled *Xia yi beizi bu jia ren* (下一辈子不嫁人，In the next life I will not get married), like a *manifesto* leading out of this framework. Zhou's accompanying videos, rendered as computer-generated animations, or costume-dressed video, evoke a stylized yet haunting visual world: traditional, predominantly rural settings populated by weary, suffering women surrounded by threatening figures — cruel men, and affectionate yet powerless mothers and grandmothers — unable to alter the predetermined fate of the female protagonist.

In parallel, on platforms such as TikTok, WeChat and Weibo, a search for "*xianqi liangmu*" yields a very different imagery. Here, the term is associated with young, well-groomed women who study — ideally completing a university degree — before marrying and having one, two, or preferably three children, to be raised with the assistance of their in-laws, often within multigenerational households. Other portrayals highlight women who use the best domestic products and appliances, excel in preparing refined dishes, and master small-scale entrepreneurial activities to support their families, while ensuring that their children attend the most prestigious schools.

In stark contrast to Zhou Linfeng's melancholic and critical reworking of the traditional ideal, these algorithmically promoted depictions reproduce a consumerist and patriarchal fantasy of femininity — one that conflates moral virtue with productivity, aesthetic self-discipline, and reproductive success. Zhou's reinterpretation thus functions as a counter-narrative, exposing the tension between nostalgic representations of domestic virtue and the neoliberal commodification of womanhood in China's contemporary digital culture, both conveying into the new XQLM ideal. A woman blogger writes that:

> The good wife and virtuous mother of the new era should be a woman who is wise, gentle, and strong inwardly, capable of managing her emotions and facing life with calmness and courage. As a wife, she should be able to understand and support her husband, communicate constructively, and contribute to the well-being of the family; as a mother, she should be responsible, affectionate, and mindful, educating her children with love and intelligence, without venting her own tensions on family members (*Hong si xin yu* 鸿思心语, 2025).

7. Resistance

Significant forms of resistance have emerged as strategies through which young Chinese women navigate and cope with entrenched social expectations. A growing number of women choose to, or are forced to, reside outside China, thereby creating a physical and psychological distance from pressures imposed both by state authorities and social actors within their communities (Ardizzoni 2025). The year 2015 marked a critical moment of collective mobilization with the suppression of the #MeToo movement in China and the arrest of the "Feminist Five": Wei Tingting, Li Tingting, Wu Rongrong, Wang Man, and Zheng Churan (Fincher 2018). From that moment on, women's discourse became more and more 'action oriented' (Wang 2018). In the ensuing decade, resistance has increasingly migrated to digital spaces or intimate discussion circles, where non-normative life choices — such as celibacy, postponement of marriage, refusal of motherhood and homosexuality — are deliberated, normalized, and strategically enacted. As widely defined by scholarly analysis, the evolution of digital feminist platforms exemplifies a broader transformation in Chinese gender discourse and in the articulation of feminist subjectivities (Mao 2020). Independent initiatives, such as *Feminist Voices* (*Nü quan zhi sheng* 女权之声)[10], established on Weibo and WeChat by transnational activist Lü Pin 吕频, alongside other transnational feminist networks, illustrate this shift. Unlike earlier generations of cultural producers who often distanced themselves from the 'feminist' label, contemporary activists increasingly embrace it, engaging in more individual, radical critiques of patriarchy, state control, and dominant gender norms, moved by an "emotional desire to eliminate gender inequality from their personal lives" (Lü 2023). This represents not only a reconfiguration of public feminist visibility but also a generational shift in the frameworks through which women in China conceptualize empowerment and agency. A reflection of this shift is visible also in the literary world, where new trends emerge, shattering traditional conceptions of heterosexual experiences, and conventional power dynamics, embracing ambiguity and fluidity, as exemplified in the "Queer Utopia" literature (Wang Der-wei 2020; Song Mingwei 2022; Wang Xinran 2025, among others). Everyday resistance is also enacted through micro-practices embedded in everyday life, which subtly destabilize normative gender scripts and create spaces for alternative subjectivities. These include the reappropriation of ritualized domestic practices

[10] A feminist social media platform that has been active between 2009 and 2018, when it was banned by Chinese authorities.

— such as the tea ceremony (*daocha* 倒茶), once reserved for male participation — and the pursuit of same-sex relationships, which challenge heteronormative expectations and social hierarchies of intimacy. Public interventions exemplify both practical and symbolic forms of resistance. For instance, campaigns to provide free menstrual products in school and university restrooms not only address material inequalities but also constitute a broader act of reclaiming social meanings around the female body. This reclaiming extends to language: euphemisms traditionally used by older generations, such as *dayima* 大姨妈 (Big Auntie), *lijia* 例假 (routine break), *qinqi* 亲戚 (family relative), *nage* 那个 (that thing), or even *daomei* 倒霉 (bad luck), are now being mobilized as markers of social and cultural reclamation, rather than being replaced by the term *yuejing* 月经 (menstruation). Simultaneously, gendered violence — including domestic abuse, gender-based bullying, and the abduction of women for reproductive purposes (*guaimai* 拐卖) — is increasingly analyzed through a critical feminist lens that questions the persistence of patriarchal structures and the resurgence of cultural norms valorizing marriage and lineage as core values.

The contemporary Chinese feminist imagination is also shaped by transnational flow of knowledge and intellectual exchange. Just as earlier women's gender discourse in China often drew inspiration from Japanese cultural productions — such as the inversion of *ryōsai kenbo* 良妻贤母 into the Chinese formula *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母 — today's gender debates is once again influenced by Japanese feminist scholarship. Notably, the work of sociologist Chizuko Ueno, whose extensive writings, over fifteen books translated into Chinese, have become highly influential, exemplifies this transnational dynamic. Since 2019, she has delivered more than fifty lectures at Chinese universities, in which she slated both overt misogyny and the cultural construction of women as weak, dependent, subordinated to socially and aesthetically normative frameworks (Ueno 2015 [2023])[11]. Her interventions resonate with a new generation of Chinese women who are increasingly questioning inherited gender hierarchies, asserting autonomous subjectivities, and experimenting with non-conventional life trajectories. Overall, these phenomena underscore the complex interplay of digital activism, micro-resistance, and transnational feminist knowledge in shaping emergent forms of gendered agency in contemporary China. They reveal how young women navigate structural constraints, engage in creative acts of self-fashioning, and

[11] More than 20 books from the author have been translated into Chinese. *Onnagirai* (Misogyny) has been translated with the title *Yannü* 厌女 in 2015 and re-published in 2023.

participate in evolving networks of feminist solidarity, both locally and globally, thus challenging deeply entrenched social norms and expanding the conceptual boundaries of Chinese feminist praxis.

8. Conclusions

Across historical periods, the XQLM ideal demonstrates remarkable adaptability. Inherited from Confucian *ideational tradition* by Republican-era reformers, eliminated by Maoist labor models and post-socialist feminist expressions, recovered in Xi Jinping's contemporary moral revival, the ideal has functioned as a tool for social regulation, shaping female labor, morality, and subjectivity. Critically, its contemporary re-emergence illustrates the interplay between traditional patriarchy, state ideology, and neoliberal pressures, producing persistent tensions between autonomy, domestic obligation, and nationalized gender roles. Women's labor and reproductive capacities continue to be instrumentalized for social and political ends, underscoring the enduring relevance of historical patriarchal frameworks in shaping modern gendered experiences in China. Yet, its top-down resemantization process is challenged by an insurgent generation of educated rural and urban women, intellectuals and artists who incorporate the contemporary tensions between individualistic, consumeristic, global and socialist and collective moral trajectories, challenging the dominant discourse in differentiated, creative and unexpected ways.

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Homoerotic Desire and Masculine Identity in Tachibana Sotō's Narrative

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Abstract This paper explores two little-known works by Tachibana Sotō (1894–1959), a Japanese author marginal in modernist studies yet briefly mentioned in queer cultural studies. His 1938 novel *Narin Denka heno Kaisō* (My Memories of Prince Nalin), awarded with the Naoki Prize, belongs to mass literature and recounts the friendship between the narrator and an Indian prince in Japan. What initially appears to be the story of a friendship with veiled homoerotic undertones that challenges gender norms in pre-war Japan, then takes on the characteristics of a spy story in which the Japanese protagonist sides with the Indians against British interference. The second text, *Nanshoku Monogatari* (A Tale of Homoerotic Experiences, 1952), adopts a humorous, quasi-confessional style to depict the author's adolescent infatuation with a younger classmate. Published amid the liberalised atmosphere of post-war *kasutori* culture, it revisits the Edo-period tradition of male-male desire (*nanshoku*) while exposing the stigma and contradictions surrounding sexuality in mid-twentieth-century Japan. This paper investigates how Tachibana's fiction negotiates the continuity and rupture between the legacy of *nanshoku*, the moralisation of the war period, and the more tolerant expression of sexuality in the post-war period.

Keywords Tachibana Sotō; *nanshoku*; masculinity; queer culture; *kasutori* magazines.

1. Introduction

Many authors who published prolifically within the realm of *taishū bungaku* (popular literature) remain marginal in scholarly accounts, despite the insights their works offer into the intersections of gender, sexuality, and mass culture. One such neglected figure is Tachibana Sotō (1894–1959), a writer whose career spanned the militarist 1930s and the more liberal post-war decades, mentioned in the *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Queer Culture* among the authors who wrote about same-sex relationships before and after the Pacific War, together with Inagaki Taruho and Kawabata Yasunari (Gerstner 2006: 325).[1] Tachibana's works are valuable precisely because they capture the shifting socio-cultural terrain in which discourses of masculinity, sexuality, and national

[1] For an overview of the author, see Yamashita (1995) and Taddei (2022).

identity were negotiated. His 1938 novel *Narin Denka heno Kaisō* (My Memories of Prince Nalin) reflects both the restrictions of a pre-war society marked by censorship and state ideology and the persistence of homoerotic undercurrents that refused to be silenced. His later *Nanshoku Monogatari* (A Tale of Homoerotic Experiences, 1952) belongs to a different cultural atmosphere, one marked by the liberalisation of publishing, the rise of erotic mass magazines (*kasutori zasshi*), and the fragmentation of sexual categories under American occupation.

This article examines the representation of masculinity and homoeroticism in these two works in relation to broader discourses of sexuality in modern Japan. By situating Tachibana within the genealogy of *nanshoku* (male-male desire) traditions, as well as the medical, legal, and cultural debates of the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa periods, I argue that his fiction embodies the tensions between premodern legacies and modern categories of sexual identity.

Methodologically, this study engages with the cultural and literary history of the modernist period (Tyler 2008) while incorporating insights from queer studies on male homosexuality and constructions of masculinity in pre-war and post-war Japan, as primarily discussed by Miller (2022), Mackintosh (2011), Angles (2011) and McLelland (2005). As for the forms in which male-male eroticism manifested itself in early modern and modern Japan, reference will mainly be made to the studies by Leupp (1995) Pflugfelder (1999) and McLelland (2000).

2. From Edo *Nanshoku* to Meiji pathologisation

The socio-cultural context in which Tachibana grew up and wrote his early works was marked by profound discontinuities in the perception of male-male intimacy. In the Edo period (1603–1867), *nanshoku* (literally 'male colours') referred to erotic and emotional relations between adult men and beautiful youths (*wakashu*), particularly among samurai, monks, and in the milieu of *kabuki* theatre. Such practices were codified, aesthetically celebrated, and narrated in literary works such as Ihara Saikaku's *Nanshoku Ōkagami* (The Great Mirror of Male Love, 1687) or in the fictionalized accounts of love affairs in Buddhist environment belonging to the *Chigo Monogatari* (Stories of the Acolytes) genre, most dating from the Muromachi period (1336–1573) and authored by priests (Schmidt-Hori 2021). These practices were deeply woven into social and aesthetic fabric. The *wakashudō* (way of the youths) emphasised not only erotic enjoyment but also mentorship, loyalty, and ideals of beauty. A

nenja (older partner) was expected to guide and even financially support his *wakashu*, while the latter reciprocated with affection and companionship. Far from being a marginal perversion, *nanshoku* permeated elite culture, temple life, and theatrical traditions. *Nanshoku* was not stigmatised as immoral so long as it coexisted with the expectation of adult men marrying women and producing heirs (Pflugfelder 1999; Leupp 1995).

This long-standing acceptance was destabilised during the Meiji era (1868–1912), when the new nation-state embarked on a project of modernisation modelled upon Western powers. Alongside constitutional and institutional reforms, sexual norms were reorganised around the heterosexual nuclear family as the foundation of the modern state. Non-reproductive sexualities were increasingly stigmatised, not only by imported Christian moralities but also by medical and legal discourses (McLelland 2005).

The translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* into Japanese in 1894 as *Shiki jōkyōhen* introduced medicalized classifications of sexual 'perversions' into public discourse. The Japanese psychiatric field, heavily influenced by German medicine, pathologised same-sex desire as *hentai seiyoku* (perverse sexual desire), contrasting it with a newly valorised norm of reproductive heterosexuality. Although Edo traditions of *nanshoku* persisted in cultural memory, they were re-coded as feudal relics incompatible with modern civilisation (Furukawa & Lockyer 1994).

The legal system reflected this shift. While the 1873 penal code (*Katei ritsuryō*) criminalised sodomy (*keikan*), the revised 1882 penal code (*Keihō*), modelled on French law under Gustave Boissonade, no longer explicitly outlawed homosexual acts except under the category of 'obscenity' when coercion or minors were involved (Pflugfelder 1999). Nevertheless, the brief period of criminalisation left a long-lasting moral stigma, framing male-male sexuality as deviant.

3. Sexuality, eroticism, and censorship in the 1930s

The 1920s and early 1930s witnessed a flourishing of erotic culture, epitomized by the phenomenon of *ero-guro-nansensu* (erotic-grotesque nonsense), which celebrated the bizarre, decadent, and perverse (Silverberg 2006). Writers such as Edogawa Rampo (1894–1965) explored sadomasochism, cross-dressing, and queer desires, often blurring the lines between popular entertainment and avant-garde experimentation.

Interestingly, many of those who condemned male homosexuality were also unable to relinquish the fond memories of their own youthful homoerotic experiences. For instance, Sawada Junjirō (1863–1944), the author of numerous works on heteronormative sexuality, recalls in his book *Shinpi naru Dōseiai* (Mysterious Homosexuality, 1920) his youthful relationships with five boys.

This cultural openness was curtailed as Japan entered a period of militarist mobilization. By the mid-1930s, state censorship intensified. The Special Higher Police (*Tokubetsu kōtō keisatsu*) monitored publications, suppressing discussions on birth control or any sexual practices not aimed at reproduction. The state promoted eugenic policies to ensure healthy reproduction, while propaganda idealized the roles of men as soldiers and women as 'good wives and wise mothers' (*ryōsai kenbo*) (McLelland 2005). Heteronormativity became a pillar of the wartime order, even as the homosocial environments of the military paradoxically fostered same-sex interactions.
This paradox deserves emphasis: while the state silenced open discussions of sexuality, the all-male environments of schools, dormitories, and military barracks provided fertile ground for same-sex intimacy. Scholars note that the very model of male bonding in the army echoed aspects of *wakashudō* even as the official narrative suppressed them (Pflugfelder 1999). It was within this fraught atmosphere that Tachibana published in 1938 *Narin denka heno kaisō* (My Memories of Prince Nalin).

4. Homoeroticism and exoticism in *My memories of Prince Nalin*

My Memories of Prince Nalin is framed as the first-person recollection of Tachibana himself, who befriends a young Indian prince studying in Japan. The prince, Nalin, an 18- or 19-year-old boy, embodies exotic charm, intellectual curiosity, and a feminised beauty that captivates the narrator. Initially dismissive of India and its people, Tachibana gradually comes to sympathise with Nalin against the machinations of the British embassy, which seeks to obstruct his mission.

The text blurs the line between autobiography and fiction, presenting itself as *jitsuwa shōsetsu*, fiction based on real events (Taniguchi 2021). The narrative's emphasis on the narrator's captivation with the prince's androgynous beauty is evident from the very outset of the novel, particularly in Tachibana's recollection of his initial encounter with the prince. Nalin's slender figure evokes statuesque femininity, his skin tone is described with aesthetic

precision and his face is compared to that of a Western prince portrayed in a painting.

> More than his neat and pleasant appearance, I was enchanted by the beauty of his features. He had the face of a young nobleman, kind-hearted and adorable. For the first time in my life, I was amazed that there was such an extraordinarily beautiful boy (*bishōnen*) among the Indians. His face resembled that of a Western prince straight out of a painting. His eyes were black as obsidian, large and bright as one would wish for in a woman (*onna ni mo shite mi ma hoshī kurai*), and he wore glasses for short-sightedness. He had a tapered nose typical of the Aryan race, a round face and a skin colour different from that of the black young men around him. Of course, he was not a white man. He was undoubtedly Indian, but I could describe him as having a very light brown colour with a hint of grey-blue. […]
> I was captivated by the beauty of that young man, whom I devoured with my eyes. The more I looked at him, the more I was consumed by that sensation. In comparison, the skin of a Western woman — banally pale, coarse, and covered with hair — seemed like a fragment of ceramic devoid of any merit. For the first time, I felt that true beauty resided in the refined and "eugenic" Orientals rather than in Caucasians. From time to time, the boy would turn his smiling face toward me or gaze at the traffic outside the window, and his extraordinary elegance eclipsed everything else. […]
> He was in profile and laughed in the typical way of boys, and as I observed his slender figure, I found that he had the feminine beauty (*onna no yōna utsukushisa*) of a magnificent statue of a woman chiselled with meticulous care by a talented sculptor (Tachibana 1977: 9–13).

As evidenced by the passages cited above, the prince's beauty is repeatedly described as feminine, and elsewhere his traditional attire is characterised as flamboyant and overtly feminine (*marude onna no yōna fukusō*) (Tachibana 1977: 38–39). This, in itself, is not particularly novel; rather, it situates the figure of the prince within the long-standing tradition of the beautiful and effeminate youth (*bishōnen*) celebrated in *nanshoku* literature. As proven by Angles (2011), homoerotic attraction to a handsome young man was a fashionable theme that enjoyed success also in modernist literature during the Taishō (1912–1926) and the early decades of the Shōwa era (1926–1989), probably because modernist writers "focused on male-male affection as a kind of backlash or protest against the strong tendency in the Meiji period toward the hetero-normalization of culture and literature" (Tyler 2008: 45–6).

Tachibana himself revisits the trope of the beautiful youth in another short story contemporaneous with *Narin denka*. In *Zushi Monogatari* (A Summer in Zushi,

1937), a ghost tale set in a secluded mountain cemetery, the central figure is the spirit of a twelve-year-old boy — a *bishōnen* whose spectral presence haunts the protagonist. The boy is described in detail at the moment of his first apparition to the narrator, who, significantly, also bears the name Tachibana and is an adult man who has recently been widowed.

> He was bareheaded, and the strands of his glossy black hair swayed like those of a little girl. He had thick eyelashes and large, clear, and lively eyes — though wide open and glistening with tears — pale cheeks, and slender limbs; he was so beautiful that one could easily have mistaken him for a girl (*mattaku onnanoko ni mo mimagaubeki bishōnen deatta*). If I were to find a flaw, I would say that he conveyed an impression of fragility. His *tabi*, the long *kasuri*-patterned kimono with the *obi* tied high around his waist — unsuited to a child, especially in the heavy humidity that heralded the rainy season — made me think of a young actor or a sickly boy (Tachibana 1994: 10).

After a series of agitated encounters, in a half-sleeping state Tachibana finally finds the courage to speak to the ghost of the handsome young man. He tells him that he may visit him whenever he wishes, but only at night, when everyone is asleep, since during the day his strange behaviour would attract attention and people would take him for insane. The young boy nods, and Tachibana remarks: "The boy was so cute, almost like a younger brother, that I felt like I wanted to hold him in my arms" (Tachibana 1994: 52). Considering that, in homoerotic discourse as early as the seventeenth century, the senior partner was referred to as the 'older brother' and the junior as the 'younger brother,' and that the relationship itself was defined as a 'brotherhood bond,' (Leupp 1995: 43) one might wonder whether this desire to embrace the ghost of the young boy does not in fact conceal a form of erotic attraction.

Returning to *My Memories of Prince Nalin*, the narrator oscillates between desire and denial, at one point confessing that his feelings might be interpreted as *hentai seiyoku* (perverse sexual desire). He recalls childhood memories of schoolboys pursuing younger companions (*chigo*), thereby explicitly linking his attraction to Nalin with Edo-period practices of *wakashudō*. Yet he simultaneously invokes the imported term 'sodomy' (*sodomī*), reflecting the ambivalence of an author caught between two discursive regimes — one indigenous and aesthetic, the other modern and pathological.

> Of course, I decided that the next day, the first thing I would do was go visit him, just as I had promised. Telling such a story, people might think I'm some kind of pervert, but ever since we said goodbye in the taxi the

> night before, his handsome face had remained strangely vivid in my mind, and I couldn't forget it.
> When I was in middle school, there was a pimply guy in my group, always flunking and obsessed with baseball, who constantly chased after the younger, good-looking students. After failing so many times, that fool ended up in the same class as his favourite boy, from whom he took math lessons. Thanks to a waitress at a *shiruko* restaurant, I had already had experiences with a woman, and I was foolish enough to believe that it was obscene for a man to pursue another man, that I would never be able to do such a thing nor ever understand it.
> And yet, when my old classmates had all settled down, becoming obedient husbands who no longer got worked up over pretty boys, I suddenly found myself noticing their beauty — and that morning, upon waking, I still saw before my eyes the prince's delicate, almost feminine features.
> I supposed that my state of mind might be a symptom of what is called sodomy,[2] but it was already absurd enough that, at my age, I had come to understand love for young men — and on top of that, the other person was none other than an Indian prince! I couldn't help but laugh to myself, thinking what a shameless man I must be (Tachibana 1977: 38–39).

Thus, the novel stages an attraction that, while never consummated, destabilizes the narrator's masculine identity. However, as the story unfolds, the homoerotic tension is gradually sublimated into friendship and political solidarity, aligning with the demands of wartime Pan-Asianism propaganda.

From this point of view, it could be argued that, while it is true that the narrator's attraction draws on the codes of *nanshoku* revitalised by modernism, the prince becomes the object of what we would today call a colonialist male gaze, unconsciously internalised by the protagonist. From a contemporary postcolonial perspective, the emphasis on the otherness and feminine beauty of the young Indian boy can be understood as an exoticisation and a disempowerment of the other through his feminisation. A process not unlike that which shaped the representation of Japan in Europe and North America between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In his essay on Orientalism, Edward Said emphasises how Western representations consistently feminised the East — imagining it as passive, penetrable, and available for conquest — thereby positioning the West as the active and virile subject of history. In *My Memories of Prince Nalin*, the perspective is reversed, yet the sexualized grammar of colonial power remains the same. Here we encounter an adult male born and raised during Japan's period of modernization and Westernisation

[2] In the Japanese text, Tachibana uses the term *nanshoku* and glosses it as *sodomy*.

who, despite the risk of ridicule, asserts his own virility through the feminisation of the body of a young Indian man — a subject of the British Empire and part of that Asia toward which Japanese imperialism was directed.[3]

Nevertheless, the frankness of the narrator's infatuation cannot be ignored. It challenges the state's attempts to enforce heteronormativity, offering readers a glimpse of a 'queer' desire under the guise of exotic adventure.

The trajectory of the novel's planned film adaptation further illustrates the tensions of the era. According to Toyota's research (2011), in 1942, director Satō Takeshi (1903–1978) drafted a screenplay emphasising the prince's ambiguous allure, with the role intended for an actress from the Takarazuka Revue, Takamine Hideko, known for gender-crossing performances. Yet the project was abandoned, likely due to censorship concerns. When revived in 1943, all homoerotic elements were excised, and the story was reframed as a political drama about Indian independence. The transformation from queer subtext to nationalist propaganda epitomises the erasures imposed by wartime ideology.

5. Post-war Japan and the liberalisation of sexual discourse

Japan's defeat in 1945 shattered not only its imperial ambitions but also the ideological edifice that had subordinated sexuality to reproduction and national duty. The American occupation introduced democratic reforms and loosened censorship, creating an unprecedented space for the exploration of sexuality. Literature (*nikutai bungaku*) explores the most macabre, corporeal and decadent aspects of human nature and kissing scenes in films cease to be a taboo. The late 1940s saw the rise of *kasutori zasshi* (cheap magazines), which catered to a mass readership hungry for entertainment.

These ephemeral magazines — often lasting only a few issues — published stories, essays, and letters focusing on erotic themes. One factor that contributed to the proliferation of this erotic material was the fact that SCAP[4]'s censorship policies largely neglected to regulate representations of sexuality, eroticism, or 'obscenity' in general (McLelland 2012: 10).

[3] In this regard, it may be useful to recall Mrinalini Sinha's study (1995) on the figure of the 'effeminate babu,' which demonstrates how colonial masculinity depended on the feminisation of the colonised.

[4] Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. The title held by General Douglas MacArthur during the United States led Allied occupation of Japan following World War II.

The subjects and voices most represented are those of heterosexual men discussing a wide range of sexual practices: sadomasochism, fetishes, masturbation, etc. Female sexuality, on the other hand, is not fully represented or discussed (McLelland 2005).

They also feature articles and publish letters from readers dealing with so-called *hentai seiyoku* 'perverse desires', including homosexual ones. In partial continuity with the pre-war taste for *eroguro nansensu*, they seek out everything that is 'curious, bizarre' (*ryōki*), in terms of sexuality, but generally show a less judgemental attitude towards homosexuality and other non-procreative acts. Unlike pre-war discourses dominated by medical experts, *kasutori* culture allowed ordinary readers to share testimonies and debate desires. Homosexuality was discussed openly, sometimes labelled as a 'perversion,' yet often without moral condemnation.

In his study (2005) McLelland argues that the analysis of hundreds of articles and letters from readers clearly shows that homosexuality at the time was not a defined category and was not clearly differentiated from cross-dressing and transgenderism. There were many terms used by men who recount their homosexual experiences to define themselves. Male homoeroticism was particularly visible through figures such as *danshō* (cross-dressing male prostitutes), also known as *okama*[5], and *gei boi* (effeminate hosts in gay bar) but these occupational and behavioural labels reflected fluid practices rather than fixed identities. To refer to men who engaged in homoerotic relationships, the neologism *danshokuka* was also popular in *kasutori* magazines. Composed of an alternative reading of the characters in the word *nanshoku* combined with the suffix *ka*, it is used by Mishima Yukio in *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours, 1951), a novel that explores themes of homosexual love, obsession, and the conflict between personal desires and societal expectations. In this context, *homo*, an abbreviation of *homosekusharu*, was also used as an alternative reading of the characters in the word *dōseai* (same-sex love).

It is also worth noting that, in the post-war period, a work such as *Nanshoku Bunken Shoshi* (Bibliography of Works on Male Homosexuality) by Iwata Jun'ichi (1900–1945) was published. Released in 1956, it constitutes a meticulous catalogue of 1,093 works that deal, more or less explicitly, with *nanshoku*, *shudō*, or *shōnen ai*, ranging from the *Ise Monogatari* (Tales of Ise) of the Heian period (794–1185) to modern novels published up to

[5] A compound word combining the honorific prefix *o* and the word 'ass' (*kama*). A word still in use today with a rather loose meaning, as it can refer to a "cross-dressed and effeminate" man as well as a man "who displays any transgender attribute" (McLelland 2000: 7).

September 1943, the date of the manuscript's completion.[6] This demonstrates that male homosexuality has never been solely a matter concerning minorities, but has long permeated Japanese literary history, intertwining with Western-influenced representations.

6. A teenager's homoerotic desires in *Nanshoku monogatari*

Serialized in *Ōru Yomimono* in 1952, *Nanshoku Monogatari* recounts episodes from the adolescence of a narrator named Tachibana Sotō.[7] Now in his fifties, married and with children, he looks back on the restless years of junior high school — the awakening of his sexuality and his consuming infatuation with a younger classmate, Ryōyama Tadamichi, destined to become a distinguished political scientist. The novel is confessional in form (*shishōsetsu*) and each chapter presents the protagonist's awkward attempts to seduce Ryōyama, culminating in humiliating rejection. The author's stated objective is not to offer an edifying narrative of male–male affection, as the classical-style title might suggest, but rather to recount his own personal experience, in a straightforward yet tragicomic tone, as is evident from the outset of the novel.

> Among my acquaintances, there is a well-known political scientist by the rather formidable name of Ryōyama Tadamichi. […]
> To say he is a "friend" might be misleading, though. In truth, we were friends only many decades ago, back when I was a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old middle-school student. Since then, we have neither spoken nor met, and it is quite possible that he no longer even remembers my existence. Strictly speaking, he was only a childhood friend — someone with whom I have long since lost all connection.
> Be that as it may, this political scientist was once my friend. For many years he served as a professor at the University of Tokyo. After resigning from his post — on some occasion I can no longer recall — he became known as one of the late Prince Konoe's "brains," and during the height of the Pacific War he was invited to serve as an advisor to the military government

[6] Among the modern novels listed are, for instance, *Vita Sexualis* by Mori Ōgai, *Kimi to watashi* (You and I, 1913) by Satomi Ton (1888–1983), and *Nageki no Mon* (The Gate of Lamentation, 1918) by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō.

[7] This section revisits and further develops my preliminary study (Taddei 2022) on Tachibana Sotō and the representation of homoerotism in *Nanshoku Monogatari*. The conclusions remain valid, and the interpretive framework is briefly outlined here to enable a comparative analysis with *My Memories of Prince Nalin*.

> in the Philippines. After the war, he was among the first to go to America, and even now, his essays — on such weighty topics as "The Nature of the Times and the Course of Reform" or "The Democratic and Dictatorial Aspects of British Diplomacy" — regularly appear at the head of monthly journals. Their content is far too abstruse for someone like me to grasp, but his reputation is such that people even whisper he might be made the secretary-general of some new political party. His name, I imagine, is well known to most readers. […]
> What makes the whole thing the more ridiculous is that I, of all people, never once imagined — not in the wildest dream — that for the next forty years I would shrink and hold my breath on account of this fellow. Back when I was a pimply sixteen-year-old, I actually convinced myself I would make that future, profoundly learned gentleman my little plaything (*chigo san*); I chased him about so relentlessly that in the end I was thrown off so sharply my pimples were practically squeezed flat. It is, frankly, an unforgivable lapse of judgment on my part. Even now, as I take up my pen, I can only stare in amazement at my own stupidity (Tachibana 1995: 6–8).

A noteworthy preliminary observation — reflecting the changing socio-cultural atmosphere of the immediate post-war period — is that, whereas *My Memories of Prince Nalin* presents a fictional narrative in which the protagonist, though sharing the author's name, remains a literary construct, *Nanshoku Monogatari* assumes an overtly autobiographical character. The youthful infatuation depicted is not directed toward an imagined figure but toward a young man who, at the time of publication, was a relatively prominent and readily identifiable individual, given that Tachibana altered his name only slightly. This figure was in fact Rōyama Masamichi (1895–1980), a Japanese political scientist, scholar of public administration, and politician, as well as Professor Emeritus at Ochanomizu University (Yamashita 1995: 365). And one cannot help but wonder how the professor might have felt upon reading the story.

With regard to the theme of *nanshoku*, two tendencies can be observed: on one hand, the traditional feminisation of the desired youth; on the other, a comic inversion of the conventional roles of the adult lover and the young beloved.

Concerning the first aspect, the expression *onna no ko noyō* (like a little girl) recurs in descriptions of the younger companions' physical appearance. This is evident, for instance, in the depiction of the young Ryōyama:

> When he was fifteen or sixteen years old, Ryōyama was a clever, small, and sturdy boy. The seat of his trousers was plump and perky, almost like a little girl's (Tachibana 1995: 8).

A similar emphasis appears in the description of Ogura, another *chigo* who attracts the narrator's attention:

> Of the two *chigo* I acquired this time, Noro was unremarkable, but the one called Ogura was such an exceptionally beautiful boy (*bishōnen*)[8] that he could easily be praised as the finest in the entire school: with his bright, round, almost mixed-race-like eyes, his cool Tokyo accent — far more captivating than that of Momoi or Takahashi — and his thick, girl-like hair (Tachibana 1995: 45).

It is worth noting *en passant* that Ogura's appeal stems not only from the androgynous refinement of his features but also from his *konketsuji no yōna hitomi* (mixed-race-like eyes), which endow his beauty with an additional layer of exotic fascination, evocative of Prince Nalin's allure.

As for the inversion of roles, while traditional *nanshoku* posited a relationship between an older, guiding man (*nenja*) and a younger, beautiful youth (*wakashu*), characterised by mentorship and affection, Tachibana deliberately subverts this model. His narrator, though older than Ryōyama, is depicted as a mischievous and unruly figure, frequently at odds with his parents and plagued by feelings of intellectual inferiority toward Ryōyama, who in turn regards him as a good-for-nothing. Also, the novel abounds in comic scenes of adolescent desire which parody the chivalrous ideals of *wakashudō*: Tachibana offering sweets to lure Ryōyama into intimacy, sketching erotic doodles in class, or begging for sexual favours using slang terms like *okama*.[9] Overall, the attitude of Tachibana toward Ryōyama and the other *chigo* bears a strong resemblance to that of the *kōha* — the group of students who, through coarse behaviour, pursued beautiful youths (*bishōnen*) in school dormitories, as exemplified in Mori Ōgai's *Vita Sexualis* (1909).

The author's style clearly contributes to expressing the emotional instability of the adolescent protagonist, Tachibana. He moves between a desire for conquest and physical control over the *chigo* and moments of loneliness and discouragement caused by the emotional distance of his parents or by the rejection of his young lovers. Instead of analysing his feelings directly, the narrator lets rhythm, repetition, onomatopoeia, and the alternation between the

[8] The word *chigo*, written either in *kanji* or in *katakana*, appears 42 times in the text, compared to *bishōnen*, which occurs only 17 times.

[9] Tachibana employs the term both to denote the partner's anus, which he intends to penetrate, and to refer to a younger, sexually passive lover.

Gunma dialect[10] and more literary expressions convey his emotions. The word thus becomes an embodied gesture rather than a vehicle of reflection, and the apparent vulgarity of the language conceals a profound emotional vulnerability. The mixture of different registers, both refined and popular, tragic and comic, creates a distorted, almost grotesque realism that vividly reveals the narrator's humanity and inner conflict.

Nanshoku Monogatari also reflects the outcomes and influence of the heteronormative debate on sexuality that emerged at the beginning of the century. Indeed, the narrator's adolescence unfolds during the first decade of the twentieth century, a period in which any form of deviation was pathologized. The influence of Meiji-era sexological thought on the life of a provincial adolescent is evident in the episode where the young Tachibana fears being regarded as a pervert should he be caught gazing at a print depicting a handsome samurai during class.

> I never did my homework, spending the entire year researching on people like Ryōyama, Irizawa, or Komaki, who treated Irizawa like his *chigo*... As a result, all the most handsome boys in school and their bosses were meticulously recorded in my notebooks.
> Among them were portraits of beautiful women, poorly executed imitations of the portraits of the then famous Takehisa Yumeji, and among them were also those of others such as Hirata Sangorō[11]. Hirata Sangorō was a young man from Satsuma famous for his beauty, a figure who could be described as representative of early modern homoeroticism. If a teacher had ever found such a notebook, I would undoubtedly have been labelled a pervert (*tōsaku seiyokusha*) (Tachibana 1995: 14–15).

Elsewhere, the incursion of legal discourse into Tachibana's youthful sexual experimentation with younger boys becomes apparent. Following his rejection by Ryōyama, Tachibana engages in sexual intercourse with the young Kuroda, yet he is haunted by the apprehension that his actions may constitute a criminally punishable 'obscene act' involving a minor under the provisions of the *Keihō* penal code.

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[10] *Nanshoku Monogatari* refers to the years when Tachibana attended the former Takasaki Junior High School, in the city of Takasaki, Gunma Prefecture (Yamashita 1995: 355). This explains the presence of linguistic elements from the local dialect, especially in the lively dialogues among the boys or in the passages where the narrator expresses feelings of anger or surprise.

[11] A famous *bishōnen* from Satsuma who lived in the 16th century and represented the *nanshoku* of the early modern age in the Samurai world (Pflugfelder 1999: 209–10).

> Does it mean that I, who was so stirred up by the breakdown of my "first marriage" to Ryōyama, have consciously committed a rape? If you peruse the Criminal Code in the Six Laws of Japan, you will find that in Article 176, "A person who commits an indecent act against a man or woman 13 years of age or older by assault or threat of assault shall be punished with imprisonment from six months to seven years". Kuroda was 16 and I was 17 at the time, so at the age of 17 I had committed a crime that would be punishable with seven years' imprisonment (Tachibana 1995: 24).

The narrator's deployment of humour further underscores the absurdity of medical anxieties and satirizes pseudoscientific conceptions of sexual exhaustion. For instance, when excessive masturbation is thought to be impairing young Tachibana's eyesight, he is prescribed lamprey meat as a preventive measure against suffering a fate akin to that of the *shōgun* Tokugawa Ienari, who was allegedly claimed by death due to excessive sexual activity (Tachibana 1995: 29).

Overall, the novel parodies both the solemn ideals of *wakashudō* and the pathologizing discourse of modern sexology and, with an almost naive frankness, it does not censor the most carnal and vulgar aspects of the protagonist's homoerotic adventures. In this respect, *Nanshoku Monogatari* contrasts sharply, for example, with *Shōnen* (The Adolescent, 1948–49) by Kawabata Yasunari. Written a few years earlier in the same cultural climate, the novel emphasises a more aestheticized and melancholic love between students, highlighting purity rather than carnality. Kawabata's protagonist insists on sublimating erotic attraction into artistic or spiritual admiration, showing the internalisation of the modern stigma on forms of 'sexual deviance', "as if attempting to draw an implicit distinction between the crushes he felt and the erotic behaviour sexologists condemned" (Angles 2011: 20).[12]

Nevertheless, both works limit the homosexual experience to adolescence. Tachibana, the adult narrator, is presented as a heterosexual man, and his 'queer' desires are relegated to youthful recklessness. This approach allows for frankness, but also seems to reinforce heteronormativity: homosexual desire is

[12] A vision similar to that of Kawabata also emerges in Inagaki Taruho's *Shōnen'ai no Bigaku* (The Aesthetics of the Love of Boys, 1968). This seminal essay explores the theme of aesthetic and spiritual attraction to young boys, treating it not as a matter of sexuality but as an ideal of beauty and purity. Drawing on both classical Greek and Japanese traditions, Inagaki conceptualizes *shōnen ai* (boy love) as a form of aesthetic contemplation — an appreciation of youth, innocence, and artistic inspiration. Rather than focusing on erotic desire, he frames this attraction as a metaphysical and artistic experience, linking it to the pursuit of beauty, creativity, and transcendence.

remembered with nostalgia but, as far as the narrator tells us, denied in its continuity into adulthood. The ending leaves readers to imagine what emotions and memories the encounter with Ryōyama might have stirred in Tachibana after so many years. He happens to catch sight of Ryōyama on a train and, startled, hastily steps off to avoid being seen. The brief encounter leaves him so deeply shaken that even Ponta — the geisha at his side, whom he dreams of marrying by redeeming her from her life — senses his turmoil and quietly decides to leave him.

Thus, while the relatively liberal post-war climate and the *kasutori* magazines permitted a less moralizing discourse on male homosexuality — partly due to the absence of its criminalization[13] — *Nanshoku Monogatari* exploits this permissiveness to construct narratives of adolescent homosexual desire with humour and candour. Nevertheless, these narratives remain confined within the heteronormative framework of adult sexuality, reflecting the enduring influence of dominant sexual discourses on the formation of individual subjectivity.

7. Conclusion

Tachibana Sotō's fiction offers a subtle and insightful look at how sexuality and homoerotic desire were negotiated within twentieth-century Japanese culture. *My Memories of Prince Nalin* captures the conflicting forces of the 1930s, intertwining non-heteronormative desire, nationalist ideals, and traces of the older *nanshoku* tradition. The protagonist initially seems to feel a genuine homoerotic attraction to the young prince, whose feminine and exotic features are highlighted, as suggested by the vocabulary used and the protagonist's candid admission that it might involve 'sodomy.' However, this possibility is ironically dismissed by protagonist and the second part of the story reframes the relationship as a friendship, positioning Tachibana on the side of the Indians against British machinations.

In contrast, *Nanshoku Monogatari* reflects the post-war atmosphere of greater sexual freedom, portraying adolescent homosexual experiences with humour and honesty. Homoerotic desire is not merely hinted at as a possibility, but is recounted openly, even in its more physical dimensions. Yet, despite the

[13] Article 14 of the 1947 Constitution was even progressive for the time, outlawing discrimination on the basis of "race, creed, sex, social status or family origin" (McLelland 2012: 6).

protagonist's early infatuations with classmates and his discovery of sexuality through them — which he claims shaped both his adolescence and adult life — these experiences appear confined to the memory of an adult who leads an apparently heterosexual life.

It cannot be excluded that Tachibana's marginal position within the literary field afforded him greater freedom in addressing the theme of homoerotic attraction, thereby challenging its aestheticized conception within modern Japanese literature. The works examined demonstrate with particular clarity that the construction and representation of the protagonists' gender identities — adult heterosexual men — inevitably intersect with social norms that, though initially repressive and later more permissive, nonetheless continue to marginalize homoerotic experience or confine it to a transitory phase in the individual's life course.

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To My Dear Friend: Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 Letter and the Subversion of AIDS

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Abstract AIDS activism in Japan was long suppressed by silence among activists and officials after the virus first emerged in Japan in 1985, owing to fears of social ostracization for its initial association with Japan's then-marginalized gay community. As attitudes shifted and AIDS became a more mainstream concern – a move prompted by the rise in cases among the heterosexual Japanese, as well as misogyny and xenophobia – stereotypes about women, male homosexuals and foreigners came to be associated with the virus. Concurrently, new modes of activism emerged through art and performance. In this context, Kyoto-based artist Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 letter, in which he 'came out' with his HIV diagnosis, sparked discussions within Japan's queer community. Connecting the letter to the wider artistic production of Furuhashi's final years, such as *S/N* (1994) and the drag show Diamonds Are Forever, this study examines the artist's reaction to his new status as HIV-positive, as well as his reframing of the virus as an agent of counterculture. Through his reading of AIDS, Furuhashi subverted the categories and stereotypes imposed by Japanese society on non-conforming bodies and individuals, offering an alternative to popular narratives on AIDS and an outlet of resistance against stigma. Examining the letter in combination with Furuhashi's activity, both within and without Kyoto, this work thus also hints at how the artist's impact extended beyond the 1990s, surviving to this day in the spaces and events that he set up in the last few years of his life.

Keywords Furuhashi Teiji; dumb type; drag; HIV; AIDS.

1. Introduction

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) were first diagnosed in the United States in 1981, signaling the start of an epidemic that would soon ravage the world. The crisis reached Japan in 1985, when the first official case was recognized in a Japanese homosexual artist who had been living in America. The early Japanese reactions to the spread of the infection were rooted in misogyny and xenophobia, framing the disease as 'imported' from abroad and shifting the blame to women, sex workers and foreign male homosexuals, whose response was one of both strategic and enforced silence. Critical here was the role of both

the government and the media. These deployed stereotypes that crafted precise images and identities for the infected and, concurrently, created divisions leading to a failure in recognizing the pervasiveness of the pandemic. In this environment, in 1992, Furuhashi Teiji, a Kyoto-based artist particularly active in Sakyō-ku, member of the collective dumb type[1] and drag queen pioneer, announced his coming out as HIV-positive to his friends through a letter which sparked a number of initiatives combining activism, art and entertainment. Among these, particularly relevant are the 1994 performance *S/N* and the numerous clubbing and dancing events organized by Furuhashi and his peers, which challenged the media's stereotypical depictions and offered individuals a way to live with and through the crisis.

This article, therefore, investigates how Furuhashi and the artists surrounding him responded to the AIDS crisis through an analysis of the 1992 letter, as well as its materialization in S/N and in the drag and clubbing activities organized by the Sakyō-ku group. First, an overview of the early stages of the pandemic in Japan is presented, detailing the 'landing' and spread of the disease, as well as the government's and media's responses. These, through the creation of stereotypical images of the foreigner as a dangerous, hypersexual being, created a binary opposition between them and the Japanese, depicted instead as docile and relatively safe, as long as they upheld the divisions and categories in which they were pigeonholed. This paper, then, delves into Furuhashi's 1992 coming-out letter, where the depiction of AIDS differs diametrically from the one prevalent at the time. Here, the virus is a friend, a countercultural actor able to disrupt and subvert Japanese sexual mores and all types of categories. AIDS thus has a productively destructive power, one allowing a proliferation of identities and the rise of a new consciousness, and calling for togetherness, rather than division. Finally, this study proposes an analysis of the theater piece *S/N* and the clubbing activities peripherally linked to it. Both were tangible manifestations of Furuhashi's thought as expressed in the 1992 letter and directly opposed the stereotypical representations plaguing the early stages of the AIDS crisis. This work demonstrates how *S/N*, in both its performance features and content, questions the labels and categories imposed on individuals and instead calls for a borderless utopia where one can live label-free togetherness. Furthermore, it reveals how the drag performance in the piece, a feature usually overlooked, is critical to the creation of pockets

[1] The spelling for dumb type is incoherent, with some texts capitalizing both words. In this paper, I follow the convention proposed by The Dumb Type Reader (2017).

of sovereignty and freedom Furuhashi advocated for, and which materialized in the parties and events he and his peers organized.

2. A 'Black Ship' Landing: Early Responses to AIDS in Japan

June 5, 1981: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publishes an article describing five cases of a rare type of pneumonia in previously healthy homosexual men in Los Angeles. On the same day, a New York dermatologist reports a cluster of Kaposi's Sarcoma cases among gay men in New York and California (HIV.gov n.d.). Although the doctors could not yet name the disease underlying these conditions, these cases would later be known as the first reported instances of HIV/AIDS in the West, marking a watershed moment in the history of contemporary pandemics and global biosecurity. The virus rapidly spread worldwide, eventually reaching Japan officially in 1985.[2] The first case of HIV infection was reported in a gay Japanese man living in the United States, who had tested positive during a stay in Japan. Soon after, the case of a hemophiliac man infected by contaminated blood products imported by the US was discovered. As cases of AIDS positivity remained at first fairly contained, the Japanese response to the virus was lukewarm, merely framing HIV/AIDS as a problem of homosexuals and as a 'Black Ship' which could land in Japan (Miller 2002: 5–6). The Japanese government and the public's stance on the matter, however, would soon change.

Starting from 1986, three cases popularly referred to as the 'Three Big Commotions' heightened the awareness of the government and the general population toward the virus. The first (1986) involved a Filipino woman, who tested positive in the Philippines but reported to have worked in Japan as a hostess; the second, referred to as the 'Kobe incident' (1987), had a Japanese woman as its protagonist. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, she had been involved in intercourse with over a hundred men, among whom was an allegedly bisexual Greek sailor thought to be the vector of the disease. This was the first case of AIDS infection involving a Japanese woman, with the press speculating on the sexuality and lifestyle of both her and the Greek sailor, and framing the incident as the landing of the 'Black Ship' in Japan; the third Commotion occurred shortly after the Kobe incident and involved a pregnant

[2] Cases of HIV infection from contaminated blood products had already been discovered before 1985 and a research unit was set up in 1983 to investigate the disease. Nevertheless, these were never publicly recognized as AIDS infections and the unit was dismantled in 1984.

woman positive with HIV in Kōchi. She had had relations with an HIV-positive hemophiliac, and her apparent dismissal of medical advice to avoid marriage and pregnancy contributed to the framing of the case as one of irresponsibility and bad womanhood/motherhood, as well as the entrance of AIDS into the household (Miller 2002: 6–9). The three cases led to a shift in the framing of the virus in Japan, which had until then focused on homosexuals and hemophiliacs. As the Commotions saw three women as protagonists, the infected woman as the main threat to innocent Japanese men and public welfare became the dominant figure and target of both the press and governmental measures (Miller 1994: 30–1). The steady rise of infections through heterosexual contact, which surpassed those through homosexual contact in 1990 in the case of HIV and in 1992 in the case of AIDS (Kihara et al. 1997), further contributed to the shift of attention from homosexual men to heterosexual individuals.

This change in perception fostered a false sense of security among the Japanese male homosexual. This feeling was supported by a public narrative opposing the docile Japanese to the hypersexual foreigner and actively undermining effective risk prevention. The framing of AIDS as a foreign threat led, in most cases, to discriminatory policies that did not affect the Japanese homosexual population. For instance, entertainment and gay cruising venues simply limited or forbade entry to foreigners (Miller 1994: 116). Such measures, clearly rooted in a misconception of the infection and in xenophobic discrimination, were ineffective in containing contagion and contributed to the invisibilization of the Japanese homosexual subject in the AIDS crisis.

This erasure is also reflected in statistics regarding the spread of HIV. Clearly assessing the actual dimension of the contagion among gay men, indeed, was particularly difficult due to the reticence and the unwillingness of homosexual individuals to even get tested due to strict governmental policies and the social pressure exerted on non-conforming sexualities and lifestyles. Reports of the first unit tasked to investigate AIDS, as early as 1983, show how the researchers were unable to effectively trace and provide numerical data about 'the Japanese homosexual,' and simply relied on and aligned with the media narrative of the Japanese gay as docile and thus less dangerous and at risk (Shigae 2013: 67). Such narratives arguably hindered an effective response to the crisis. As Takeda also contends, the framing of contagion through a binary of, on the one hand, the innocence and victimhood of the infected hemophiliac[3] and, on the other, the irresponsibility and fault of the homosexual

[3] Discussing the depiction of the infected hemophiliac goes beyond the scope of this paper. For the sake of the argument presented here, it suffices to know that the HIV-positive

and the sexually promiscuous created a dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' AIDS. This, in turn, potentially heightened the risk of contagion (Takeda 2009: 47–8) and contributed to driving individuals who feared social repercussions away from testing and reporting. As a result, the Japanese homosexual man remained a nebulous, elusive figure left to be defined by the media and popular narratives, rather than a fully self-defining subject.

Since the beginning of the infection, indeed, the media deployed a precise stereotypical image of the Japanese gay, one that was constructed in relation to an equally stereotypical image of the gay foreigner. Early news and opinion pieces on AIDS infection presented it as a direct result of the American mentality and its liberated sexuality (Shigae 2013: 61), which made the gay foreigner, regardless of his actual place of origin, inherently dangerous. The Japanese gay, instead, was presented as docile (otonashii おとなしい), with fewer partners, and therefore less exposed to the risk of infection (Shigae 2013: 62). This view was not exclusive to the official channels, but was also shared by a significant portion of the Japanese gay population. Some gay magazines, such as *Barazoku* 薔薇族, published, since the 1980s, articles mirroring the popular narrative opposing the Japanese to the foreigner. This position was also evident in the readers' letters to the magazine, which expressed not only their distance from their foreign counterparts, but also their desire for invisibility (Shigae 2013: 103–4). Invisibility was not simply a result of governmental policies or of the pieces of media outlets, but also a strategy sought after by the majority of gay Japanese themselves.

To state that all Japanese were silent and that no activism emerged would be reductive and false. Organizations such as ILGA Japan and OCCUR, a branch separated from ILGA in 1986, were established and have been active in HIV-related activism since the beginning of the epidemic in Japan. Nevertheless, the climate among the general gay population was characterized by both strategic and enforced silence, meant to protect the infected homosexual and shield him from social suicide (Miller 1994: 129–30). Concurrently, the lack of information and the misinformation about HIV and homosexuality available to the gay Japanese contributed to his invisibilization and isolation (Kazama and Kawaguchi 2003: 191). Furthermore, his nebulous status and the popular narratives eventually linked the Japanese gay to the woman rather than to other gays around the world. The characteristics attributed to the Japanese male homosexual, prominently those of docility and

hemophiliac was constructed as the helpless victim of contamination through infected blood products and therefore presented as a 'good' and innocent carrier of the virus.

moderation, were – and still are – features primarily assigned to women, thus resulting in a 'feminization' of AIDS with pronounced (self-)orientalistic undertone.

Therefore, the picture emerging from these early depictions of AIDS in Japan is one dominated by a xenophobic, misogynistic discourse that created the Japanese homosexual, the HIV-positive woman, and the 'bad infected' more generally, in reference to a foreign, dangerous 'Other' – the (gay) foreigner. The two figures are inextricably intertwined, as one defines the other: there is no docile gay Japanese without a hypersexual foreigner to set the curve of deviance. Similarly, for women, all three Commotions involved foreignness to some extent: the Filipino woman was the direct foreigner; the Kobe infected was first-hand involved with the foreign in the figure of the hypersexual and allegedly bisexual Greek sailor; the Kōchi woman, on the other hand, was guilty of bringing the foreign disease directly into the innermost domain, that of the household. The result of these discursive practices was an extremely biased and limited understanding of HIV/AIDS. All the stereotyped figures, despite being linked to each other, were depicted as separate categories that should not come into contact with one another, lest they be punished with the disease. The act of categorizing also produced identities, crystallized them, and fixed them as labels on the bodies of the infected. It was within this vacuum of lived narratives and the proliferation of stereotypes concerning the experience of AIDS in the affected communities that the role of artist-activists from within them in Japan became all the more pertinent in redirecting attention toward the more marginalized elements of society.

3. Breaking the Silence: Furuhashi Teiji and His Coming Out Letter

Amidst popular narratives and silence, the artist Furuhashi Teiji opened up the discourse on AIDS in radically different terms, questioning the categories devised by Japanese society to frame the crisis, as well as the sexual mores of the Japanese. Born in Kyoto in 1960, his father was a *nihon-ga* painter and kimono designer, and introduced him to painting and art from a very young age. His interests, however, gravitated toward music, and after high school, he enrolled at Kyoto University of the Arts. Here, his interest in video art and his involvement with different types of artistic media began. In 1984, he co-founded, with other students of that university, the mixed-media group dumb type. In 1985, during a stay in New York, he incorporated drag into his artistic

practice by attending and performing at the renowned Pyramid Club alongside drag legends such as Lady Bunny and Lypsinka. Subsequent trips to New York with other members of dumb type, such as Yamanaka Tōru/DJ LaLa, made the artists aware of Japan's lack of drag parties like the ones they experienced in the city. Therefore, in 1989, together with DJ LaLa and the Shanghai Love Theater performer Simone Fukayuki, Furuhashi founded Diamonds Are Forever, the first drag show organized by Japanese people, which later became involved in AIDS activism. In 1992, dumb type was working abroad in Europe, with Furuhashi unable to join due to what he then described as health concerns. On this occasion, on October 11th, he sent the collective and his friends in Japan a letter, tellingly titled "Furuhashi Teiji's New Life – LIFE WITH VIRUS: Celebrating the Announcement of HIV Infection." As the title makes explicit, Furuhashi here came out as HIV positive, prompted by the further decline of his health and justifying his silence about his condition it owing to a sense of denial (Furuhashi 1992). The letter had a tremendous impact on the artistic community of Sakyō-ku, the Kyoto ward where dumb type operated, sparking initiatives that blurred art, activism, education, and entertainment.[4] Involved until the very end in his art with both dumb type and the cast of Diamonds Are Forever, Furuhashi died in 1995 of sepsis complications resulting from AIDS.[5]

Though other gay activists had previously come out with their own diagnoses (see, for instance, Takeda 2011: 125–8), Furuhashi's emotionally complex and personal use of prose in his letter, wherein he delves extensively into potentialities seemingly afforded him by the virus, proved to be particularly impactful. While Furuhashi's announcement of HIV positivity is undoubtedly the central theme of the letter, and he does not hide or mystify the painful bodily reality of being infected with the virus, he avoids framing the disease as the defining feature of his identity. In fact, he states: "it could be hard for me to think that total strangers might only know me by the label 'infected'" (Furuhashi 1992). The rejection of labels as devices crystallizing the self into a singular, essentialized being is a central theme in Furuhashi's AIDS-related production, as also revealed by a 1995 interview with Carol Lufty on the 1994 performance *S/N*. Here he stresses:

> I want it to be clear to the audience that I am living with AIDS. But I didn't intend it as a heroic gesture. I've never gone out of my way to advertise it

[4] For a more detailed description of these activities, see Tsubaki et al. (2019).
[5] Furuhashi's biography was compiled by combining the information available in several sources, such as Visual AIDS n.d.; Dumb Type (2000: 52–63); Tsubaki et al. (2019: 26–44).

> because it's not my primary identity. [...] I don't have a primary identity. I'm just saying that being HIV positive is not it. I want to stress this because people who get to know me let the fact that I am HIV positive dominate our interaction. This has a particularly strong impact on people who don't have a lot of HIV-positive friends; it immediately becomes my first identity in their eyes. The point is that I don't want this to be the only criteria for how people respond to me (Dumb Type 2000: 109).

As will be shown in the next section, the issues of identity and identification, as well as their overcoming, are central themes in the dumb type's piece S/N, a work that deals with Furuhashi's experience as an AIDS-positive individual.

HIV is presented in the letter as a painful and unsettling experience that invests and reorganizes the entire body, but not in an annihilating or completely negative fashion. With the infection, Furuhashi states, comes a new attachment to life and awareness of his own body and its potentialities (Furuhashi 1992). AIDS produces a split in his self-perception and his temporality, marking the end of the old Furuhashi and the beginning of the new one. This new self, as he poetically points out at the end of the letter, has a new perception of his own body: "[e]ven now, when I close my eyes, I can hear the loud rush of blood flowing through my body. This sound that I never noticed until now continually awakens me to the existence of my new self" (Furuhashi 1992). As HIV produces a shift in the body and consciousness of Furuhashi, it also provides new potentialities to his previous identities, which continue to exist in dialogue with the infected self. In particular, 'Furuhashi as artist' gains heightened consciousness and awareness of what art can do for himself and Japanese society. As also Takeda (2009: 50) points out, art becomes for Furuhashi an "effective means of healing the underlying mental ills that we who live in modern society must inevitably deal with" (Furuhashi 1992). It thus becomes a tool through which to address the social inequalities and the discrimination faced by marginalized categories, as well as to break apart and overcome the categories created by Japanese society. The appearance of the new self in Furuhashi's body also directly counters the monolithic depictions put out by the government and the media, where AIDS infection overrides any other identity the carrier might possess and effectively rewrites them by attaching labels and moral judgments. In Furuhashi's letter, instead, AIDS has a multiplying power, one facilitating the birth and proliferation of new identities and selves that do not rewrite the previous ones, but rather enter into conversation with them.

The same way AIDS' destruction of the body entails an act of production within it, so, in Furuhashi's thought, it can cause an equally productive destruction in Japanese society. AIDS, he states, is much more than a simple disease, much more than an illness that can be ascribed to individual categories while absolving others.

> The virus renders meaningless any distinction between man-to-woman sex, man-to-man sex, woman-to-woman sex, socially approved sex or unrecognized sex. Heterosexuals, homosexuals, and bisexuals alike have to bear unflinching witness to how the virus is tearing down any such distinctions and with them the droning undertones of modern Japan's ugliest sexual mores. AIDS is the last counter-culture. It's already laughing at us if we think it's a mere disease (Furuhashi 1992).

Furuhashi's view of AIDS echoes that of Douglas Crimp, who stresses the subversive and revolutionary character of AIDS by pointing out that

> AIDS intersects with and requires a critical rethinking of all of culture: of language and representation, science and medicine, health and illness, sex and death, the public and private realms. AIDS is a central issue for gay men, of course, but also for lesbians. AIDS is an issue for women generally, but especially for poor and minority women, child-bearing women, and women working in the health care system. AIDS is an issue for drug users, for prisoners, and for sex workers. At some point, even "ordinary" heterosexual men will have to learn that AIDS is an issue for them, and not simply because they might be susceptible to 'contagion' (Crimp 2002: 41).

Crimp's last point sounds even more poignant when one notes that 1992, the year in which Furuhashi wrote his letter, also marked the moment in which AIDS infection in heterosexual individuals surpassed that in homosexual ones. As a countercultural and barrier-breaking agent, AIDS thus has the productive potential to favor a rearranging of Japanese society, flattening those differences that are socially constructed and that create an illusion of distinction between categories. Furuhashi's letter explicitly counters the stereotypes set forth by the government and the media, envisioning instead a borderless utopia where all categories are rendered meaningless. Concurrently, 'art with AIDS' takes on an equally productively destructive character in pointing out and addressing those meaningless distinctions and the violence that comes with them.

One final aspect of Furuhashi's letter is that of friendship. Before being released to the public, the letter was first sent privately to a handful of friends, addressed as "my dear true friend" (*shin no yūjin-sama* 真の友人様). The main

aim of Furuhashi's coming out is, admittedly, to repair what he perceives as a rift in their mutual trust, deriving from his reticence about his status. Surprisingly, however, the title of 'friend' extends to the virus as well, which is Furuhashi's "most passionate friend" despite eventually killing him (Furuhashi 1992). Both human and viral friends coexist within Furuhashi in a deeply embodied experience, where bodily separation is overcome, and unity within the infected artist is also achieved through the art they, as friends, have created together. Takeda calls this a "rhetoric of fraternity/friendship" (*yūai no retorikku* 友愛のレトリック) and contends that it was crucial, together with the predominance of the 'artist' identity over gender and sexuality, to foster a sense of commonality among Furuhashi's friends (Takeda 2011: 129). Takeda's thesis is not fully convincing, as it relies at least partially on a sort of identity politics that is at odds with Furushashi and the Sakyō-ku group's striving to overcome all kinds of labeling. Furthermore, it obscures the role of AIDS in uniting the group and the importance of homosexuality in Furuhashi's experience with the virus and in the creation of works such *S/N*, which required considerable explanation and communication in a group formed predominantly by heterosexual individuals, as Lunsing recalls (Lunsing 2017: 101). Nevertheless, the sense of fraternity and commonality expressed in the letter's rhetoric was undoubtedly fostered by Furuhashi and the artists surrounding him. Club parties grew in number and frequency (Lunsing 2017: 101), and community was cultivated through dancing and finding fun and connection in adversity, an ethos well-represented by the play on the acronym 'AIDS' Furuhashi and the group devised for the 10th AIDS Conference in Yokohama, "**A**nd **I** **D**ance with **S**omebody" (Tsubaki et al. 2019: 62–3). As further elaborated in the next section, community, partying, and drag are closely intertwined in Furuhashi's activity, and to this day, they carry on Furuhashi's legacy through yearly events on his birthday and initiatives related to HIV.

4. Subverting the Stereotype: *S/N*, clubbing, drag

Even though the letter remained private until 2000, when it was published in the book *Memorandum Teiji Furuhashi*, it had a profoundly impactful effect on the artistic activity of dumb type. The work that best materializes the letter's content is probably *S/N*, a theater piece composed of seven independent scenes connected by the same theme – Furuhashi's experience with AIDS. Describing the performance in full would not only go beyond the scope of this paper but

also be an almost impossible task. The performances of dumb type, indeed, present a mixture of genres, performance types and technologies that exceed usual artistic classifications. Peter Eckersall describes dumb type's performance style as New Media Dramaturgy, which he defines as

> a turn to visuality, intermediality, and dialectical moves in performance that show these expressions embodied and visualised in live performance space and time. […] Like dumb type's work, this is a field of performance in between theatre, dance, music and visual arts. […] NMD [New Media Dramaturgy] is the name we use to designate both the *composition* of this kind of performance in and through new media art works, and its *effects on an audience* (Eckersall 2014: 4, italics in original).

Visually and in terms of performance, therefore, *S/N* already disturbs any attempt at clear categorization, also favoring interaction with and direct address to the viewer that challenge the divide between actor and audience. The disruptive form of the performance thus mirrors the message underlying the entire piece, as well as the main point Furuhashi advances in his 1992 letter: the overcoming of all kinds of boundaries and the disruption of any attempt at categorization.

Before delving further into *S/N*, it is useful to outline a few theoretical and methodological principles that guide this reading of dumb type's work. To fully grasp the complexity of *S/N*, a shift away from a logocentric conception of theater and performance is required. The collective's performances compel the viewer and the scholar to decenter language, both as spoken word and as meaning easily intelligible from movement, as the primary and only channel of understanding. It instead prompts attention to the body, to how it acts within space, and how space in turn acts upon it. The performer's body should therefore not be viewed as a unified, 'natural' whole, but as polysemic and unstable, in constant relationship with the environment of the stage. Especially in *S/N*, but more in general in all of the 1990s dumb type's opus,

> the physical presence of the dancers on the stage […] is both fundamental and precarious. While they are essential to bringing these stunning environments to life, the performers' bodies are often shown on the verge of erasure. They are inscribed and moved, they undergo. However, they are also shown in the act of revealing, exposing and resisting these so-called 'mute processes.' The movements, gestures and actions of dumb type's performers always embody this tension/duality as they are simultaneously triggered by the situations and environments in which they find themselves, and by powerful 'gestures of refusal and dissent' (Jansen 2017: 22).

The body, then, does not exist in a vacuum, nor as separated from the space in which it moves. Rather, it performs in dynamic tension with it, simultaneously shaping the stage and being shaped by it. As explored below, this perspective is especially relevant to *S/N*, where questions of visibility, invisibility, and the celebration of the outcast often take forms that exceed the spoken or written word.

Abandoning a logocentric perspective, however, does not mean disregarding (written) language altogether. In *S/*N, the issue of the written word and its relation to the body remains crucial, particularly in how the performance exposes the media's tendency to inscribe categories and identities onto bodies. As Michel De Certeau, analyzing the relationship between language and power, points out,

> the law constantly writes itself on bodies. It engraves itself on parchments made from the skin of its subjects. It articulates them in a juridical corpus. It makes its book out of them. These writings carry out two complementary operations: through them, living beings are "packed into a text" (in the sense that products are canned or packed), transformed into signifiers of rules (a sort of "intextuation") and, on the other hand, the reason or Logos of a society "becomes flesh" (an incarnation) (De Certeau 1984: 140).

De Certeau's analysis thus shows how bodies become the surface on which power and violence are inscribed, and through which they are propagated. Yet, to simply treat the body as a 'vessel' of texts and signs might obscure its potential to generate meaning through movement. As Susan Leigh Foster argues, the body is always in a process of writing in relation to the inscriptions on itself (Foster 1995: 6), thus becoming not only a recipient, but also an agent of signs and texts. Dumb type's performances should thus be read within this tension: between the external inscriptions society imposes and the embodied counter-writings created through movement and the corporeality of the performer.

S/N, in its structure and aesthetics, plays with the binary and categorical constructions in Japanese society, simultaneously mirroring, opposing, and troubling them. The scene is constituted of four different layers – a large front acting stage, a horizontal screen, an additional narrow acting stage above it, and the invisible space behind the screen where actors occasionally fall – where projections, actors, and dancers appear and disappear, disrupting the otherwise frontal scene and offering the audience multiple viewpoints. The lighting and projections, which alternately and at times schizophrenically illuminate and

conceal parts of, or the entire bodies of, the performers, as well as the dancers' appearance and disappearance from the top stage, create more than a purely aesthetically disturbing game. Instead, they call on the stage the question of visibility and invisibility in Japanese society. As Fujii observes,

> *S/N* is about questioning the aesthetic and political relationship between the visible (the valuable, the powerful) and the invisible (the valueless, the powerless) and possibly reversing this relationship. The performance brings to light what otherwise remains invisible, or at least marginalized. […] More strikingly, however, the visible is used to put into question the power politics that define what should or should not be socially visible (Fujii 2017: 206).

The work thus both reflects the government's and the media's power to obscure and opposes it. The disappearance of the genitalia and the face of the naked performers, hidden by shadows, as well as the projection of anonymous headless torsos, mirror the way the government and the media policed the lifestyle and the representation of the woman and the homosexual. Thus, this artistic choice underscores the profoundly political character of the acts of showing and seeing. On the other hand, however, the very presence of those otherwise invisibilized subjects through the actors confronts the viewers exactly with what should not be seen, thus escaping the power of images and the control of representation.

A crucial yet often overlooked dimension of *S/N*'s exploration of (in)visibility of the infected subject and of the outcast is its use of drag. The first extensive conversation about Furuhashi's life with AIDS occurs indeed while he applies drag make-up. From that point on, he only appears as his drag persona Miss Glorias, with different outfits and in different roles. Incorporating drag, specifically the style of Diamonds Are Forever, into the performance means bringing the drag ethos of the show into *S/N*. Diamond's drag goes beyond the simple female impersonation, combining gorgeous costumes and make-up with a pronounced passion for the grotesque, ugliness, and the subversion of roles and categories (Mitsuhashi et al. 2022: 167). The taste for the grotesque not only influences the character and artistic direction of the show, but is also closely related to the artists' understanding of what a drag queen is. As a manifesto compiled by Simone Fukayuki and D.K. Uraji – drag queens of Diamonds Are Forever and friends of Furuhashi – states, "[the drag queen's] value system has a sense of inversion, and she places the highest value in playing a contradictory undertone. Complexes in mainstream society become

strengths, ugliness becomes beauty, the sacred becomes the profane, she turns around the cheap into the gorgeous" (Mitsuhashi et al. 2022: 167). Drag performance thus allows for a celebration of all that society deems ugly and cast aside, proposing an inverted worldview in which what should be hidden and disregarded is instead put into the spotlight.[6] Inserting this kind of ethos through the Diamond drag performance in *S/N* thus reinforces the subversion of categories and identities the piece proposes, while offering a space for the infected to escape invisibility. While Japanese society demands the HIV-positive individual to seek invisibility to avoid social suicide, it thus itself avoids, as Furuhashi hinted at in the letter, to face its own hypocrisy and regime of silence. The importance of the ugly and the silenced afforded by the Diamonds Are Forever drag, on the other hand, opens up a space to confront the hypocrisy and discrimination of society, escape invisibility, and find not tolerance, but celebration. Thus, drag has the power to effectively overturn those stereotypical representations that plagued the Japanese homosexual and open to alternative representations that challenged the hierarchies and categories that Japanese society tried to impose on its people.

The power and oppression of representation are also directly voiced by the actors, and the discussion concerning them becomes even more concrete and tangible with direct references to the media. Around twenty minutes into the performance, Peter Golightly provocatively addresses the audience, stating that we can escape the infection with safe sex, but also asking how we can protect ourselves from words and images. In the meantime, statements on AIDS, extrapolated from both Japanese and foreign newspapers and publications, are projected onto the black screen while Furuhashi applies drag make-up. "Nobody can escape from those images," continues Golightly, "Like 'tragedy,' 'victim,' 'certain death,' 'plague,' 'punishment,' 'incurable,' 'hopeless'" ("S/N :: DUMB TYPE" n.d.). Furuhashi continues detailing how his life with the virus continued ordinarily, and Golightly brings the perspective of the US too, where heterosexual infection has surpassed homosexual one. The reality of the infected Japanese is thus brought on stage beyond the fiction/non-fiction character of the piece. In *S/N*, however, the perspective is subverted. While death is certainly a main theme, here the focus is also on how to live and love while being infected, beyond accusations of promiscuity and false images of docility – the performers do not hide their own sexual activity, but present it on stage as something completely ordinary. Thus, the piece offers a much more

[6] For a more extensive analysis of the Diamonds Are Forever drag ethos, see Del Din 2025.

realistic representation of the homosexual than those offered by the media and the government, at the same time allowing to reclaim one's own agency in defining and living as oneself beyond stereotyped images.

The power of words and representation, as well as the consequent creation and imposition of identities as labels, is a central theme in *S/N*. In the opening scene, the actors are shown with labels such as 'HIV+,' 'homosexual,' and 'deaf' literally attached to their clothes, and dumb type member Peter Golightly addresses the audience by pointing at the labels and stating: "I'm sorry to tell you, but we are not actors. We are this. [...] And, how are you?" ("S/N :: DUMB TYPE" n.d.). The question of whether the labels are reality or fiction due to the theatrical nature of the work, as well as Golightly's question breaking down the divide between the performers and the public, problematizes the reductionist act of labeling and coming out as 'something' or 'someone,' framing instead identity as fluid and multifaceted (Takeda 2017: 114). The performance, then, brings to the stage what Furuhashi had already hinted at in the 1992 letter, where the singular identification as HIV positive instead gives way to his identity as an artist, as well as to the new selves that the infection affords him.

One final aspect of Furuhashi's letter that materializes in *S/N* and his drag activity is that of relationships and community. A twenty-minute-long conversation between Furuhashi, Golightly and sex worker and performer BuBu De La Madeleine on love, sex and relationships with and without AIDS ends with pictures of naked men and women kissing and hugging. At the same time, Furuhashi lip-syncs to *People* by Shirley Bassey (1965). The song choice and the first three lines of the song – "People / People who need people / Are the luckiest people in the world" – are incredibly poignant and illustrate the *yūai no retorikku* so central to Furuhashi's letter. In a Japan where stereotypical representations and the government's misguided action divide and pigeonhole its citizens, the piece invokes community and togetherness. The fact that Furuhashi performs in drag and lip-syncs to the same diva whose song, *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), gives the name to the drag show he co-founded is not a pure aesthetic choice.

Since his 1992 coming-out, drag and clubbing had been central to Furuhashi's and other dumb type performers' activity. Clubbing and dancing became major platforms through which Furuhashi/Miss Glorias and the queens of Diamonds Are Forever opened up spaces where people, HIV-positive and negative alike, could not simply survive the crisis, but find new ways to live together and imagine themselves. As Pendleton points out, "[d]rag acts and club spaces such as Diamonds provide one such space to construct the past and

present of queer communities through what happens on the stage and the dancefloor" (2021: 307). Clubbing and dancing, while apparently mere entertainment, can thus become forms of community-building and political participation. Riley et al., in their investigation of Electronic Dance Music clubbing communities, highlight this political potential, revealing how such events enable participants

> to create temporary moments in which to live out alternative value systems to those, which for them, represented the dominant culture. This living-out of alternative value systems enabled participants to create (temporary pockets of) sovereignty over their own existence (Riley et al. 2010: 358).

Spaces such as the club parties organized by dumb type members thus created pockets where one could elude binary oppositions such as that of 'Japanese' and 'foreigner' created by the media, and envision new realities free from their constraints, however briefly.

Furuhashi and dumb type's call for a utopia without borders and categories, temporarily materialized through their clubbing activity, is also exemplified by two elements of *S/N*. The first is the recurrent catchphrase "I have a dream, that my status will disappear. I have a dream, that my gender will disappear. I have a dream, that my nationality will disappear" ("S/N :: DUMB TYPE" n.d.) This call for the dissolution of all those elements that create categories and divisions stands in stark contrast to the society envisioned by the media and the government, rendering meaningless all those man-made distinctions. The connection to localized and material practices such as partying and dancing becomes evident when one examines the posters created for the Love Ball at the 10th International AIDS Conference, where the slogan "And I Dance with Somebody" is coupled with the aforementioned catchphrase from *S/N* (Tsubaki et al. 2019: 63). The second moment is the drag act that concludes *S/N*, in which Miss Glorias lip-syncs to *Amapola* as sung by Nana Mouskouri (1986) while drifting away on an inflatable boat – perhaps signifying his decay and death – and BuBu pulls out a long string of country flags out of her vagina. In a simultaneously moving and almost comical moment, the piece trivializes the distinctions between nationalities and dissolves the borders between countries, at the same time reminding the viewer that the AIDS crisis involves everybody, regardless of their labels, and that community and togetherness are what must be sought after to live with and through it. In the context of the AIDS crisis in Japan, therefore, dancing together beyond diversity as advocated by Furuhashi could represent effective tools of political action through which

to open spaces of resistance and opposition to the media and governmental regimes. Although a more thorough exploration of this aspect of Furuhashi's legacy is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to point out that this type of activities continues to this day through both Diamonds Are Forever and other initiatives organized by ex-dumb type members, thus keeping alive spaces in which to invent and reimagine oneself, and concurrently resist the representations and labels society forces upon us.

5. Conclusions

Through an examination of Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 coming-out letter, the piece *S/N*, and the drag and clubbing activities organized by the artist, this article has shown how Furuhashi subverted the stereotypes deployed by the Japanese government and media in the early stages of the AIDS epidemic. This study first delineated the early responses and depictions of AIDS, unveiling the xenophobic, homophobic and misogynistic characters of these representations. The government and the media, in most cases with the support of the Japanese homosexuals themselves, created a binary opposition between the hypersexual, dangerous foreigner and the docile Japanese, thus furthering divisions in society. The analysis of Furuhashi's letter provided by this article elucidated how the artist actively sought to subvert these representations by portraying AIDS as a friend and the ultimate countercultural agent. The virus, in the letter, does have a destructive power, but this is a productive one, allowing for the proliferation of identities, the countering of monolithic, stereotypical depictions, and the disruption of all categories and sexual mores. Furthermore, AIDS makes Furuhashi aware of the importance of friendships and relationships, the only instruments he sees fit to live through the crisis. Finally, this paper analyzed the theatrical performance *S/N*, as well as the drag and clubbing activities pioneered by Furuhashi, as tangible materializations of the letter's content. Disruptive in both form and content, *S/N* calls into question the power of words and representation, as well as that of visibility and invisibility. In doing so, it reverses the stereotypes deployed by the media and the government, allowing what society wants to hide to be not only seen, but also unapologetically put into the spotlight. In this regard, the drag of Diamonds Are Forever plays a major role due to its subversive power, operating a reversal of values and enabling the celebration of the outcast. Concurrently, drag and the clubbing activities organized by Furuhashi go beyond mere

entertainment, acquiring a strong political connotation and creating pockets of freedom where all individuals, positive and negative alike, can find togetherness during the crisis.

This brief exploration of Furuhashi's thought and activities still leaves many aspects of Furuhashi's art and legacy unexamined. Japanese society has certainly changed since Furuhashi's death, and medical advancements have turned AIDS from a death sentence to a condition that still allows the positive individual to live an ordinary life. This, however, does not mean that discrimination toward HIV-positive people has disappeared, nor that new categories and binaries have stopped being created. Further research within the "pockets of freedom" that Furuhashi helped create – such as *Diamonds Are Forever* — would be invaluable for assessing his enduring legacy. It could also reveal whether his ideas still offer tools for confronting crises like the AIDS pandemic today. Furthermore, placing Furuhashi's letter in conversation with dumb type's production after his death would perhaps enable new and deeper analyses of the collective's activity. Such studies would not only shed further light on Furuhashi's activity and thought, but also contribute to complicate our understanding of the history of the AIDS pandemic in Japan, as well as of how art and community can be effective means to live not in spite of, but with and through the crisis.

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Resurgences of Women's Language in Japanese TV News: Shirabete Mitara and the Representation of Foreign Women

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Abstract This study examines the representation of women's language in *Shirabete Mitara*, a television segment aired by the Japanese broadcaster Fuji TV. Drawing on audiovisual translation research and recent developments in Japanese sociolinguistics and media studies, it explores the inter-indexical relations between the Japanese voice-over and interlingual subtitles used to translate the speech of foreign female speakers, and the ideological portrayals of femininity they construct. The analysis of interview segments reveals not only the discrepancy between the non-native speakers' speech and that adopted by Japanese voice actresses, but also a process of hyperfeminization that indexes the metapragmatic stereotypes around which the so-called Japanese Women's Language (*joseigo*) has crystallized. The study further shows how the speakers' iconic bodies are instrumentalized as semiotic resources to convey specific ideologies of femininity, ultimately reinforcing gender-based discrimination deeply rooted in contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords language ideology; voice-over; interlingual subtitling; women's language; audiovisual translation.

1. Women's Language at the Intersection of Society and Translation

This study investigates the use of Women's Language (WL) in contemporary Japanese audiovisual television, with a focus on the *Shirabete Mitara* segment broadcast by Fuji TV. It examines the voice-over and subtitling of foreign women interviewed in Japan in order to analyze the types of femininity constructed through WL in translation. Drawing on ethnographic and anthropolinguistic research (Agha 2007; Duranti 2021; Irvine & Gal 2000, 2019; Miyazaki 2023; Spitzmüller 2022) and sociolinguistic studies (Abe 2010; Itō, Muta & Maruyama 2025; Iwata, Shigemitsu & Murata 2022; Mashiko 2017; Nakamura 2024, 2025; Okamoto 2025; Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith 2004; Sanada 2020; Yamashita 2022), the gendered linguistic landscape in Japan emerges as multifaceted, shaped by the meanings language acquires across

varied contexts. Conversely, the persisting diageneric bias in Japanese media, especially in audiovisual translation, often neglects the dynamic and regenerative aspects of language – processes through which communities of practice reshape linguistic forms. While recognizing the contributions of constructivist approaches to gender – especially in audiovisual translation (De Marco 2006, 2009, 2016; Konstantinovskaia 2020; Ranzato 2012; Vitucci 2020, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2025), Japanese gendered translation (Abe 2010; Furukawa 2009, 2024; Hiramoto 2009; Kobayashi 2024; Länsisalmi 2019; Nakamura 2020a, 2022, 2023; Nohara 2018; Ohara 2019; Saitō 2018; SturtzSreetharan 2006, 2009, 2017, Yukawa & Saitō 2004), and role language (Johnstone 2017; Kinsui 2003, 2007, 2017; Yasui 2024) this study moves beyond conceiving audiovisual translation as a purely technical operation. Instead, it foregrounds the role of linguistic ideologies in shaping translation practices, projecting specific social imaginaries that are internalized by viewers as naturalized realities. In particular, it underscores how female speech styles in Japanese audiovisual translations tend to reinforce gender ideologies by re-naturalizing women's roles within a patriarchal and heteronormative framework – one that is intimately bound up with the idealization of femininity. (Katō 2017; Konstantinovskaia 2020; Mandujano-Salazar 2016; Starr 2015).[1]

From a linguistic standpoint, numerous Japanese scholars – including Jugaku Akiko, Endō Orie, Tanaka Kazuko, and more recently Nakamura Momoko and Okamoto Shigeko – have demonstrated how discourse on WL has historically promoted a form of linguistic essentialism. This, in turn, has contributed to the reinforcement of hegemonic social and political structures, often at the expense of gender equality. Yet, gendered stereotypes about women persist in Japanese media. As Furukawa (2024) notes, such biases are found even in literary translation, including cases where the translators are women. Likewise, Mashiko (2017: 137) argues that when feminine sentence-final particles (SFPs) are normalized as markers of 'femininity' in character portrayals in TV dramas or novels, this reflects gender-based discrimination.

[1] The ideological framework in question is firmly tied to broader historical and socio-economic shifts. As Mandujano-Salazar (2024: 61) observes, Japan's economic downturn in the 1990s and early 2000s triggered major changes in the social fabric, including population aging, declining birth rates, and growing distrust in state institutions. Notably, this period also saw rising social criticism of women, especially regarding their perceived reluctance to marry and have children.

Accordingly, what merits empirical inquiry is the gap between these representations and women's actual linguistic practices in daily life.

In voice-over and dubbing, the alteration of women's speech is shaped by two key processes central to this study: one multisemiotic, the other interlinguistic. These are: (1) the use of the iconic bodies of foreign actresses aligned with the concept of 'bodies of otherness', emphasizing the disjunction between visual presence and vocal rendering (Inoue 2003; Vitucci 2023, 2024a); and (2) the adoption of genderlects encoding specific inter-indexical relations, enabled by the interlingual translation strategy known as 'transduction' – the discretionary assignment of specific gendered speech styles to these characters based on preconceived cultural and ideological templates (Hiramoto 2009; Okamoto 2025; Nakamura 2012, 2013, 2020b, 2023). For audiences, this is striking: viewers are led to reconcile a pseudo-natural speech – rendered as native to foreign actresses – with a visual illusion of congruence, suggesting gendered language norms exist even in non-Japanese contexts. Naturally, this reinforces the belief in the universality of a genderlect resembling Japanese WL.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Japanese WL is rooted in ideologically constructed assumptions derived from enduring stereotypes about female speech in Japan. As Okamoto (2016) and Shibamoto-Smith (2004) note, WL is typically associated with: (1) greater use of honorifics, indirect speech acts, interjections, and exclamatory expressions; (2) higher vocal pitch; (3) exclusive use of sentence-final particles like *-wa* with rising intonation; and (4) avoidance of the copula *-da* and emphatic particles such as *-zo* and *-ze*. In line with prior studies (Abe 2010; Ishiguro 2013; Okamoto 2016; Vitucci 2020, 2024a), other WL-linked features include honorific prefixes like *o-* and *go-* (e.g., *obentō*, *ocha*, *okaban*), avoidance of imperative/negative verb forms (*tabero!*, *taberu na!*), and refraining from masculine or profane vocabulary. Instead, WL favors first-person pronouns with feminine or neutral nuance (*watashi, atashi, atai, uchi*) and second-person forms like *anata* (used in intimate settings). Feminine SFPs (*-kashira, -wa, -wane, -wayo*), and stereotypically feminine interjections (*maa, arama, araa, kyaa*) are also common. Moreover, WL speakers often omit the copula *-da* after *-na* adjectives and nouns, using *ne* instead (*gomen ne!*), or replace *-no desu / -ndayo* with the feminine *-noyo* (Abe 2010; Nakamura 2013; Vitucci 2020, 2024a). Crucially, these features are embedded within a broader ideological framework that ties them to idealized notions of 'femininity' in Japanese culture (Konstantinovskaia 2020). As Nakamura (2025) notes, *-wa* is often interpreted as an index of 'softness' (*yawarakasa*), ideologically linked to the category of 'women'.

2. Data set and methodology

The dataset for this study consists of three episodes of the television segment *Shirabete Mitara* (しらべてみたら), a regular feature of the news program *Live News It!* (Live News イット!), aired by Fuji TV between February and May 2025, with a total runtime of approximately 73 minutes. Known for its investigative and accessible tone, the segment covers topics ranging from consumer behavior and cultural trends to inbound tourism and public safety. Content is made widely comprehensible through on-site interviews and statistical insights. In translation, interviews with foreign speakers are rendered via voice-over and interlingual subtitles, except when speakers are fluent in Japanese. Episodes are accessible through the broadcaster's website (fujitv.co.jp), *TVer* (a free streaming service), *FOD* (Fuji TV's official platform), and *YouTube* (Fuji TV's official channel). For this analysis of WL, only voice-over and subtitles from female speakers were considered. Male speakers, women who spoke in Japanese, and female participants with fewer than three utterances were excluded from the dataset.[2]

The topics covered in the three episodes, presented in chronological order, are as follows: 1. Shopping by foreign tourists in Japan, broadcast in February 2025; 2. Japan as photographed by foreign tourists, broadcast in March 2025; 3. Shopping by foreign tourists in Japan (2), broadcast in May 2025. In particular, the speech of the following speakers, as recorded in the interviews conducted within the program, will be analyzed in chronological order:

[2] The sample of six speakers covers three different geographical areas (Europe, the U.S., and South America) and was selected based on the presence of more than three utterances. It is worth noting, however, that each of the three videos also includes additional female speakers of different nationalities whose speech features tokens associated with WL. These latter speakers were not included in the analysis, as they each produced no more than two utterances translated into Japanese. The United States were selected twice due to the high frequency of American citizens interviewed.

Speaker's reference	Nationality	Approximate Age (where not indicated)	Japanese register in translation	Episode
S1	Venezuela	20-30	Informal	February 2025
S2	U.S.A.	20-30	Informal	February 2025
S3	Switzerland	20-30	Informal	March 2025
S4	The Netherlands	30-40	Informal	March 2025
S5	U.S.A.	20-30	Informal	May 2025
S6	Chile	40-50	Formal	May 2025

Figure 1: Profile of the examined sample.

The study pursues three main objectives: (1) to explore possible correlations between speakers' age, nationality, and their use of WL; (2) to examine the relationship between diaphasic variation (polite vs. informal register) and Japanese WL; and (3) to identify the ideological framework underlying WL usage among the selected speakers. To calculate the proportion of WL employed in the three analyzed videos – that is, the extent to which each speaker activated features from the WL repertoire – Figure 2 presents the resulting percentages. These were obtained by dividing the number of WL tokens actually used by the total number of possible tokens in the full repertoire, which includes: *-no*; the variant *-noyo*; *-wa*; the variant *-wane*; *-kashira*; noun/adverb + *-yo*; adjective + *-yo*; verb + *-yo*; and noun + *-ne*.[3] Once the WL percentages have been established for each speaker, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of their speech will follow, cross-referencing the variables of nationality, age, and diaphasic register in order to identify the models of femininity evoked through the use of WL.

2.1 Quantitative Dataset Analysis

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of WL features across the six speakers selected for this study (S1–S6) distinguishing between the two translation modalities: voice-over and subtitles.

[3] Due to constraints inherent to the nature of the contribution, paralinguistic features of language and personal pronouns will not be taken into consideration.

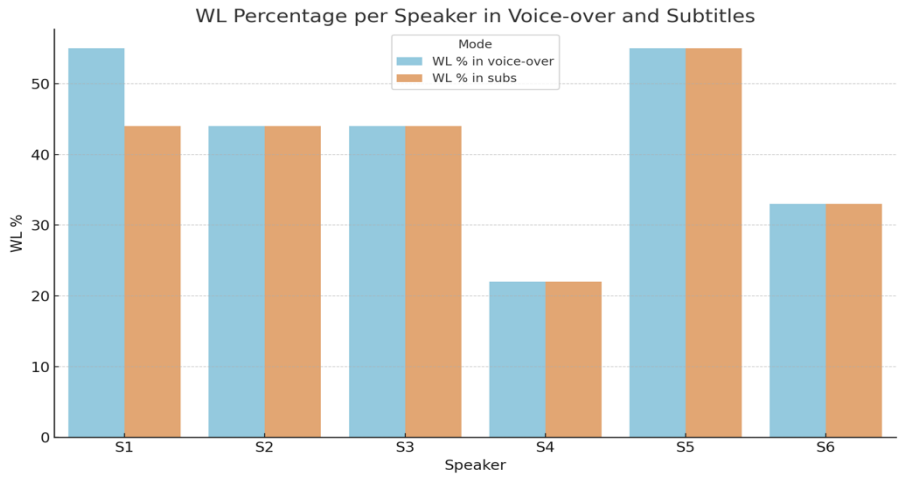

Figure 2: WL Percentage per Speaker in Voice-over and Subtitles.

The vertical axis indicates the percentage of WL features relative to the total number of target tokens, while the horizontal axis lists each speaker. Two key trends emerge. First, the distribution of WL percentages appears to be nearly symmetrical across modalities for five of the six speakers (S2–S6), indicating a high degree of translational consistency. The sole exception is S1, whose voice-over registers a significantly higher WL percentage (55.5%) compared to her subtitles (44.4%), suggesting a more overtly gendered and performative stylization in the voice-over rendering. Second, the chart points to a general tendency toward standardization in subtitles: three speakers (S1, S2, S3) display identical WL rates of 44.4% in the subtitled version, likely reflecting the spatial and syntactic constraints inherent in this modality. By contrast, the voice-over format appears to allow for greater expressive latitude and ideological mediation, particularly in more stylized speaker profiles such as S1.

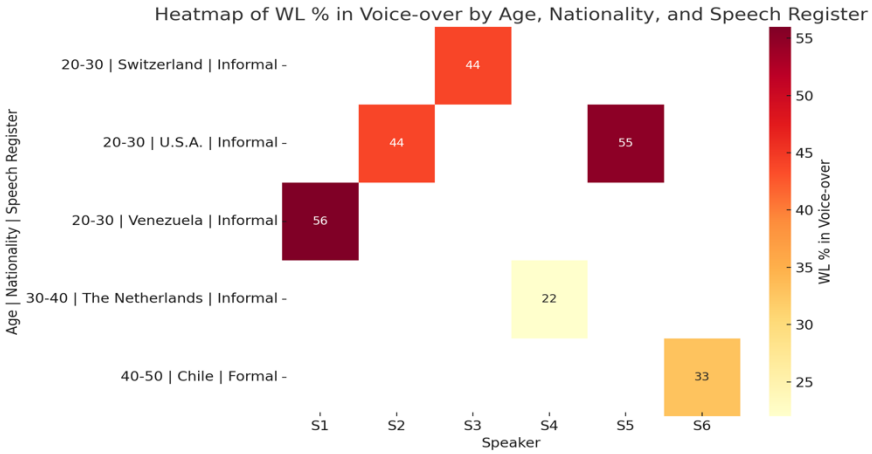

Figure 3: Heatmap of WL % in Voice-over by Age, Nationality and Speech Register.

Figure 3 presents a heatmap visualizing the percentage of WL features used in voice-over translations, cross-referenced by speaker metadata including age group, nationality, and speech register. The most salient feature of the heatmap is the marked contrast across age and speech register. All speakers in the 20–30 age group, using informal Japanese, exhibit higher WL percentages, with S1 (20–30 | Venezuela | Informal) and S5 (20–30 | U.S.A. | Informal) both registering the highest value (55.5%). This peak would suggest that informal speech, particularly among younger women, is more likely to incorporate indexical features of femininity. By contrast, the lowest WL percentage (22.2%) is recorded for S4 (30–40 | The Netherlands | Informal), indicating that informal register alone does not guarantee high WL usage. This suggests that other variables – such as speaker identity, cultural background, and genre context – may mediate the deployment or suppression of WL forms. The only speaker employing a formal register is S6 (40–50 | Chile | Formal), whose voice-over contains 33.3% WL. While this is higher than S4, it remains lower than all informal speakers in the 20–30 cohort. Interestingly, S2 and S3, both from the 20–30 age group and using informal Japanese, show identical WL percentages (44.4%), despite differing nationalities (U.S.A. and Switzerland). This suggests that, within this demographic, register and age may exert a stronger influence than nationality on WL representation in translation.

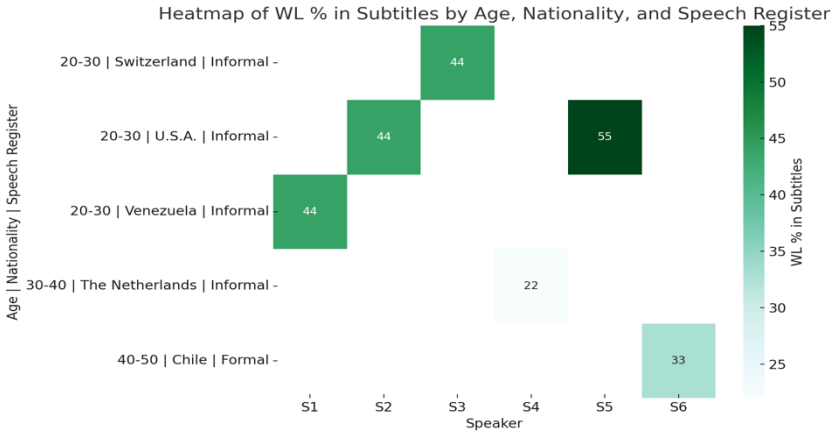

Figure 4: Heatmap of WL % in Subtitles by Age, Nationality and Speech Register.

In contrast, Figure 4 visualizes the distribution of WL features in subtitled Japanese translations, cross-referenced by age group, nationality, and speech register. One of the most notable observations is the limited variation across speaker profiles. The majority of participants – specifically S1, S2, and S3 –

register an identical WL percentage of 44.4%, despite differences in both nationality and age. Notably, age and register seem to exert less influence in subtitles than in voice-over translations, where a broader range of variation is evident (as shown in Figure 3). The lack of differentiation across nationalities – such as the United States, Venezuela, and Switzerland, all converging at 44.4% (with the exception of S5) – further supports the hypothesis that subtitling conventions tend to favor uniformity over indexical nuance. Taken together, the comparison between Figures 3 and 4 indicates that, while register and age play a slightly greater role in influencing WL usage in voice-over translations – particularly among younger speakers employing informal speech – such effects are notably less pronounced in subtitles. Overall, the figures underscore modality-specific translational tendencies: voice-over allows for a higher degree of ideological and indexical stylization, whereas subtitles tend to prioritize standardization, thereby reducing sociolinguistic nuance.

2.2 Qualitative Dataset Analysis

This section presents a qualitative discourse analysis of the speech of the six female interviewees, aiming to identify potential models of femininity shaped through the two translation modalities examined. Structurally, the *Shirabete Mitara* segment alternates interviews with foreign female speakers and commentary by a Japanese female speaker, along with native Japanese interlocutors (e.g., shopkeepers). The voice-over is handled by native-speaking voice actresses, distinct from the main narrator. Notably, these actresses seem selected primarily based on the interviewee's age rather than appearance or nationality.

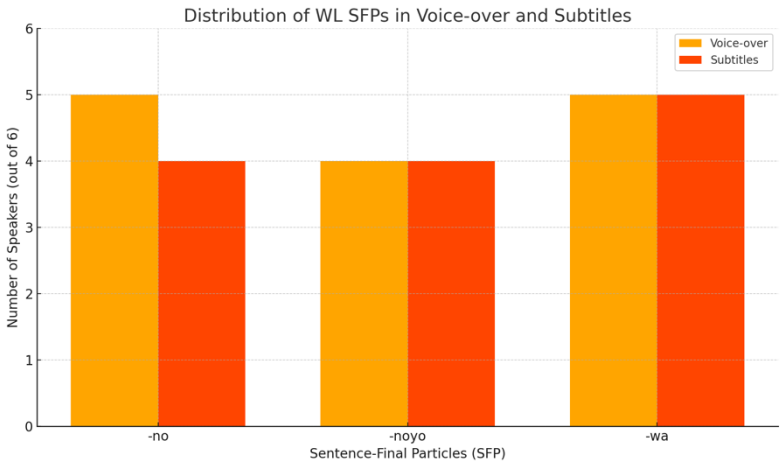

Figure 5: Distribution of WL SFPs in Voice-over and Subtitling.

Regarding WL occurrence, all SFPs analyzed were present in the six interviews. Some particles occurred more frequently, as shown in Figure 5, while others appeared only one to three times but still represented the rest of the dataset. We attribute this lower frequency not to intentional omission but to the program's editing style, which presents short interviews with multiple speakers. To clarify the choices made by dialogue writers and subtitlers, a brief overview of the female interviewees – following their order of appearance across the three episodes – is provided below.

In the February episode, two speakers are featured: S1, a fashion-conscious model from Venezuela who came to Japan for work and expresses a strong interest in shopping for clothing items; and S2, a young American woman with a fuller body type who shows particular enthusiasm for shopping for Japanese knives. Both are portrayed as being especially drawn to consumer goods available in Japan, to the extent that S1 even markets them online via her social media channels. Introduced as the winner of the "Miss International 2023" contest, S1 enthusiastically showcases the items she has purchased in Japan and expresses herself as follows[4]:

01 *Nedan mo yasui shi, hinshitsu mo subarashii* ***wa****!*
(Eng. Not only are the prices low, but the quality is also excellent!)
02 *Nihon no toppu no mise yo!*
(Eng. This is one of Japan's top stores!)
03 *Sētā o katta ndakedo…*
(Eng. I bought a sweater, but…)
04 *A! Watashino baggu mo sō*
(Eng. Oh! My bag is the same)
05 *Kono ryukkusakku mo Yunikuro* ***noyo***
(Eng. This backpack is from Uniqlo as well)

In our view, the use of informal register (*futsūtai*), combined with the occurrence of the two sentence-final particles *-wa* (line 1) and *-noyo* (line 5) by S1, contributes to indexicalizing a rather 'casual' model of femininity (Nakamura 2020), if not one that borders on the 'infantile' – a perception reinforced by the extremely high-pitched voice of the Japanese voice actress which closely draws on the vocal repertoire of the so-called 'sweet voice' (Starr 2015). Indeed, when considering the topic of the interview itself (shopping in

[4] In this section, the voice-over and subtitle texts are identical.

Japan) and the age group to which S1 belongs, it seems likely that the stereotype conveyed through translation is intended to index a form of 'coquettishness' (*iropposa*) that would position the speaker as a self-styled expert in Japanese shopping culture, speaking in a performatively feminine manner toward the interviewer. Not coincidentally, in the images that follow, the program includes clips of S1 taken from her social media accounts, in which she showcases the items she purchased in Japan and demonstrates how to wear them.

Similarly, S2 is portrayed as an enthusiast of both shopping and Japanese culture. Encountered on the street in Asakusa and taken to a traditional Japanese knife shop, the young woman expresses herself as follows:

> 06 *Nihon ni kite kara, hobo mainichi kaimono shiteiru* ***wa***
> (Eng. Ever since I arrived in Japan, I've been going shopping nearly every day, you know.)
> 07 *Konnani nagai hōchō de nani o kiru no* ***kashira****?*
> (Eng. I wonder what one would cut with such a long knife?)
> 08 *Amerika niwa konna takusan no hōchō nai* ***wa***
> (Eng. You don't find this many knives in America)
> 09 *Kore o kau* ***wa***
> (Eng. I'll buy this)
> 10 *Nigitta toki no kanshoku ga yokute, sugoku karukatta* ***no****!*
> (Eng. It felt really good when I held it, and it was incredibly light!)
> 11 *Ha ni tsuiteta moyō mo sugoku suteki datta shi*
> (Eng. The pattern on the blade was also really beautiful, and…)
> 12 *Tottemo kagayaiteiru* ***wa****. Kagayaiteru no ga suki*
> (Eng. It's shining so brightly. I really like things that shine)

In this case, S2 – like S1 – makes use of the informal register (*futsūtai*), incorporating not only SFPs such as *-wa* (lines 6, 8, 9,12) and *-no* (line 10), but also extending her repertoire to include *-kashira* (line 7). Unlike S1, however, the tone of the voice actress voicing S2 is noticeably deeper, likely in order to render the character multisemiotically more credible (especially given that S2 is physically less striking than S1). Still, while S2's WL retains a certain degree of 'casualness' in her performance of femininity, it appears to place greater emphasis on the affective dimension of speech. Notably, she seems overly excited not only at the prospect of purchasing such expensive knives (a point also emphasized by the narrator, who comments on their exorbitant price), but also at the idea of possibly living in Japan in the near future – an idea she herself introduces shortly thereafter. Unlike S1, then, S2 employs *-wa* to express

'excitement' (*kōfun*) – both for her unique personal experience and, more specifically, for the 'distinctiveness' (*omoshirosa*) of her purchasing choices. This contributes to reinforcing the stereotypical portrayal of foreign consumers in Japan as prone to making quirky or unpredictable choices (after all, why would a young American woman travel to Japan to buy vegetable knives?). At the same time, her reaction helps underscore the presumed superiority of Japanese craftsmanship over foreign-made goods. Needless to say, this mode of representing alterity serves the broader agenda of the program itself, which aims to present the Japanese audience with the hidden charms and positive aspects of their own country.

The March episode features S3, a young tourist from Switzerland with an interest in smoking regulations in Japan, and S4, an older participant from the Netherlands, who expresses interest in the prizes obtainable from crane games (UFO catchers). In the case of S3, it is noteworthy that the most representative WL tokens in both translational modalities are still *-wa* (lines 14, 17), *-no* (line 13), and *-noyo* (line 16), occurring in equal proportions. What stands out in her case is the use of a lower-pitched and more 'mature' voice in the Japanese voice-over compared to the original, especially given that the interview takes on a more socially-oriented dimension (i.e., smoking in designated public spaces in Japan). Notably, S3 expresses great surprise at the fact that it is possible to smoke in areas that, while officially designated, are extremely crowded and potentially harmful to health[5]. As she herself states:

13 *Kondeiru tokoro ni tatte tabako o suu no ga omoshiroi to omotta* ***no***
(Eng. I thought it was fun to stand in a crowded place and smoke)
14 *Watashi kara suru to arienai* ***wa!***
(Eng. I just can't believe anyone would do that!)
15 *Suisu da to dokodemo tabako o sueru kara ne*
(Eng. You know, in Switzerland you can smoke wherever you want)
16 *Hitogomi no naka de tabako o sutta* ***noyo****!*
(Eng. They were smoking right in the middle of a crowd!)
17 *Nihon de tabako wa tanoshimenai* ***wa****!*
(Eng. You just can't enjoy smoking in Japan!)

If one were to investigate the indexical meanings of the WL features in S3's speech – similarly to what was done in the case of S2 – it could be hypothesized

[5] According to S3, in Switzerland, for instance, smoking is allowed anywhere.

that the SFPs she employs serve to signal both a sense of 'astonishment' (*odoroki*) and of 'distinctiveness' (*omoshirosa*). However, unlike the previous episode, this one appears to convey a subtly critical tone on the part of the producers, positioning S3's home country (Switzerland) as more 'advanced' than Japan in this regard. For this reason, S3's speech style (she also makes use of the informal register), in contrast to that of S2, seems intentionally more 'affected' (*kidotta hanashikata*) and 'didactic' (*kyōikuteki*). The resulting image, then, is that of a thoughtful woman intent on offering helpful advice to her Japanese audience.

Unlike S3, S4 displays a sense of 'excitement' (*kōfun*) and 'surprise' (*odoroki*) upon discovering that consumable goods (in her case, boxes of white grapes and donuts) can be obtained as prizes from UFO catcher machines.

18 *Kikai o tsukatte shōhin o te ni irerareru nante*
(Eng. I can't believe you can actually get stuff just by using a machine)
19 *Totemo mezurashii* ***wa****!*
(Eng. That's really unusual!)
20 *Hajimete yatta yo!*
(Eng. I did it for the first time!)
21 *Tabeta kedo watashino kuchi ni awanakatta* ***wa***
(Eng. I tried it, but it just wasn't to my taste)

Although older than S3, S4 also adopts an informal register, even though both characters share the same Japanese voice actress. Despite the interview being frequently interspersed with the narrator's voice, S4 – albeit with fewer occurrences – also employs WL, particularly through the use of the SFP *-wa* (lines 19 and 21). In this case, however, if the first instance of *-wa* (line 19) may index a sense of 'excitement' (*kōfun*) and 'surprise' (*odoroki*), the second occurrence (line 21) appears to convey a form of 'coquettishness' (*iropposa*) – possibly suggesting that S4 is trying to imply she is used to consuming higher-quality food than what she encountered in Japanese game arcades. Moreover, it is worth noting that S4 appears alongside her male partner during the interview, a circumstance that may partially account for the presence of WL features in her speech. From a strictly social perspective, as with S2, what emerges is a clear interest on the part of adult foreigners in aspects of Japanese society that are typically geared toward the tastes and expectations of local teenagers. All the more 'peculiar', then, is the fact that an adult woman would comment – with a touch of 'pretentiousness' – that she did not enjoy the products she won from a UFO catcher (as a matter of fact, how many of her

Japanese peers would ever visit an arcade to try and win donuts?). In our opinion, it is highly likely that the producers' intent is precisely to represent alterity through a series of behaviors that the Japanese audience may perceive as 'eccentric'.

In the most recent episode of *Shirabete Mitara* considered here (May 2025), the featured speakers are S5, a young American woman visiting Japan with her partner, and S6, a Chilean woman aged between 40 and 50, also travelling in Japan with a friend. From a linguistic perspective, S5 – who also speaks using an informal register (*futsūgo*) – displays high percentages of WL across both translation modes, primarily through the use of the SFPs *-no* (lines 22, 25, 26), *-noyo* (line 28), and *-wa* (line 29).

22 *Rosanzersu kara kita* ***no***
(Eng. I came from Los Angeles)
23 *Kekkon shitate de hanemūnchū* ***nano***
(Eng. We just got married and we're on our honeymoon!)
24 *Yūjin ga Kappabashi shōten*
(Eng. My friend told me)
25 *de kicchinyōin o kau koto o susumete kureta* ***no***
(Eng. I should check out Kappabashi for kitchenware)
26 *Kare*[6] *wa ookii kara kyabetsu no tegiri o takusan taberu* ***no***
(Eng. He's a big guy, so he eats a lot of hand-cut cabbage)
27 *Watashi ga kiru supīdo ja oitsukanai kara*
(Eng. I can't cut fast enough to keep up)
28 *Suraisā no hō ga hayaku dekite yoi* ***noyo***
(Eng. Using a slicer is just faster and easier!)
29 *Koko nara kitto mitsukaru to omotteta* ***wa****!*
(Eng. I just knew I'd find it here!)

In the case of S5, it is evident that the SFP *-wa* partially performs the same functions as in S2, who employed *-wa* to express 'excitement' (*kōfun*) and 'distinctiveness' (*omoshirosa*), or in S4, who similarly conveyed a sense of 'surprise' (*odoroki*) in relation to her purchasing choices. Notably, in line 29, S5 appears pleased that her intuition – namely, finding a slicer in the district she had been recommended – has been confirmed. Moreover, S5 repeatedly employs *-no* in an explanatory fashion (see lines 22, 25, 26) to convey a similar sense of 'excitement', once again adopting a tone that borders on the 'childlike', as previously observed in S1. An additional element that emerges more

[6] In this instance, S5 is referring to her husband.

prominently in this case is the presence of S5's husband, who – similarly to S4's partner – significantly shapes the translators' perception of her identity. The fact that she explicitly mentions, for instance, that she is the one who cooks for him suggests that, once again, S5's use of WL may index a feminine ideal closely aligned with a patriarchal view of society (Mandujano-Salazar 2016; Vitucci 2024b).

The final speaker in the third video is S6 who, as the eldest participant, adopts a formal register (*teineigo*) in both translation modes under examination, thereby minimizing the use of WL to the greatest extent. It is significant to observe that, while explaining how she manages to save money during her trip to Japan, S6 shifts from the polite register (*teineigo*) to the plain form (*futsūgo*), incorporating in this transition features typically associated with WL, such as *-noyo* (line 33) and *-wane* (line 34), each serving distinct pragmatic functions. The particle *-noyo*, as in the case of S5 (line 28), is employed in an explanatory manner, aimed at emotionally engaging the interviewer. Conversely, *-wane* (line 34) appears to be used to express an opinion that could be framed as 'common sense' (*jōshiki*). It is also worth noting that, in reaching this point in the conversation, S6 – while not producing fully formed sentences in Japanese – nonetheless incorporates several Japanese lexical items into her speech, such as *shokupan* (square loaf bread), *hamu* (ham), *gyūniku* (beef), and *kōhī* (coffee). From an ideological perspective, the use of WL in this instance clearly reproduces the 'classical' image of a woman skilled in domestic matters, attentive to saving money, and capable of offering useful advice to that end. The overall impression is that S6 momentarily shifts from being a Chilean tourist in Japan to embodying a stereotypical twentieth-century Japanese housewife.

30 *Zenkai no nihonryokō wa zenbu de 70man'en kurai deshita*
(Eng. My last trip to Japan cost me around 700,000 yen in total)
31 *Tokuni furaito ga takai kara*
(Eng. Especially because flights are so expensive)
32 *Sūpā de asagohan o katte*
(Eng. I buy my breakfast at the supermarket)
33 *Yorugohan wa kombini de kau* ***noyo***
(Eng. I get my dinner at the convenience store)
34 *Yasui basho wa ii* ***wane!***
(Eng. Cheap place is good!)

3. Discussions and Perspectives

The ideological underpinnings of Japanese WL have been critically examined in the last years by several scholars whose work has shown how it has often been framed in essentialist terms, reinforcing rigid conceptions of gender difference that align with broader hegemonic structures (DiBello Takeuchi 2023; Duranti 2021; Nakamura 2023). Despite widespread critique, such essentialist portrayals continue to permeate Japanese media, where linguistic forms tied to traditional femininity are frequently recycled. As Mashiko (2017) argues, the normalization of feminine SFPs in scripted media can perpetuate discriminatory gender norms under the guise of authenticity or character realism.

Drawing on the literary corpus presented herein, this study set out to explore the interaction between sociolinguistic variables – specifically age, nationality, and register – and the representation of Japanese WL across two translation modalities (voice-over and subtitles) in the television program *Shirabete Mitara* (Fuji TV). Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative percentages and qualitative discourse analysis, several key patterns emerged that speak directly to the three guiding research questions:

1. Correlation between Age, Nationality, and WL Use. The analysis reveals a clear correlation between age and the frequency of WL features, particularly in the voice-over translations. Younger speakers (S1, S2, S3, S5), all aged between 20 and 30, consistently exhibit higher percentages of WL, with S1 and S5 reaching a peak of 55.5%. In contrast, older speakers – S4 (30–40) and S6 (40–50) – demonstrate markedly lower WL frequencies (22.2% and 33.3%, respectively), suggesting that age acts as a limiting factor in the stylization of gendered speech. The variable of nationality, while less statistically determinant, contributes significantly to the qualitative construction of identity. For instance, Latin American participants (S1 from Venezuela and S6 from Chile) illustrate two opposite ends of the femininity spectrum: one hyper-feminized and performative (S1), the other pragmatic and domestically oriented (S6). European speakers (S3 from Switzerland and S4 from the Netherlands) tend toward either critical or eccentric femininities, often distanced from the normative local models. North American speakers (S2 and S5), meanwhile, are characterized by emotionality and relational positioning. These national backgrounds appear to inform not the quantity but the pragmatic function and ideological framing of WL, suggesting that cultural expectations around gender roles are indexed through localized appropriations of Japanese speech styles.

2. Relationship Between Register and WL. A second major finding concerns the diaphasic variation between polite (*teineigo*) and informal (*futsūtai*) registers. All speakers but one (S6) employ the informal register during their interviews. This consistent informality correlates with higher WL usage, indicating that WL – despite its historical ties to refinement a politeness – is now more closely aligned with affective and performative registers. S6, the only speaker who begins with polite speech, registers a lower WL percentage (33.3%), supporting the hypothesis that politeness constrains the use of WL**,** possibly due to its association with more regulated and socially neutral communication styles. Moreover, the pragmatic flexibility of WL emerges clearly across cases. While S1 and S2 use SFPs such as *-wa*, *-no*, and *-noyo* to express excitement, cuteness, or consumer enthusiasm, S3 and S4 use the same features to convey critique or affected superiority. On the contrary, S5's childlike use of WL affirms her role as a nurturer in a traditional heterosexual family unit, whereas S6 deploys WL only within a functional, economizing narrative. These patterns reinforce the notion that WL is not a monolithic linguistic variety, but a **multi-indexical resource** capable of expressing affect, identity, and ideology depending on the speaker's stance and interactional goals.

3. Ideological Functions of WL in Translation. The third axis of investigation – the ideological function of WL as mediated through translation modality – reveals differences between voice-over and subtitles. This is most evident in the case of S1, whose voice-over modality emerges as an ideological site of performative femininity, particularly effective in projecting traits like coquettishness (*iropposa*), emotionality (*kōfun*), or childlike innocence. In contrast, subtitling exhibits a flattening effect, with most WL percentages converging around 44.4% across diverse speaker profiles.

By contrast, when considering the intersection of sociolinguistic and ideological variables, it becomes possible to group the six speakers into a structured typology of foreign femininities (Figure 6):

Speaker	Age Group	Register	WL Features	Indexed Femininity	Symbolic Role
S1	Young	Informal	-wa, -noyo	Coquettish, infantilized	Fashionable influencer
S2	Young	Informal	-wa, -no, -kashira	Affective, enthusiastic	Exotic and emotionally engaged consumer
S3	Young adult	Informal	-wa, -no, -noyo	Affected, didactic	Cultural critic and observer
S4	Older adult	Informal	-wa	Eccentric, pretentious	Outsider in youth-oriented settings
S5	Young adult	Informal	-no, -noyo, -wa	Childlike, nurturing	Traditional wife and caretaker
S6	Middle-aged	Formal > Informal	-noyo, -wane	Frugal, domestic	Economically wise housewife figure

Figure 6: Typology of Foreign Femininities in *Shirabete Mitara.*

Group 1 (pink): Performative and Consumer-Oriented Femininity (S1 and S2) – Characterized by affective language, informal register, and overt enthusiasm for Japanese culture and goods. Their WL use contributes to constructing a hyperfeminine, commodified persona.
Group 2 (green): Eccentric and Critically Distanced Femininity (S3 and S4) – Defined by speech styles that index either critique (S3) or ironic detachment (S4), often through WL features repurposed for didactic or pretentious effects.
Group 3 (blue): Pragmatic and Domestic Femininity (S5 and S6) – Aligned with household tasks, care, and frugality. WL in these cases is used to express domestic competence and traditional gender roles, particularly through the lens of economic efficiency or marital responsibility.

This typology illustrates how *Shirabete Mitara* leverages WL to construct stylized, ideologically charged representations of foreign women. By combining register, translation modality, and the speaker's sociolinguistic background, the program constructs different models of femininity that feel both recognizable and exotic. This dual portrayal strengthens Japan's cultural authority (Mandujano-Salazar 2016, 2024), while making foreign women understandable through gender norms familiar to Japanese audiences (Nakamura 2013, 2014, 2023). In our opinion, despite their differences, the three profiles emerging from the above-mentioned investigation reaffirm images of 'femininity' that are indirectly embedded in the essentialist framework of the patriarchal tradition (Konstantinovskaia 2020; Zi 2024), whereby women are predominantly confined to the domestic sphere (Group 3: caretaking of the household and management of domestic economy), cast as expert buyers[7] (Group 1), or portrayed in the act of raising awareness for educational purposes (Group 2).

[7] It should not be overlooked that, within the patriarchal model of the heterosexual family prevalent throughout the twentieth century in Japan, it was always women who were responsible for managing the household economy.

These inter-indexical relations – linguistically conveyed through the use of WL – are further corroborated by a professional voice actress in an email interview conducted in February 2025 with the author of this study. When asked about the use of WL in dubbing and voice-over, Yūko[8] confirmed that, despite a slight decline in recent years, scriptwriters still tend to insert it as a defining feature of female speech. According to her, the rationale behind this choice lies partly in the Japanese education system, which subconsciously shapes the linguistic imaginary of female speech in both men and women, and partly in the voice acting industry and acting schools, which continue to emphasize this type of linguistic characterization (*yakuwarigo,* to use a term coined by Kinsui in his research). Following this rationale, the interviewee suggests that a more pronounced linguistic stylization would enable Japanese audiences to better identify female characters on screen, thereby facilitating a deeper immersion in the narratives being told.

Nevertheless, from an ideological standpoint, this type of intervention can only reinforce the reiteration of an iconization process (Irvine & Gal 2000, 2019), aimed at associating a specific group of speakers with particular speech styles, regardless of whether such associations reflect the complexity of the multiple female identities present in contemporary language use. What thus emerges as a central question is whether those working in audiovisual translation in Japan acknowledge the ethical responsibility inherent in translation and the social repercussions of their translated texts. As several studies in translation studies and sociolinguistics have already emphasized, once shared with target audiences, translated dialogues permeate the social fabric, shaping audience perceptions and influencing both their thought and linguistic experience. As Furukawa (2017) also reminds us, when audiences remain unaware of the ideological dimension conveyed through WL and fail to recognize that such language merely reflects the subordinate position of women in society, ideology finds fertile ground, operating invisibly as a shaper of gender ideology and inequality. In other words, these linguistic representations mirror the gender ideology of what women *should* be, rather than what they truly are. Moreover, from a multisemiotic perspective, the 'bodies of otherness' once again serve as valuable instruments within this ideological framework (Inoue 2003) and this persistence calls for sustained critical engagement with Japanese media production, especially in light of recent developments in artificial intelligence that may further entrench these representational patterns.

[8] For privacy reasons, we shall refer to her as Yūko.

At this historical juncture, AI technologies – such as automatic subtitling systems or the female voices commonly used in car navigation devices – are actively reproducing and amplifying this narrative across the multimodal texts we consume (Iwata, Shigemitsu & Murata 2022). In effect, both WL and men's language continue to shape our perceptions by offering linguistic patterns that gradually solidify into models of power.

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(Not) Becoming Mothers: Fertility Intentions and Reproductive Agency During the Three-child Policy in China

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Abstract This paper examines Chinese women's fertility intentions and attitudes toward motherhood following the implementation of the three-child policy announced in May 2021. Drawing on Minello's theoretical framework for analyzing declining fertility, I argue that the reproductive choices of Chinese women are not influenced by the possibility of having additional children, but rather by the disjuncture between the structural and cultural dimensions of contemporary Chinese society. Market liberalization and the privatization of welfare services following the economic reforms of the 1980s created a disjuncture between the material needs of Chinese families and the traditional cultural assumptions regarding family and maternity, which was exacerbated by the introduction of the one-child policy and subsequently of the two-child policy. Against this background, the implementation of the three-child policy continues to stimulate forms of awareness and reflection concerning women's bodily autonomy, reproductive agency, and fertility intentions. Employing social media posts as case studies, this paper aims not only to underscore how birth rates are increasingly affected by economic and political structures, but also to stimulate reflection on material concerns and forms of dissent that, despite their cultural specificity, can serve as a bridge toward broader, non-Eurocentric feminist analyses of motherhood.

Keywords three-child policy; fertility intentions; motherhood; Chinese women; reproductive agency.

1. Introduction

This paper examines Chinese women's fertility intentions and attitudes toward motherhood following the three-child policy, implemented in May 2021, with particular attention to how women articulate reproductive agency through social media discourse. Drawing on Minello's (2022) theoretical framework for analyzing declining fertility in Italy, which emphasizes the necessary dialogue between structure (economic-political conditions) and culture (socially attributed gender expectations), I argue that Chinese women's reproductive choices are shaped not by the possibility of having additional children but by

the fundamental disjuncture between structural and cultural dimensions of contemporary Chinese society. This disjuncture is characterized by simultaneous demands for women's productive labor in a precarious economy and cultural expectations that women fulfill traditional roles as mothers and primary caregivers.

Public debates around reproductive governance increasingly reflect these complexities. In their analysis of online discussions concerning state natality policies, Chen et al. (2023) observe that themes related to women's reproductive rights, employment discrimination, and shifting perceptions of marriage and parenthood rank among the most frequently discussed issues — second only to the economic costs of childbirth.

Following this multifaceted perspective and building on feminist demographic principles that emphasize the need to bring demography into dialogue with disciplines concerned with structural inequalities (Williams 2010), this study employs a multidisciplinary approach. This approach combines quantitative data and qualitative analysis of social media discourse to capture both structural dynamics — such as demographic policies and economic conditions — and everyday discursive practices through which women negotiate reproductive agency. For the analysis of social media discourse, I adopted an approach that finds its basis in critical discourse analysis (CDA), which conceptualizes language as a form of social practice and emphasizes the importance of contextual factors in processes of meaning-making (Wodak 2001: 1–2). CDA investigates how discourse is shaped by relations of dominance, how it is historically produced and embedded in specific temporal and spatial settings, and how power structures are both reinforced and challenged through linguistic practices (Wodak 2001; Van Dijk 2015). Within the context of this study, CDA offers a particularly suitable framework for examining how Chinese women employ social media discourse to contest state-led reproductive governance and articulate bodily autonomy in a setting where institutional discourses justify demographic control through appeals to national interests and traditional family values. My analysis draws on CDA to conduct a qualitative, context-oriented content analysis. In doing so, I focus on recurring themes through which users articulate their positions on motherhood and state reproductive governance. The paper examines not only the textual content of posts but also the social processes and structures shaping their production — including the historical context of reproductive governance in China. Within this framework, the language of social media reveals itself as a particularly significant site of power and struggle, where women negotiate

possibilities of resistance to unequal power relations through discursive strategies that may appear as everyday conversation yet carry profound political implications.

I searched Sina Weibo for posts using hashtags #三孩政策# (three-child policy), #三孩生育政策来了# (the three-child policy has arrived), and the combination of words 三孩政策+女性 (three-child policy + women), focusing on posts published from May 2021 onward. The posts and comments analyzed as case studies were selected from fifty-four posts based on thematic relevance to reproductive autonomy, fertility intentions, and critiques of pronatalist policies. The analysis focused on identifying recurring themes and narrative framings through which users articulated their positions on motherhood and state reproductive governance.

It is important to acknowledge this study's limitations. Access to Weibo from outside China presents significant technical challenges, and censorship mechanisms affect post visibility. Consequently, the number of posts analyzed is limited. To address these constraints, I supplement social media analysis with findings from academic studies conducting extensive surveys and interviews on fertility intentions (Zhang et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2022; Chen et al. 2023) and incorporate analysis of feminist activist discourse published outside mainland China.

This study should be understood as exploratory and preliminary — an initial approach to examining how Chinese women negotiate reproductive agency through digital discourse. Rather than claiming definitive conclusions, this research aims to illuminate emerging patterns in women's articulations of reproductive refusal and contribute to broader, non-Eurocentric feminist analyses of motherhood.

2. Women, Motherhood and Reproductive Policies in Contemporary China

2.1 From "Virtuous Mother" to "Mother of National Citizens": Gender and Nation-Building in the Early Modern China

Female gender roles, and motherhood values in particular, have always constituted integral components of what can be defined today as traditional Chinese culture. Following a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal structure, traditional Chinese women's role and virtues were organized around the "Three

Obediences": to their father, to their husband, and finally to their son (Leung 2003: 361). Within this framework, the Confucian concept of filial piety also played a crucial role in defining social and gendered relations: women were first expected to be dutiful daughters who cared for their parents; after marriage, they would move to their husband's household and serve their in-laws. Widowed women were expected to defer to their son's authority in matters of family leadership. Women's roles were further summarized by the Confucian principle of *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母, which literally translates as "virtuous wife and good mother", demonstrating how motherhood constituted a fundamental component of women's identity construction (Weeks 1989: 597).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the conceptualization of a new China, which sought to distance itself from outdated traditional cultural norms and political structure, led progressive intellectuals, as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, to advocate for female economic independence and education. They believed that educated working women could serve as fundamental active agents in the development of a new State. It was deemed essential to guarantee women the opportunity to pursue professional careers to contribute to national development and, as educated mothers, to positively influence their children's education (Cheng 2000: 110; Liu et al. 2013: 33; Mann 2011: 21): "Children's education begins with the mother's teaching, which is itself rooted in women's education. Therefore women's education fundamentally determines whether a nation will survive or be destroyed and whether it will prosper or languish in weakness." (Liang 2013[1897]: 194). Despite the spirit of enlightenment that was forewarning the May Fourth Movement, the maternal function was nonetheless understood as women's innate biological vocation and celebrated as part of the broader nationalist project. Indeed, women were praised as "mothers of national citizens" (国民之母), an expression that merged the traditional image of the virtuous mother with that of the modern nation (Zhu 2015: 29).

2.2 The Gendered Labor of Revolution: Women between Emancipation and Reproductive Expectations

With the advent of the Maoist period women assumed a key role in revolutionary objectives. This new perspective on gender roles was fully portrayed by the slogan "Whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too" (男同志能办的事情, 女同志也能办) and by the image of the Iron Girls (Yang & Yan 2017: 64), tireless workers and revolutionaries who

had abandoned all aesthetic characteristics associated with the female gender and were considered equal to men, with whom they shared labor responsibilities. Yet even as these women were called to their revolutionary duties, they could not ignore their roles as mother and wife in the family. This entailed active participation in revolutionary processes without neglecting reproductive labor and care responsibilities (Leung 2003: 366). The tension inherent in this dual expectation — full participation in productive labor alongside continued responsibility for reproductive labor — created challenges for women.

Between 1950 and 1970, China's population grew dramatically from 540 million to over 800 million, creating significant concerns about resource allocation and economic development. In response, the government introduced the Wan xi shao (晚稀少) policy in 1970 (trad. later, more spaced, fewer), which encouraged later childbearing, longer spacing between children, and fewer children overall. This policy functioned more as an awareness campaign than as a coercive measure, relying on education and persuasion rather than punishment.

2.3 Economic Reforms and the One-Child Policy

The advent of Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalization policies marked a watershed moment not only in China's economic trajectory but also in the reconfiguration of gender roles and reproductive governance. The concept of "femininity" and the figure of the sexualized woman, previously rejected as bourgeois, returned to prominence through mass media representation (Yang 1999: 47). According to Wang (2017: 221), the shift from the positive perception of the Iron Girls to the rejection of this model of Chinese womanhood "parallels the transition from socialist to capitalist ideals of gender, class, and ethnicity". This shift entailed also a reconfiguration of responsibilities considered "feminine": on one hand, it emphasized the necessity of working to ensure family welfare and access to increasingly privatized services; on the other, it renewed social pressure surrounding traditional roles of mother and wife, passing from "iron women" to "socialist housewives" (Leung 2003: 368). The dismantling of state-provided social services led to a renewed emphasis on the household as the primary economic unit. As a result, access to high-quality infant and maternal care became increasingly dependent on the ability to pay, while women were expected to embody a model centered on commitment and devotion to family responsibilities (Leung 2003: 368).

It was precisely at this moment of profound economic and cultural transformation that the Chinese government implemented its first reproductive policy. In 1979, despite the demonstrable success of the previous Wan xi shao campaign in reducing fertility rates from 5.9 to 2.9 children per woman between 1970 and 1979 (Zeng & Hesketh 2016: 1930), the government announced the one-child policy. The policy prohibited couples from having more than one child, with exceptions for ethnic minorities, and violations resulted in sex-selective abortions, female infanticides, and forced sterilizations (Cai & Feng 2021: 592–593; Mann 2011: 63). To ensure compliance, a control system was established through the existing elaborate bureaucratic organization of CCP officials throughout the national territory (Mattingly 2020).

Within Chinese culture, bearing children, particularly male children, has always been a prerogative to ensure patrilineal lineage and the presence of labor force in the fields. This is one of the main reasons why, especially in rural areas, where families relied heavily on offspring to carry out agricultural work, the policy was unpopular (Mattingly 2020: 273). Furthermore, following the Confucian concept of filial piety, offspring represent an important source not only for labor but also for the care of the elderly population.

The one-child policy, therefore, appeared in direct opposition to the traditional cultural assumptions that the CCP itself was simultaneously bringing back into prominence, and women's bodies became the primary site where this contradiction was violently enacted.

2.4 Traditional Family Values and Pronatalist Governance in Xi's China

Within this socio-moral framework, themes concerning the role of the family, its values, and women's family responsibilities have returned to prominence as fundamental to social harmony (Wu & Dong 2019: 8). These themes have acquired an increasingly prominent role in official political discourse, contributing to the identity construction of the nation. Against this background, population aging, decline in the labor force, and persistently low fertility rates were the long-term consequences of the one-child policy.

First announced in 2013, the conditional two-child policy initially allowed the possibility of having a second child only if at least one member of the couple was born under the one-child policy. In 2015 the universal two-child policy was announced, giving the opportunity to all couples to have a second child. However, according to data reported by the National Health and Family

Planning Commission, by May 2015 only 13.2% of couples eligible for the new policy had applied for a second child (Zeng & Hesketh 2016: 1932). Among these families, young couples with high incomes and a first-born daughter were predominantly represented — a pattern that itself reflects the persisting cultural preference for male children alongside economic calculations about the costs of child-rearing. The collapse in birth rates reveals that the possibility of procreating more than one child was not actually the cause of declining fertility. Women found themselves caught between escalating economic pressures requiring dual household incomes and intensifying cultural expectations requiring their devotion to family and childcare. In early 2022, the National Bureau of Statistics announced that the number of newborns in 2021 was 10.62 million, representing a decrease of 1.38 million from 2020 (Ning et al. 2022).

The decline in birth rates revealed the failure of the two-child policy, leading to the introduction of the three-child policy in May 2021. What distinguishes this policy from previous ones, beyond the possibility of having a third child, is the official announcement by the CCP regarding the implementation of a system of subsidies dedicated to childcare and natality: "The decision lays out supporting measures in three areas: strengthening child nursery services, reducing the cost of childbearing and improving prenatal and postnatal services" (The State Council of the People Republic of China 2021).

In addition to abolishing fines for those who exceed the three-child limit, on July 20, 2021, the PRC government announced planned support measures, including: tax deductions for childcare and medical assistance expenses for children under 3 years of age; strengthening childcare services to support dual-income families at affordable prices, with particular reference to establishing community childcare facilities such as nurseries; increasing care services within schools to facilitate work-life balance; implementing extended maternity leave; enacting policies against workplace discrimination of women, such as establishing public services for women's reintegration into the workforce for those who interrupted their careers following pregnancy. Between May 2021 and June 2022, a total of nineteen support policies for the three-child policy were made public through media channels, both at national and local levels (Peng et al. 2024). One example is the policy enacted on March 28, 2022, which announced the possibility of deducting childcare expenses for children up to three years of age for a maximum of 1,000 RMB per month per child. One of the most recent measures was announced on July 28, 2025, according to which,

starting from January 1, 2025, regardless of whether families have one, two, or three children, every child in each household will receive a state subsidy of 3,600 RMB annually (Xinhua News 2025). The importance the government places on these issues is exemplified by the announcement on October 2025, by the All-China Women's Federation and major official media outlets of the publication in several foreign languages of two books containing Xi Jinping's most important speeches on women, children, and family: "one on studying and implementing Xi Jinping's discourses on work related to women, children, and women's federations, and the other on studying and implementing his discourses on family, family education, and family values" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2025).

This intensified emphasis on traditional family values has been accompanied by campaigns such as the "Looking for the Most Beautiful Family Campaign" (寻找最美家庭), launched by the All-China Women's Federation in 2020 with the aim of promoting, among various family virtues, marital harmony and filial piety. The campaign description, accompanied by a photo of a family consisting of parents and two children — a boy and a girl — specifically states that it seeks to highlight "the unique role of Chinese women in social and family life and helps to manifest family virtues in the new era" (All-China Women's Federation 2020). The Federation's website also contains a section entirely dedicated to stories of virtuous Chinese families that fully embody family values and promote them through dedicated activities[1].

In this context, fundamental contradictions persist. On one side, despite the announced measures, the deeply privatized nature of China's economy means that the cost of child-rearing remains prohibitively high for many families, while workplace discrimination against mothers continues to threaten women's professional advancement. On the other side, the Xi administration's promotion of traditional family values places ever-greater pressure on women to fulfill roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers — pressure that is fundamentally at odds with the economic necessity for women to maintain professional careers to afford the childcare and educational services.

[1] The Family section of the English-language website is accessible at the following link https://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/In-depth/family/2108/3111-1.htm

3. Fertility intentions and Reproductive Agency during the Three-Child Policy

The data presented in the previous section clearly reflect a demographic landscape characterized by declining fertility intentions and realized fertility rates. According to the Official Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China for 2024 (中华人民共和国 2024 年国民经济和社会发展统计公报), the birth rate in 2024 was 6.77%. This represents an increase compared to 2023 (6.39%), but remains lower than the 2021 figure of 7.52%, the year in which the three-child policy was enacted.

However, a purely quantitative analysis of data is insufficient to investigate the causes of declining birth rates and to analyze how natality policies are received by the population — that is, in this case, the extent to which the three-child policy can effectively meet the needs and aspirations of the Chinese population. In pursuing this objective, it becomes evident that the gender component plays a fundamental role within this analysis. Indeed, as demonstrated in the first section, there exists a profound relationship between the socially constructed figure of women and all responsibilities encompassed within the "maternal," including reproductive and care work. Recognition of the intimate and complex link that exists between gender issues, demographic data, and natality policies reveals the necessity of employing qualitative tools that attend to the implications that gender has for the constitution of society in its broadest sense.

In analyzing the causes of low birth rates in Italy, demographer Alessandra Minello (2022) found that for desired and realized fertility to coincide, it is necessary to attend to the dialogue between structure and culture. Understanding "structure" as the economic-political framework within which societies operate and "culture" as the dimension encompassing, among various aspects of life, socially attributed expectations and responsibilities regarding gender, Minello suggests that it is necessary to account for the synergy between these two aspects in order to effect change in birth rate trends. Structure and culture influence each other. The lack of complementarity between them produces systemic social and economic imbalances that amplify gender inequalities, sustaining women's subordinate status across both the productive and reproductive spheres.

According to Huang and Wu (2022: 144), the negative trend in fertility rates is not unique to the People's Republic of China but reflects a broader

pattern across East Asia. These scholars note that, despite increasing governmental concern over declining birth and marriage rates, most states in the region have failed to allocate sufficient resources to implement meaningful family support. East Asia exhibits a tendency toward what Ochiai (2014: 214) defines as "familistic individualization," in which governments appeal to citizens' individual responsibility toward the traditional family and marriage in times of welfare crises and demographic change. This is, to some extent, what is also happening in China, where institutions have focused on promoting a traditional heteronormative family system grounded on Confucian values as a response to declining fertility rates. The historical analysis presented previously demonstrated how, in China, successive reproductive policies from the one-child through the three-child policy have consistently failed to align material support with cultural expectations, creating persistent contradictions that have intensified under conditions of economic neoliberalization.

Applying Minello's framework to the Chinese case reveals how the support actions for reproductive policies, interconnected with the economic changes that accompanied them, did not correspond to the socio-cultural assumptions of the Chinese population. The implementation of the one-child policy coincided with a fundamental period of economic transition: the opening of markets and the consequent move toward privatization of companies and services. From a cultural perspective, institutions pushed for the revival of traditional family values and childcare. Furthermore, following the Confucian concept of filial piety, the offspring represents an important source not only for labor but also for care of the elderly population. The implementation of the one-child policy therefore appeared in opposition to the traditional cultural assumptions that the CCP itself brought back into prominence beginning in the 1980s. This lack of correspondence between political directives and cultural systems led to practices such as infanticides, selective abortions to ensure a male heir, and forced sterilizations, with severe material and psychological repercussions for women. The collapse in birth rates that followed the two-child policy is emblematic as it reveals how the possibility of procreating more than one child was not the cause of declining fertility anymore. The necessity for families to have access to dual incomes to ensure educational and care services for their children, combined with cultural and social pressure requiring women to maintain their role as mothers and caregivers toward the family, does not incentivize the population to have more than one child. Under a cultural point of view, the Xi administration's promotion of Confucian family values — including campaigns celebrating 'virtuous' families, official speeches

emphasizing women's familial roles, and media representations of ideal motherhood — creates intense social pressure for women to fulfill traditional maternal and caregiving responsibilities. However, the cultural landscape of contemporary China is not monolithic. The Xi Jinping era began during a historical period in which Chinese society, following economic openings, experienced rapid transformation in lifestyle and consequently in ways of thinking and approaching social issues (Scarpari 2014: 823). It is within this heterogeneous cultural context that a crucial additional dimension emerges: the growing awareness among Chinese women concerning bodily autonomy, reproductive agency, and the historical pattern of state control over fertility.

3.1 "The Three-child Policy Has Arrived, Are You Ready?": Structural Barriers to Fertility Intentions

Considering that the three-child policy is a recent measure, it is instructive to examine studies conducted on fertility intentions following the policy's officialization. A survey conducted from June 10 to July 12, 2021, among 15,332 participants aged 20 to 45, found that only 22% expressed willingness to have a third child. Among the reasons preventing the remaining 78% from this choice are difficulty reconciling work and childcare, rising costs of child-rearing, and lack of public childcare services. The results also demonstrate that as participants' age increases, willingness to have large families decreases (Zhang et al. 2021). Another study, conducted from August 30 to September 28, 2021, surveyed 6,680 young people aged 18 to 25. The results demonstrate that 40% would like to have two children (46.5% of these responses from men, 36.2% from women), while only 2.8% of male participants and 1.6% of female participants expressed desire for three children. Notably, 26% of respondents indicated they do not want to have children at all (Zhang et al. 2021).

These data appear to resonate with the reactions expressed by some Chinese users on Weibo, one of China's main social media platforms.

Following the announcement of the three-child policy, all institutional social media channels disseminated the news. Specifically, Xinhua News Agency conducted a poll on Weibo asking: "The three-child policy has arrived, are you ready?" (三孩生育政策来了你准备好了吗). However, of 32,000 respondents, 29,000 answered that they would "absolutely not consider it" (完全不考虑). According to posts by several users published on May 31, 2021 (the date of the policy's announcement), the agency allegedly deleted the poll immediately: "Xinhua News Agency deleted this vote, giving the impression of

a mess of chicken feathers and a group of bastards" (新华社把这个投票删了，给人的感觉是一地鸡毛，一群混蛋) (Weibo 2021a). Moreover, the agency apparently also disabled users' ability to comment on the main post announcing the policy. A post by a female user published on May 31, 2021, which garnered significant engagement (10,000 likes and 761 comments), remarked: "Did Xinhua News Agency shut down its official comments for fear of being criticized? Not to mention having three children. Look at how many young friends of appropriate age around you are still unable to get married due to issues with household registration, cars, and houses" (新华社官方的评论是怕被骂才关了吗？可别说生三个孩子了看看身边多少人适龄年纪的青年朋友们还因为户口、车子、房子问题不能结婚). She continued: "By the way, when I was a child, the national family planning policy was in place. I grew up and the government encouraged me to have three children. So, for someone like me, do we have to support 4 grandparents and our parents in the future + Raising three children? After checking the prices, forget it, I don't deserve it. I just want to love happily, live well, and talk less nonsense. After all, living is not just about passing on the family line" (顺便提一句，我小时候国家计划生育。我长大了政府鼓励 3 胎。所以和我同样的人，以后难道要赡养 4 和父母+抚养 3 个孩子吗。看了看物价，算了，老娘不配。我只想开开心心恋爱，好好生活，少说屁话。人活着毕竟不只是为了传宗接代的) (Weibo 2021b).

A qualitative study by Liu et al. (2022), interviewing subjects from various social backgrounds, underlined that a structured system of childcare services would alleviate the stress of balancing work and parental life and would increase inclination to have more children. Among the most pressing requests are implementation of public and private educational and care institutions with flexible hours, as well as economic subsidies dedicated to natality. The requests expressed reveal an evident connection between Chinese women's fertility intentions and the adequacy of gender policies currently applied in China. The implementation of women's rights and interests at the occupational level — such as extended maternity leave and promotion of gender equality in the workplace — emerges as fundamental to reversing the fertility trend. The persistent low fertility intentions, with their associated reasons, suggest that according to a substantial portion of the population, many necessary measures have yet to be adopted (Zhang et al. 2021; Chen et al. 2023).

The inadequacy of the measures adopted following the enactment of the three-child policy also emerged when Xinhua News Agency disseminated the implementation plan for the childcare subsidy system (育儿补贴制度实施方案) in a postdated July 20, 2021 (Weibo 2021c). Among the various comments,

several from skeptical and critical users regarding the new birth policy stand out. One of the most-liked comments (127 likes) stated: "Please care about women before talking about childbirth" (请关爱女性再谈生育吧). Another user replied: "With a mortgage of over one million yuan, I am not considering having a second or third child" (还有一百多万房贷压着，二胎，三胎就不考虑了) (Weibo 2021c). By framing reproductive decisions through economic calculus — mortgages, household registration costs, housing prices — the users render visible the material contradictions that state pronatalist discourse obscures through appeals to national interest and traditional family values.

According to Gao et al. (2024), as implementation of the three-child policy proceeds, women's employment and promotion trajectories are predicted to become increasingly difficult. This anticipated deterioration exemplifies the structural dimension of the contradiction: policies ostensibly designed to support fertility may paradoxically increase workplace discrimination against women of childbearing age, as employers anticipate extended absences and divided attention. The economic calculation families must make thus becomes even more unfavorable: not only must they afford direct costs of additional children, but women must also factor in likely career penalties they will incur.

On November 8, 2024, the Weibo account of the Chinese magazine Sanlian Life Weekly (三联生活周刊) published an article entitled "Who will pay for the working mothers?" (谁来为职场妈妈买单？), which received 1,428 likes. The piece recounted the story of Xu Zhi, a working woman who, upon returning to work from maternity leave, was denied a promotion on the grounds that she would still need to breastfeed; her supervisor therefore preferred to give the opportunity to a male colleague. The article explained how this is a very common condition for working mothers: "The common limitations and problems they face include insufficient access to childcare institutions, low involvement of husbands in child rearing, and increased physical and cognitive labor due to having a second child" (她们面临的共同局限和问题包括托育机构可及性不足、丈夫育儿参与度低，以及因二孩增加的体力和认知劳动) (Weibo 2024). Among the 155 comments on the article, some users acknowledged the disparity in caregiving roles between mothers and fathers and called for greater balance in care responsibilities: "How to balance? Family or career? The father of the child must also take responsibility. Don't blame the child's mother all the time..." (如何平衡？家庭还是事业？孩子他爸也得有担当，别一股脑全推给孩子他妈…); "What used to be a problem has become a major issue, and relevant regulations need to be introduced at the national level, including amending labor laws, to effectively protect the rights of female

employees to have children and take care of their children." (曾经不是问题的问题成了大问题，需要从国家层面出台有关规定，包括修改劳动法，切实保障女员工生育、保育权利。); "While the decision to have children is a joint one between men and women, it's ultimately women who bear the risk and costs. If men don't contribute to fertility insurance and provide financial support, and only donate sperm, they're effectively getting a child for nothing, a typical 'gold-diggin man'..." (生育是男女双方共同参与决定的，最后却主要是女性在承担风险成本，男性如果不贡献生育保障金，承担物质保障，只出一个精子，那无异于白捞一个孩子，典型"捞男"…). This last comment received 438 likes. The need to guarantee better working conditions for women and a major involvement of male partners in domestic and care work emerges clearly. The burden of the double shift that women must perform — productive labor and reproductive and care work — is acknowledged, as it penalizes women in the workplace, depriving them of adequate material conditions and economic autonomy.

These are some of the structural barriers that prevent the realization of fertility intentions. The testimonies analyzed here reveal how the lack of structured and effective support services, combined with persistent gender inequality in the workplace, fails to encourage Chinese women to have children. However, this structural dimension coexists with the experiences of those who choose not to have children as a personal decision or as a deliberate stance against women's social subordination.

3.2 "Without a uterus, there is no right to speak": Reproductive Agency within Contemporary Chinese Cultural Contexts

According to Federici (2020), the development of the capitalist system requires labor power, but also new workers and that is the reason why "no sector of capital can be indifferent to whether women decide to procreate" (2020: 17). For this reason, women's bodies have been subjected to a dual process of mechanization: the first is connected to productive labor, whether paid or unpaid, performed outside and inside the home; the second is manifested in reproductive labor, in which women have been expropriated from their own bodies, socially conceived as reproductive machines.

This perspective resonates with the common sentiment of many Weibo women users who perceive motherhood as a burden, an obligation to be fulfilled in order to maintain the country's harmony, to the point of urging other women not to marry and not to have children. While not explicitly discussing

bodies, the presence of comments such as "It's better that no one gets married and has children" (大家不婚不育就好了) and "Live happily, don't have children" (快乐的活着吧啊那就不生孩子) in response to the Sanlian Life Weekly post (Weibo 2024) testifies to a strong sense of dissatisfaction toward the socially conceived prospect of motherhood. The encouragement by some users not to have children is effectively an invitation to reclaim the reproductive function of one's own body.

This phenomenon can be understood through what Brown (2019) conceptualizes as a 'birth strike' — an uncoordinated yet collective refusal by women to reproduce under conditions they deem untenable. Women are individually deciding to have fewer children or none at all, not merely as personal choices, but as responses to systemic failures: the lack of childcare support, insufficient parental leave, inadequate healthcare, and the broader incompatibility between motherhood and economic survival. Crucially, Brown frames reproductive control as a tool of political power: "we need to stop thinking about birth control and abortion as just individual choices or 'our most personal health care decisions' and start thinking about them as a tool of political power that women, the childbearing workforce, must control" (2019: 153). This grassroots resistance, though unorganized, creates collective pressure on the power structure, revealing the indispensable value of women's reproductive work. The Chinese case demonstrates how, despite pronatalist policies and economic incentives, women maintain control over their reproductive capacity by refusing to bear children under conditions that would intensify their exploitation.

This articulation of bodily autonomy as central to reproductive freedom resonated powerfully in online discourse. Over the past few years, discussions around 'fertility fear' (kongyu 恐育) have become increasingly visible among young, unmarried Chinese women, especially within the social media sphere. According to Han (2024), among the issues discussed in the context of fertility fear, in addition to the structural reasons analyzed previously, there is also reproductive freedom (2024: 306). As a representative example, a Weibo post from May 31, 2021, responding to the three-child policy, starkly asserted: "Regarding #ThreeChildPolicy#, the most fundamental point is that without a uterus, there is no right to speak. Secondly, the uterus belongs only to its owner, not to men, not to the government, not to the state, and should not be coveted, controlled, or divided by any non-uterus owner" (关于#三孩政策#首先最基本的一点，没有子宫就没有发言权。其次，子宫只属于其拥有者，不属于男性、不属于政府、不属于国家，不应该被任何非子宫拥有者觊觎、掌控和

瓜分) (Sina Weibo 2021d). This statement, that reached 192 likes, directly challenges the state's claim to regulate women's reproductive capacity, asserting that reproductive decision-making authority belongs exclusively to those with the bodily capacity for reproduction. It reflects how users are translating the structural contradictions analyzed above into an everyday political language of refusal, asserting ownership over their reproductive labor and rejecting its instrumentalization for demographic goals. This assertation is highlighted by the repetitive structure "不属于男性、不属于政府、不属于国家" (not to men, not to the government, not to the state), that produces a striking rhetorical effect, evoking both indignation and empowerment.

This critical stance is amplified in transnational feminist activism, where activists positioned outside PRC censorship can articulate more explicitly oppositional discourse. A similar perspective appears in the article "Non-reproduction as Women's Free Choice and as the Ultimate Means to Halt the Operation of Patriarchy" (不生育是女性的自由选择，也可以是停止父权制度运作的最终方案), written by activist feminist writer Lü Pin and published after the announcement of the three-child policy, in October 21, 2021, on the blog 歪脑 (Why Not), a USA-based online magazine addressing new generations of Chinese readers. The activist writes:

> Feminism must maintain its own public agenda. Its opposition to employment gender discrimination and its demands for public childcare are not aimed at encouraging women to have more children or allocating more benefits to childbearing women, but rather at ensuring that reproduction remains a free choice for women — a principle that is inseparable from ensuring the freedom to have fewer or no children. However, it is conceivable that the enhancement of women's reproductive freedom will herald a further decline in birth rates, serving as a marker of the tension between women and the state (Lü 2021).

Lü Pin directly emphasizes that feminist opposition to employment discrimination and demands for public childcare are not intended to encourage women to have more children. Instead, these demands aim to ensure that reproduction remains genuinely voluntary. States facing demographic decline often introduce measures such as extended parental leave, childcare subsidies, and protections against workplace discrimination for mothers. While these policies adopt the rhetoric of feminist demands for better working conditions and gender equality, their ultimate objective remains demographic: to increase birth rates in service of national interests. In the Chinese context specifically,

the state's appropriation of feminist discourse serves to advance its bio-political agenda of population management, with patriotic rhetoric encouraging women to bear more children — a strategy that has evoked strong resentment among women who recognize the patriarchal nature of these population planning policies (Zhang et al. 2024). By asserting that enhanced reproductive freedom will likely result in further declining birth rates, Lü Pin reveals the fundamental incompatibility between authentic women's liberation and state demographic management.

The overseas Instagram account @feministchina, managed by Chinese feminists living outside the PRC, collects content addressing gender inequalities in China and publicizes demonstrations and support events for Chinese women. A post from May 31, 2021 — immediately following announcement of the three-child policy — affirms: "Women are not reproductive tools and will not and should not change their personal decisions to have no or fewer children for the sake of national interest." (女性不是生育工具，不会也不应为"国家利益"而改变个人不生少生的决定), "Based on human rights rather than birth rate considerations, the state should thoroughly abolish birth control and abolish family planning" (基于人权而非生育率考量，国家应彻底取消生育控制，废除计划生育) (Instagram 2021).

This statement centers the body — specifically, the refusal of women's bodies to function as 'reproductive tools' serving national wellbeing and state objectives. This perspective represents what can be characterized as grassroots feminist critique, articulated through social media by activists positioned outside mainland China borders, thereby enabling expression of explicitly anti-state positions. Crucially, this framing identifies the three-child policy not as an isolated measure but as the latest iteration of a historical pattern in which reproductive policies — whether restrictive or incentivizing — instrumentalize women's bodies for state demographic management.

4. Conclusions

This paper examined Chinese women's fertility intentions and attitudes toward motherhood under the three-child policy, demonstrating how reproductive choices are shaped not by the possibility of having additional children but by the structural-cultural disjuncture characterizing contemporary Chinese society. Applying Minello's (2022) framework to the Chinese context reveals how market liberalization and welfare privatization following the 1980s reforms

created a fundamental misalignment: structurally, families face prohibitive child-rearing costs and intensified workplace discrimination against mothers; culturally, the Xi administration's promotion of Confucian family values creates intense pressure for women to fulfill traditional maternal and caregiving responsibilities. This lack of complementarity — where economic conditions require women's full participation in wage labor while cultural expectations demand devotion to family — produces a tension between Chinese women and Chinese Government's policies.

Drawing on CDA's understanding of discourse as socially situated practice, social media posts have been examined as discourses historically situated within China's specific context of reproductive control (Wodak 2001: 3). Posts explicitly rejecting state control over reproduction — asserting that "the uterus belongs only to its owner, not to men, not to the government, not to the state" — demonstrate a growing consciousness around bodily autonomy that challenges ideologies of demographic nationalism. Comments encouraging reproductive refusal, critiquing the double burden of productive and reproductive labor, and demanding male participation in care work articulate collective resistance to state demographic management. This counter-discourse represents women's assertion of reproductive agency against biopolitical governance.

By centering Chinese women's voices and analyzing their context-specific strategies of resistance, this study seeks to contribute to non-Eurocentric feminist analyses of motherhood. While Chinese women negotiate reproductive agency within a landscape shaped by Confucian patriarchal kinship systems, authoritarian demographic management, and post-socialist neoliberalization, the material conditions underlying their reproductive refusal resonate across borders. Whether in China or Europe, women confront inadequate parental leave policies, prohibitive childcare costs, systematic workplace discrimination against mothers, and the persistent gendering of care responsibilities. These structural similarities, manifesting through different political and cultural frameworks, suggest that feminist resistance to reproductive instrumentalization addresses fundamentally shared contradictions of contemporary capitalism: the simultaneous demand for women's productive labor and their reproductive work, without providing the material conditions for either. Such an approach seeks to offer a modest contribution by drawing attention to both the historical specificity of women's struggles and the shared material conditions that shape feminist resistance across different contexts.

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A Time that Goes Nowhere: The Resemantization of Time as an All-Human Language in Zheng Xiaoqiong's Poetry and our Contemporaneity

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Abstract Zheng Xiaoqiong (Sichuan 1980–) is a contemporary poet best known for her *dagong* (migrant workers') poetry, often interpreted through subaltern or ecocritical lenses. This article proposes a broader reading of Zheng's work, arguing that her poetry addresses the experience of time as a specifically human and embodied language. Departing from the linear, progress-oriented temporality underlying dominant modern narratives, Zheng's poems reveal time as both physical and cognitively constructed – a rhythm inscribed on bodies and environments that exposes both the interdependence of all beings and the linguistic nature of human lives. Through an intersectional and transcorporeal approach, indebted to thinkers such as Adriana Cavarero and Stacy Alaimo, the contribution investigates how Zheng's resemantization of time arises from her situated experience as a female migrant worker, yet ultimately speaks to the condition of human existence as a whole. Comparative readings with other Sinophone authors further highlight how her poetry transforms personal marginality into a wide-reaching meditation on the possibilities of being human in a world of supposed crises, and concrete, inevitable, transcorporeal – possibly transconscious – interconnection.

Keywords Zheng Xiaoqiong; *dagong* poetry; transcorporeality; time; crisis.

1. Introduction: Zheng Xiaoqiong and the Critical Reception of Her Poetry

Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼 was born in 1980 in a village in Sichuan, which she left in 2001 in search of work in Dongguan. In Dongguan – a booming city in southern China, located roughly between Guangzhou and Shenzhen – she moved from one factory to another, from one identification number to the next. The only constants in this anonymous and mechanical existence were the inevitable corporeality of herself and things surrounding her, time as a human measure inscribed on bodies by the cycle of the seasons, and poetry, which Zheng began to publish in literary magazines, gradually earning her recognition.

Although Zheng worked in factories for seven years, her poetry was noticed early on, and especially with the rise of the internet she soon became part of networks of poets and writers, engaging in fruitful exchanges. As early as 2003 she received the *First China Folk Poetry Prize for a New Poet*, followed by several other awards – particularly after 2007, when the release of her poetry collection *Huangmaling* 黄麻岭 marked the beginning of her publishing career (to date, Zheng has published ten books). In addition to recognition from literary magazines and numerous local and national literary prizes, it is worth mentioning the prestigious *China Quyuan Poetry Gold Prize* and the national *Lu Xun Literary Prize*, both awarded to her in 2014 (Zhou 2016: 93–94).

Public attention, both national and international, academic and non-academic, subsequently followed. The CNKI database alone currently lists around 150 academic texts that, since 2007, have focused on – or made mention of – Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry.[1] There is also a substantial body of scholarship in English, as well as scientific and journalistic articles in various other languages. In fact, Zheng's poetry has now been translated into many languages, including Japanese, Korean, Turkish, Vietnamese, and other Asian languages, as well as English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Swedish, and more.

As far as academic attention is concerned, most scholarship situates Zheng Xiaoqiong's production within the tradition of *dagong shige* 打工诗歌 "migrant worker poetry," emphasizing her representation of factory labor, bodily suffering, and social marginality (e.g., Zou & Wu 2025; Shen 2025; Picerni 2020; Zhou 2016). Her identity as a female migrant worker has also given rise to a substantial body of feminist and gender-focused analysis, exploring how her work articulates the experiences of the *dagongmei* 打工妹 "young women laborers," constructing a distinct subjectivity that combines class and gender oppression while asserting new modes of female self-expression. As regards socio-political dimensions, Zheng's poetry has been studied for her ecological and ecofeminist concerns (e.g., Gong 2018; Feng 2017; Gong 2012), which have also gained her the attention of non-academic circles of environmental activism and ecopoetry.[2] Ultimately, there is no lack of studies interpreting her work through broader lenses, such as the philosophical approach of post-existentialism (Shao 2025), or connecting her writing to wider literary and

[1] Search for "郑小琼". *CNKI.net*, https://www.cnki.net/kns/defaultresult/index [last accessed 25 Sept 2025].

[2] E.g. Zheng, Xiaoqiong. n.a. "What are the ecological / social crises within your region / country?". *Ecopoetikon.org*, https://ecopoetikon.org/poets/portfolio/zheng-xiaoqiong [last accessed 25 Sept 2025].

ideological contexts, such as the legacy of left-wing literature (e.g., Feng 2018; Gong 2012), the rise of new popular culture (e.g., Dai & Zhang 2025; Li et al. 2025), or the production of writers such as Yu Xiuhua 余秀华 (1976–) and Fan Yusu 范雨素 (1973–), who similarly challenge literary norms from positions of social marginality (e.g., Wei 2021; Liu 2020).

A recurring motif in this criticism is the centrality of pain and the body. Zheng's depiction of physical exhaustion is read both as an autobiographical testimony and as a metaphor for systemic violence under globalized capitalism. Yet, researchers have also pointed to a perceivable evolution in her writing – from the early "migrant worker poetry" label to more personal, experimental, and intellectual modes, extending her focus from the factory and the city to questions of ecology and spirituality (e.g., Zhang 2016).

This article precisely situates itself within this strand of research which, by moving beyond the label of "migrant poet," seeks instead to explore the broader value of Zheng Xiaoqiong's work. More specifically, this contribution aims to examine the resemantization of time observable in a selection of Zheng's poems, situating this perspective of hers within a framework of transcorporeal dynamics and relations – hence, within a field of inquiry that does not concern Chinese migrant workers alone, but humanity as a whole. My methodological stance thus resonates with Van Crevel's (2025) invitation to an ontological approach to Zheng's poetry yet advances a distinct critical focus: I examine the resemantization of time in Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry through an intersectional lens. Whereas Admussen (2025: 14, 15 and ff.), who also discusses the topic of time in relation to poetic expression and contemporaneity, interrogates the "dehomogenization of spacetime" in contemporary poetry – conceptualizing time as rhythm – and links its arrhythmic perceptions to the asymmetrical temporalities of climate change across localities, my analysis shifts the emphasis from ecological and (g)located temporality to humans' most intimate and embodied temporal experience.

Namely, I investigate how time is reinvented as a fundamental category of meaning-making – a framework through which human consciousness makes sense of, survives and navigates both internal and external changes. In an age that renders us both contingent and eternal – one that projects humans onto the increasingly "timeless" horizon of chronic consumerist time shortage (Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist 2003) while also confronting us with generative language models that are themselves "timeless," disembodied, and thus potentially eternal – reading Zheng's poetry through this lens may add a timely contribution to existing interpretive frameworks. Indeed, it offers an

occasion to revisit the "outmoded," as Miller lamented (2003: 86), question of time in literature, or more broadly in language, prompting a renewed reflection on the human as a temporal being, living physically and cognitively in the very time that language seeks to analogize and represent.

Central to my argument is the correlation between the resemantization of time observable in Zheng's work and her subject position as both a woman and a migrant worker – a figure hyper-exposed to environmental degradation yet also actively embedded within its unfolding realities. Thus, if Admussen foregrounds the desynchronization of time in relation to planetary crisis (Admussen 2025: 26, 37, etc.) – already identifying a positive implication in its opening up the possibility for new, locally grounded rhythms and "strange loops" (Admussen 2025: 25, 33–34) – my aim is to further illustrate how another kind of positive – and possibly redemptive – resignification of time may be traced in the work of my case-study author. As a conclusion to my analysis, I eventually argue that, considering this resemantization as emerging from the situated, intersectional subjectivity of a woman poet living and writing within that very crisis – that is, on those margins where issues such as environmental pollution, gender violence, and a sense of disorientation and identity loss are most acutely felt – its perspective holds all the more significant potential for enabling us to confront this so-called 'crisis' with engaged empathy and new constructive responses.

2. The (Human) Body of Time: Transcorporeality as a Theoretical Framework

The core argument of this article posits that, in this age of "great derangement" (Ghosh 2017) and of "death of transnational time" (Admussen 2025), Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry conveys a return to a possibility of "human time." This concept of human time – one rooted in the environment and interpersonal relationships – emerges from her poetry as more authentic and fulfilling than the progressivist and eschatological notion of time prevailing in contemporary societies.

While progressivist time is aimed toward a phantomatic development being never fully attainable and thus having detrimental effects on the world and its inhabitants, acknowledging the "unfathomable enigma" of human temporality (Miller 2003: 89), poetry – and literature in general – have often

been representing senses of time which better resonate with our human experiences.

Thus, if it might be true that "each literary work has a different time sense – even those by the same author" (Miller 2003: 87), my attempt here is to detect a time-related discourse underlying Zheng's verses that – despite its different manifestations – might be indexical of a well-weaved and coherent resemantization of time. Subsequent to this analysis, time finally reveals itself to be a cognitive device, that is, a meaning-making process existing through human language, yet nonetheless indispensable to (return to) being human.

To introduce and understand the alternative sense of time proposed by Zheng Xiaoqiong, and the resulting extended value of her poetic activity – one that exceeds the label of "migrant poetry" to address our shared entanglement within the material, linguistic, and "temporal" contexts that shape our life experiences as humans – I will employ Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality. While this involves a degree of simplification that may not do full justice to the depth and wide-reaching implications of Alaimo's theorization, it remains functional to the scope of the present article. In this sense, the concept is understood here as the inseparability of human corporeality – "in all its material fleshiness" – from its embedding environment.

> Transcorporeality does the opposite of distancing or dividing the human from external nature. It implies that we're literally enmeshed in the physical material world […] there's no nature that we just act upon. Instead, it's also acting back upon us, as we are always already the very substance and the stuff of the word that we are changing (Kuznetski & Alaimo 2020: 139).

The term 'transcorporeality,' thus, might well describe the physical (and possibly social) position in which every human being is situated – and indeed every existing being, whether living or not, with a more or less visible physicality. Differently said, the notion of transcorporeality allows conceiving of the subject as "generated through and entangled with biological, technological, economic, social, political and other systems" (Alaimo 2018: 436). Thus, in the case of Zheng Xiaoqiong, this term might prove particularly appropriate for foregrounding the intersectionality of the forces and variables that act upon her body and person, and are in turn acted through them: not only the force of the chemical elements and metals with which she contaminates the environment and by which she herself is contaminated, but also the global economic dynamics in which she inevitably participates – as well as the unquestioned patriarchal regime that these dynamics indeed perpetuate:

> For example, in the poem "Age of Industry," Zheng employs the voice of a migrant worker to show that her life and workplace on the assembly line in a factory are inter-twined with the global market […] : "Japanese machines in American-invested factories carry iron / produced in Brazilian mines; / . . . / I am keeping busy every day / for the sake of peacefully arranging the world in a factory". […] [Additionally,] Zheng's emphasis on the intersections of patriarchy and market economy extends the critique of sexual exploitation of women beyond sexism in China to the intricacies of "patriarchal capital" in the age of urbanism and globalization (Zhou 2016: 89–91).

In this contribution, I will use the concept of 'transcorporeality,' both by applying it to this poetry's content (where reality is represented as a transcorporeal field of relationships between human beings and the environment), and for describing Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetic practice itself, thus conceiving writing poetry as a biological process, organically being part of that very same transcorporeal field. My thesis, ultimately, is that this poetic activity understood as a biological process is precisely what enables Zheng to resemantize time – a process grounded in her specific life experience yet culminating in a compelling (re)conceiving of human transcorporeality as a relational and linguistic condition, rather than one merely situated and entangled at the material level.

3. "They are me, I am them." Writing of a Multi-entity, Preserving Low Entropy.

The link between the resemantization of time and the rethinking of what it means – or rather, of what it *is* – to be human necessarily passes through an identitarian renunciation, which concerns both the term 'time' itself and Zheng as a person. Put differently, in order to resemantize what we conventionally call 'time' through poetic activity, Zheng operates on two parallel channels: on the one hand, she virtually deconstructs her own sense of individuality and singular identity; on the other, she refuses a univocal representation of time, whether as a linear or cyclical trajectory, or as a unique and objective coordinate of any given contingency. After all, one deconstruction cannot occur without the other: to continue being Zheng Xiaoqiong and to write a self-centered poetry would mean admitting to biographical coordinates inscribed in the human language of time (e.g., a birthdate preceding later life events, a village of

departure and a city of arrival, one job before and another after, a before and after in relation to an illness or accident, etc. – a temporalization which, as Miller suggests, is nothing but linguistic, that is, founded on the fact that human language does not merely *express* time, but rather *creates* it tout court); conversely, to reiterate the language of time without problematizing it would not allow the dismantling of individual identity from those very coordinates, and would thus return the poet to herself, without any real alternative.

To clarify these reflections, I will first discuss the poet's deconstruction and resemantization of her own identity, and subsequently the deconstruction and resemantization of 'time,' pausing on some concrete examples and, where useful, comparing them with the works of other Sinophone poets and writers.

As regards the deconstruction of the poet's identity, again, this is the very condition for accessing a different sense of time, yet the reversal is also true: based on the alternative sense of time conveyed by her poetry, Zheng experiences and suggests new ways for individuals to experience human life and identity.

To delve further, her search for an alternative identity rests on an in-depth exploration of connection with others, understood not only as fellow human beings (for instance, other female workers) but also as non-human elements of the environment. The theme of sisterhood is thus recurrent and programmatic in her poetry, yet the multi-entity consciousness she envisions also emerges through the representations of artificial objects and natural elements, especially plants and atmospheric agents, which – far from constituting external details or factors – do share with human beings the very same level of existence and the very same intense proximity or interrelation.

As a result, Zheng's work gestures toward an identity that transcends human, temporalized individualism, reaching toward a 'multi-entity' rather than an *individual* identity – a positive form of transcorporeality that ultimately opens onto a dimension of timeless trans-consciousness. And it is precisely this trans-consciousness what makes it possible to reconceive human time – and thus human existence on Earth – in an alternative, and potentially redemptive way.

Most interestingly, it is not so much Zheng's status as a migrant worker as her status as a woman – including her feminist awareness (Wu 2018) – what enables her to enact this identitarian transition. Her verses, in fact, both exemplify and perform what Cavarero & Guaraldo explain as follows:

> The individualist doctrine that characterizes modern political thought […] [is] centered on the abstract notion of a free and autonomous individual […], appearing in the legal sphere as the bearer of rights, and serving instead, in the sphere of the market, as the repository of incessant desires […], the ideal protagonist of a consumer economy. […] With [Descartes'] *cogito ergo sum*, we are confronted with the theorem of an individual existence that brings itself into the world through thought – that is, with the theoretical act of an autogeneration of the self as a "thinking substance." To which […] Descartes must, of course, add the presence of the body, which he defines as an "extended substance" that – one supposes, even if the philosopher pays no attention to such trifles – is generated by a mother. […] Feminist theory has devoted [constant effort] to overturning the framework of selfish individualism, by elaborating an alternative mode of thought that conceives subjectivity primarily in terms of relationality and interdependence. […] Far from being closed and self-sufficient subjects, […] we are all embodied singularities, vulnerable and exposed. […] The urgency of a response to climate catastrophe and to other planetary crises is clearly incompatible with the model of the selfish and competitive individual, the latest offspring of the Anthropocene lineage. More promising instead is a model of relational subjectivity, attentive to the vulnerability of the living – human and non-human alike – , […] a *feminine relational model* as an alternative to the *masculine individualist model* (Cavarero & Guaraldo 2024: 45–49).

To explore more closely how this transpecific sisterhood (or "feminine relational model"), and its accompanying multi-entity search, concretely emerge in Zheng's poetry, I propose considering the following poems, in which the poet respectively identifies with her colleague workers (*They*), and with some grass roots (*Grass Roots*), thus sheltering her monadic self for embracing a multi-entity ipseity:

> (1) They
>
> I remember iron, iron that rusted over time
> pale red or dark brown, tears in a furnace fire
> I remember the distracted, exhausted eyes above the workstations
> their gazes were small and trivial, small as a gradual furnace fire
> their depression and distress, and a tiny bit of hope
> are lit up by the flames, unfold, on white blueprints
> or between the red lines of a traditional painting, by the meager monthly wages
> and a gradually exhausted heart –

I remember their faces, their wild eyes and subtle trembling
their calloused fingers, their rough and simple lives
I say quietly: they are me, I am them
our grief and pain and hope are kept silent and forbearing
our confessions and hearts and loves are all in tears,
all is as silent and lonely as iron, or as pain

I say, in the vast crowds, we are all alike
we all love and hate, we all breathe, we all have noble spirits
we all have unyielding loneliness and compassion!
(Zheng 2015: 270; translation by Eleanor Goodman)

(2) Grass roots

Twilight spreads, a layer of ash-gray iron melts July
Returning to lychee woods, everything is empty and silent . . .
flying bugs of July
And a drop of blood pools at the tip of a grass blade, a slanting red
When short, grass stalks drop their heads
And see a drifter's heels
In Silver Lake Park, encountering a plume of grass with purple-blue flowers
Moonlight hears the sounds of flowers, blooming and fragrant

Pale flower of July cannot hold on to the moonlight over Silver Lake Park
By the lake at midnight I listen to a blade of grass weeping, it is a
Drifter on the road, briefly
Vanishing into the dark

A street lamp illuminates grass tips and my footprints
We share the same name, oh
– Grass roots

In the depth of green grass, under the lychee trees
My friends and family
In this homeless strange land, I grow like a blade of grass
At the twilight when the universe falls silent, a night wind blows
But cannot blow down our heads
(Zheng 2022b: 42; translation by Jonathan Stalling)

The examples reported above, and especially the lines highlighted in bold, clearly exemplify the abandonment – within the virtual space of the text – of an individual self-reducible to a single identity. In the first case (*They*), this ipseity

is rearticulated in the multi-entity of the coworkers with whom the poet does not merely associate – she does not employ the rhetorical device of comparison – but rather identifies through a powerful double metaphor, when she bluntly states: "they are me, I am them." In the second case (Grass roots), she even comes to merge herself with the plant species of grass and lychee trees, not only playing on the linguistic level ('grass roots,' or *caogen* 草根 in Chinese, is a metaphorical term commonly used to refer to 'ordinary people'), but also establishing with them a shared physical-biological lineage, to the point of calling herself part of the same family and claiming to grow in the same way they grow.

Pursuing this reflection a bit further, and returning to Cavarero & Guaraldo's discourse, I contend that the urgency of this quest for a multi-entity consciousness in Zheng's lines, is indeed not by chance. In fact, those unavoidable conditions of 'embodiment', 'vulnerability' and 'inter-dependence,' that as human beings we all share, are particularly suffered by migrant women laborers like her.

My argument, thus, is that this search for a multi-entity consciousness – undoubtedly boosted by a feminist stance – originally arises from Zheng's urgent need to fill the void left by the loss of an integral and healthy subjective dimension. In fact, for migrant workers like her, subjective dimension is affected on all fronts – physically (as they suffer physical impairments, chemical poisoning, irregular menstruation, etc.), psychologically (they are deprived of their personal names and not recognized any specialized skills: on the assembly line, they are all identical, interchangeable numbers), and socially (far from their hometowns, they are deprived of their family and community ties, thus, of that sense of subjective recognition and legitimization deriving from them).

Hence, to concretely observe this loss of an identity intended as individual, singular, referable to one name and one body, let's consider, for instance, this excerpt from *Life*:

(3) [from Life]

What you don't know is that my name has been hidden by an employee ID
my two hands have become part of the assembly line, my body was signed over
to a contract, my black hair is turning white, leaving noise and toil
overtime work and wages...I've passed through fixed fluorescent lights
and the exhausted shadows flung on the machine stations move slowly

> turning, bending down, silent as cast iron […]
> **I don't know how to protect a silent life**
> **this life of a lost name and gender**, this life of surviving off of contracts
> where and how do I start, with **the moon** on the metal cots in the eight-person dorm room
> what it **illuminates** is **homesickness**, the secret flirting and love in the thundering of the machines […]
> (Zheng 2015: 267–8; translation by Eleanor Goodman)

In this poem, the disorientation of the individual and her sense of identity is emphasized both rhetorically and thematically. On the rhetorical level, the enumerative style and paratactic accumulation immediately stand out, which, far from making the poem more fluid or intelligible, instead create an overwhelming, suffocating reading experience. It seems as if Zheng intended her poetic *text* to reproduce the monotonous roaring of the machinery, the alienating repetition of gestures, and the resulting sense of oppression that the factory (con)*text* originally exerts on her. Notice, for example, the repeated use of 'know' – always in the negative form –: "you don't know […] that my name has been hidden," "I don't know how to protect a silent life." On the thematic level, the poem features the poet-individual's unrecognizability – both in relation to herself (her hands and body no longer belong to her, and her inner life falls silent amid the deafening noise of the factory; she has become a "silent life") and in relation to others, for whom she no longer has a name. This reflects the loss of any center, or reference point, capable of defining her boundaries. The absence of home or family is particularly striking – "the moon […] illuminates […] homesickness" – and such dislocation eventually elicits a profound sense of disorientation: "I don't know how to protect a silent life […] of a lost name and gender."

Hence, to sum up, as these three poems testify, this woman laborer's sense of self is so disrupted that the contours of a subjective identity are no longer definable or preservable. In her poetry, thus, survival is eventually sought by shedding an individual self and rather embracing a multi-entity alliance – both among human bodies and between humans and the environment.

At first glance, this multi-entity shift might appear an overwhelmingly chaotic and psychologically demanding path, one that broken individuals would hardly consider a more livable dimension (par rapport to the "masculine individualist model"). Yet, in Zheng Xiaoqiong's practice, the chaotic charge of such a busy, multi-entity world–one of roaring machines, melting chemicals,

blowing winds, aging beauties, changing trees, shifting laborers, etc.–is well counterbalanced by her poetic activity itself as a low-entropy-preserving process.

Entropy is a term borrowed from thermodynamics, designating the quantity that measures the degree of disorder within a physical system–the greater the disorder, the higher its level of entropy. As the British neuroscientist Anil Seth explains,

> the second law of thermodynamics tells us that the entropy of any isolated physical system increases over time. […] But somehow […] living systems temporarily fend off the second law, persisting in a precarious condition of improbability. They exist out of equilibrium with their environment, and this is what it means to "exist" in the first place (Seth 2021: 223–4).

From a biological perspective, transcorporeality and the preservation of a low level of entropy are thus processes that remain constantly precarious yet constitute a necessary condition for survival (Seth 2021: 223). "For any living system," Seth continues, "the condition of 'being alive' means proactively seeking out a particular set of states that are visited repeatedly over time, whether these are body temperatures, heart rates […] or the organisation of protein complexes […] in a single-celled bacterium" (Seth 2021: 224). While the persistence of this equilibrium – both physical and transcorporeal (Seth notably emphasizes that "living systems are in continual open interaction" – Seth 2021: 224) – may suffice for the survival of most living organisms, the human being, as a social animal endowed with symbolic language, also contains a form of heightened entropy that manifests at social and psychological levels and is negotiated precisely through the epidermis of language.

Hence, by suggesting that the high entropy of a multi-entity existence appears to be counterbalanced by Zheng through and within her poetic practice, this essay proposes to locate human linguistic activity – of which poetry is, quite literally, the paradigmatic form (the term derives from the Greek poiesis, meaning "the act of creation") – within the transcorporeal dynamics, both physical and symbolic, that originally inform it. Accordingly, it hypothesizes – drawing on Zheng's poetic production – that this very same poetic activity may function as a mode of regulation or counterbalance to environmental and psychological chaos, emerging both from individual disorientation and from the multi-entity responses she engenders. In the very first line of *Gudu* 孤独 "Loneliness," Zheng puts it in these terms: "In order to escape loneliness/she writes poetry" (Zheng 2022b: 72). Yet, as a matter of fact, poetry saves her both from loneliness and from the multi-entity chaos that she

engages with just "in order to escape loneliness," because through the controllable ecology of this literary text she can enact this multi-entity survival while (linguistically) exerting control over it.

Differently said, her poetry systematically articulates a multi-entity everyday existence, becoming an integral component of her self's biological, low-entropy-preserving mechanisms of survival – akin to breathing, heartbeat, or digestion. Writing poetry – that is, spatializing human life within a timeless ecology – consequently becomes a biological survival strategy sustaining the organism – an organism that can be understood as Zheng Xiaoqiong herself, her colleague community, Chinese migrant workers, the broader Chinese population, or even the whole of humanity.

Taking a step back from poetic activity as a biological mechanism, it has been noted that the deconstruction of an individual subjectivity, and the resemantization of human subjectivity as relational and multi-entity existence, goes hand in hand, in Zheng's verses, with a deconstruction and resemantization of time. As already mentioned, this resemantization of time may be understood as the outcome of adopting the viewpoint of a multi-entity self, but also as its starting point. In this section, I will further examine the premises of such resemantization, how it is connected to the resemantization of human identity, and – most importantly – how it might be discerned in Zheng's poetry.

Regarding the premises and the connection between the resemantization of time and the resemantization of human identity, it might be worth specifying that what follows is purely based on my own reading of and reflection on the texts. In other words, I am not claiming any explicit authorial intent on Zheng's part but rather offering one interpretative proposal among many possible others. In my view, the representations of time, and the forms – both linguistic and corporeal – that time assumes in this poet's verses, appear to rest on the assumption that time is, to a certain extent, a functional illusion, or, borrowing again from neuroscience, a self-induced 'hallucination' (Seth 2021: 310), yet ultimately necessary for human existence. Conceiving of human time as a controlled hallucination – that is, as an illusion specifically functional to *human* life – would thus enable Zheng to recognize how the self itself, or the perception each person has of themselves as an individual consciousness, is likewise a functional yet relative perception. Differently said, if time is an illusion, then our ego – our internal narrative of a time-rooted individual identity – might be equally conceived of as a cognitive construction.

Another line of reflection, which also emerges quite evidently from Zheng's verses, is that language is precisely what allows time to be spatialized – thus figured, though never attaining a representation beyond abstraction (Miller 2003: 87); or conversely, that any human time that can be conceived of exists only insofar as it is abstracted through, or made of, words. What I have observed, thus, is that in Zheng's poetry, time is both embodied and linguistic: it consists simultaneously in *humans'* embodied perception of reality, and in their linguistic conceptualization trying to make sense of that perception.

In fact, Zheng features time primarily in relation to the human body (e.g., aging) and to environmental transformations (e.g., seasonal shifts, falling rain, flowing water, blowing wind, rusting iron, etc.), thus as a physical and tangible experience, yet also as a cognitive one. This latter aspect emerges, for instance, in one of the following poems (*She*), where human lifetime is compared to a film projected by memory: a fictional movement observed from a condition of stillness, that is, a mental abstraction – something that can be stopped and grasped in each tiny moment of its unfolding (e.g., through poetic writing or filmmaking), but never as a representable whole.

Among the poems in which I have observed this thematization of time, the following are some of the most significant examples:

[Time in relation to the human body:]

(4) Time

In the village where I've lived for six years, in the lychee grove
the mountain stream shines on my truncated youth
the hardware factory's drowsy dream
leaves Silver Lake Park, heading north
I polish a migrant's sighs
and my own closer Huangma Mountain dialect
in the shade of banyan trees, the blazing industrial zone
turns brighter and brighter in the minds of the workers
past events fall from memory, wet
with grief, and the lights show the wrinkles slowly forming at my eyes
a lonely bird hides itself in the darkness of the lychee grove
the darkness overwhelms the red of the lychees, and the dark branches
turn even darker, the birdcalls have faded, and here
the roar of the hardware factory continues its banging unabated
my worker's number is 231, and when I take the blueprints, there in the darkness
in the midst of forgotten time, I see my youth

wriggling away in a clean and public grief
withering in the vastness of my country
(Zheng 2015: 270–1; translation by Eleanor Goodman)

[Time in relation to environmental elements:]

(5) The Wind Blows I

Huangma Ling. The wind blows on the twilight
that slowly sinks into darkness
leaving behind a void and my wobbly heels

Along Phoenix Avenue the wind blows continuously from
the hair of the afternoon workers to the melancholy of
the birds that return to the lychee grove

They come from distant places, Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei
They speak in dialect, and the wind blows on their destinies of
breathless wanderers

The wind blows on the pedestrian bridge
on the hidden prostitutes who, blacker than the night, under
the shade of a tree, look into the distance

The wind continues to blow, time is silent,
the trees are mute… their faint rustling

Time and water that I cannot stop, flow,
vanish... like my native country, like a foreign land

The wind blows and I bend to adore this
poor yet pure, austere life
(Zheng 2022b: 76; draft translation by myself)

[Time as both physically embodied, and abstracted through human language:]

(6) She

She no longer lives in her pain, like wood
no longer lives in the forest. She made herself into a chair
without anyone sitting on it. In the quiet and bright reflection

Her body began to shrivel silently and fragilely

Soon it will fade away, she begins to grow attached to things like a wall
to the security she gets from it and the calm she relies on. Her wishes
are like running raindrops, mild but restless
The sun illuminates the illusion in the mirror, that fading face

She begins to accept that like a flower she will wither
On her face shriveled features of clouds have emerged
Maybe this heart won't stand waiting like a plant
But it's going to be a pair of shoes that go the distance

In the thunderous echo of drops that fall down like ashes,
sitting on the bed, she tilts her head and observes people and objects in the mirror
of this film neither tragic nor comic called Life that memory shoots
already tired of this gloomy and narrow path

Moonlight has such a bitter and harsh sound
Full of gratitude for the pain that punctually arrives every month
that feeds the heart with hopes and anxieties
sweet melancholy that now deprives anger of any use
(Zheng 2022b: 36; draft translation by myself)

By analyzing these poems, we can get a sense of what I mean by conceiving poetic activity as a biological process, or as a low-entropy-preserving practice. In these verses, in fact, we can observe how the poet, through the spatializations made possible by language, captures – or rather hunts for – her own sense of time, in order to make its physicality and (cognitive) reality into a harbor of calm and security ("she's attached to things like a wall, to the security she gets from it and the calm she relies on," *She*, ll. 5–6).

This reality of a time that is not static but still and calm, capable of becoming a chair for one who can never sit down (*She*, ll. 2–3), of returning a changing face from the stillness of a mirror (*She*, ll. 8–10), or of echoing birds falling silent at nightfall, indifferent to the factory's unceasing roar (*Time*, ll. 11–14), ultimately constitutes that human dimension – austere yet authentic (*The Wind Blows*, last line) and thus livable – that poetic activity allows Zheng to depict.

The dimension she opposes is that of the factory, whose experience is not perceived by migrant workers as a real space-time of life, but rather as a "drowsy dream" (*Time*, l. 3): a suspended, unreal existence born of incessant, alienating,

and dehumanizing labor, of an "unabated banging" (*Time*, l. 14) that follows the (non-)time of the machines and therefore denies the time of cycle, return, and rest – the very time that Zheng represents, for instance, through spatializations (e.g., the blowing of the wind or the return of birds to their nests after sunset, *The Wind Blows*, ll. 1–6), or through sound impressions (e.g., the trees in the darkness of the night are 'mute,' despite the blowing of the wind, because mute is the biological time of rest, *The Wind Blows*, ll. 13–14).

At night, the tree – like the human being – belongs to a silent darkness unknown to the world of the factory and its machines, which are constantly switched on, *flashing and roaring*. (See, in *Time*, ll. 7–8, the contrast between the shadowy banyans and the "blazing industrial zone" shining "brighter and brighter in the minds of the workers.") That darkness enveloping the lychee and banyan trees, the birds and the prostitutes at sunset, is ultimately the time of rest.

In other words, thus, that dark space represented through words – this spatialization of movements, lights, and sounds – is an abstraction through which time is portrayed: a time grasped and figured through language, and which, ultimately, we can consider intrinsic to human life – a paradigm through which human beings project and situate themselves within the rhythmic horizon of life. But does this time concretely exist? Does it also exist for the other – for the reader, for the migrant worker? Does it *ex-ist* – outside the poet, and outside the text? I hereby argue that the answer might be yes: through the poem itself.

In fact, if the act of writing poetry is the dimension in which Zheng re-figures this time, then the poem, as the product of her writing, becomes the point of conjunction between this time (i.e. the one figured through her words) and the transcorporeal reality within which she operates. Zheng does not evade Saint Augustine's question – *what is time?* – "If no one asks me, I know; if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not" (Saint Augustine 1951: 224). On the contrary, her verses seem to seek it everywhere, collecting its sounds, its motions, its traces.

In Zheng's poetry, what time is, or what it once was before the alienating experience of life among machines – a language through which human life constantly, perpetually, precariously used to attune itself with the rest of existence – seems rather a given notion. Hence, Zheng does not aim at metaphysical speculation, nor at defining time or transforming it into a metaphor for something beyond material life. On the contrary, she seeks its evidence in matter itself: in the body (e.g., wrinkles, menstruation; *She*, ll. 10, 18), and in memory – which is like a muscle, changing and weakening with age

(*Time*, ll. 9–10) – and turns its related sufferings and frailties (physical weakness, pain, forgetfulness) into the very point of contact between the human being and the reality of which she is part.

In other words, the problematic and ineffable nature of this time – its resistance to verbalization, to being reduced to a system or an arrestable mechanism – yet the inevitable necessity of turning it into poesis, of creating it and continuing it –, resembles that regime of 'improbability' in which, as Seth observes, living beings fend off the second law of thermodynamics for the very sake of existing. It is an ineffability that, after all the wrinkles, clouds, and sunsets described, leaves the poet inevitably silent (*She*, l. 4), yet alive with a renewed sense of concrete existence – poor and yet authentic (*The Wind Blows*, last line).

Ultimately, it is interesting to note how this linguistic figuring of time – which in *The Wind Blows* materializes in the element of the wind and in the polyphony it gathers (the noise of the poet's heels, the birdsong fading at dusk, the varied dialects of the migrant workers, the silence of trees in the dark) – brings us back precisely to the multi-entity perspective discussed earlier. The starting point is the language of the individual poet – indeed, the first sound the wind encounters in the poem is that of her heels – but Zheng's poetry then acts upon that individual perspective like a kaleidoscope. The result is that the time she strives to depict, as illustrated in these examples, goes far beyond any banal melancholy for wrinkles or the sorrow of aging far from home: it transforms into a multi-entity experience and dimension, into a movement including stillness and, above all, including the other – the colleagues, the birds, the prostitutes, the trees, etc.

It is this time that takes form in the other, that resonates in the other, that literally *ex-ists*, what finally returns to the poet as a tangible anchorage, a flow she cannot stop (*The Wind Blows*, ll. 15–16) but to which she willingly surrenders ("I bend to adore this // poor yet pure, austere life," *The Wind Blows*, last lines), finding in this surrender a joyful – though painful – space of real existence. Significantly, she is "*full of gratitude for the pain that punctually arrives every month, // that feeds the heart with hopes and anxieties*" (*She*, ll. 18–19).

This reference to the menstrual cycle is also an opportunity to observe how the very dimension of gender is repositioned and resemantized in Zheng's discourse. Not only does the classic representation of romantic (and heterosexual) love give way to the portrayal of deep sororal empathy and affection (e.g., *They*) and even interspecific bonds (e.g., *Grassroots*), but the

menstrual cycle itself – commonly conceived as an undeniable marker of the female condition – appears here to be stripped of its (female) body of origin, rather representing a cadence of time, a rhythm that is not only personal but entangled with everything else.

Instead of emphasizing the exceptional nature of the female condition (in contrast to a presumed male universal), this cyclical 'pain' becomes, thus, its universalizing element: if the (menstrual, lunar, seasonal, emotional, vital, generational, etc.) cycle is the temporal form that allows the human heart – repeatedly and rhythmically – to replenish itself with 'hopes' and related 'anxieties,' then every person – whether man, woman, or identifying otherwise – who experiences the fatigue of living yet also the cyclical renewal of intentions, expectations, or simply vital energies, may be said to feel 'grateful' for this 'pain,' which indeed is intrinsic to (any) human life.

Hence, in other words, the resemantization of human temporality carried out by Zheng is also a resemantization of the female condition – shifting it from something exceptional (vis-à-vis the male universal) to something universally defining of human nature itself.

Zheng's depiction of time thus reconciles both the female and male, and the human and environmental dimensions, by transcorporeally situating human experience within a non-self-centered mode of life and poetic expression. It is a physical yet transcorporeal time, a stream that encompasses the poet, her language, and the environment they inhabit. Although the poems discussed above may have already shed considerable light on this point, to further grasp the relevance of this concept it is useful to compare Zheng's portrayals of time with other representations in contemporary Sinophone poetry.

For instance, Bei Dao 北岛 (1949–)'s *The Roses of Time* articulates a distinctly metaphysical view of time – a vision that certainly holds its own philosophical and aesthetic value yet does not permit the kind of resemantization discussed here. Interestingly, this male poet's preference for a metaphysical approach to time resonates with Cavarero & Guaraldo's observations on the male domain over spiritual and philosophical discourse, a domain traditionally considered alien to women, who are instead associated with their embodied role as life-generators (Cavarero & Guaraldo 2024: 19–20). Yet, leaving such reflections for another research, let us now consider the following lines:

(7) The Roses of Time

When the gate guard sinks into sleep
You turn back together with the storm
That which ages in the embrace is
The rose of time

When the birds' routes demarcate the sky
You look backward at the sunset
That which appears in the disappearance is
The rose of time

When the sword is bent in the water
You tread the flute melody across the bridge
That which cries aloud in the conspiracy is
The rose of time

When the pen draws a line of horizon
You're startled awake by the oriental gong
That which blooms in the reverberation is
The rose of time

It is always this moment in the mirror
This moment leads toward the gate of rebirth
And the gate opens toward seas
The roses of time
(Bei 2011: 263–4; translation by Tao Naikan and Simon Patton)

Comparing these lines with the preceding poems immediately highlight their different approaches to time. Although the spatial representations used by the two poets sometimes coincide – e.g., "the birds' routes" (*Roses of Time*, line 5; comparable to *The Wind Blows*, line 6), "the sunset" (*Roses of Time*, line 6; comparable to *The Wind Blows*, line 1), or the mirror's reflection (*Roses of Time*, line 17; comparable to *She*, line 8) – the formal structure in which Bei Dao inscribes such elements (a temporal clause beginning with "when," reinforced by its fourfold repetition and by the metaphorical device that rhythmically refrains – "that which ages […] is the rose of time," "that which appears […] is the rose of time," "that which cries aloud […] is the rose of time," "that which blooms […] is the rose of time") points to an aesthetic-philosophical quest that – as discussed in the previous paragraphs – has no place, nor reason to exist, in Zheng's poetry.

Bei Dao does not seek evidence of a time possessing its own physical or linguistic concreteness in order to anchor a renewed sense of real existence. On the contrary, he abstracts the spatial moments of time – its "roses" – into a rhythmic and captivating song, which ultimately aspires – in contrast to Zheng's more yielding approach (see *The Wind Blows*, last four lines) – to allude, through human language, to the totality of reality, investing his "roses" of time with an absolute, metaphysical significance. One might consider, in this respect, the final quatrain and its powerful allusive charge, which eventually constitutes a sort of open ending, pointing toward a meaning other than matter and other – or external – to the poem itself.

It goes without saying that this comparison does not aim to express any judgment or establish any hierarchy of value between the poems under examination. As previously stated, its purpose is rather to define more precisely – by contrast – the specific resemantization of time that characterizes Zheng's poetry. In light of this comparison, Zheng thus patently contrasts Bei Dao's metaphysical roses of time with a rather physical and linguistic concept of time; a time being much rooted in our all-human experience of life and never constituting an external entity.

Another contemporary poet worth mentioning is Han Dong 韩东 (1961–). In some of his writings, including the example presented below, Han Dong indeed depicts how the human body bears the marks of time. However, in his poetry, these physical changes lack transcorporeal potential; they do not situate the poet within a framework connecting the individual's experience to the other and to the environment. For Han Dong, the poet's body neither mirrors the time of other beings nor attunes him to the steppe (see In these years, ll. 19–20). By contrast, *In These Years* follows a linear temporal narrative, focused entirely on the poet, recounting his life as an individual, independent human being, simply aging with the passage of time (his solitude and isolation being further underscored by the recurring motif of the number one: in these years, he has read only one book and listened to only one CD; see ll. 21–22).

Following *In These Years*, I present a poem by Zheng Xiaoqiong, which will offer an opportunity to draw a compelling comparison.

(8) In these years (by Han Dong)

In these years, I haven't had a bad time
except for love, I haven't fallen in love anymore
except for sleeping, I haven't slept with a woman anymore
except for writing, no more poetry

I often send people to hell, but without anger
I'm often in Nanjing, it also happens
that I go elsewhere
I continue to live, but I don't aspire to a long life

In these years, I've lacked money, but I didn't want it
I've lacked sleep, but I didn't take tranquilizers
I've lacked meat, but I didn't eat chicken feet
I've gone bald, let me go bald
my teeth have fallen out, let them fall out
I'm satisfied with the ones that remain
my beard has turned white, even the lower beard
my eyebrow hair has grown, even the nose hair

In these years, I've been to Shanghai once
but it doesn't seem to me that things have changed much in Shanghai
I've been to the steppe once, but I haven't felt
communion with nature
I've read, just one book, but seven times
I've listened to music, just one CD, every day
words and ideograms no longer torment me
nor do I torment my language anymore

In these years, a friend has died,
but to me it feels as if he were still alive.
Another one is famous now
so bye-bye, let's leave it at that
I am still Han Dong, they call me Old Han.
Old Han is still well: he climbs the mountain every week,
not to gaze into the distance from above, nor to make love in the open air,
just like that, and halfway up he turns back.
(Han 2015: 195–6; draft translation by myself)

(9) Body (by Zheng Xiaoqiong)

The twilight extracted from my body
tender but passionate silence
grass bent until it falls into the darkness
time pierced, little by little
The forehead in the mirror begins to whiten with snow
that covers face, bones, hair
these somber and ancient white things
like sugar that melts on an ordinary day
The twilight that flows deep in the ribs

lingers for a moment making me glimpse a quiet
but meticulous life what remains is love that, like a
stain of water spreads
In the shade of birds that chirp on the lake Li
a curved branch whispers, calling to me
I turn and see it stretch out happily
while I, like a drop of rain from last year
fallen on a crowd of people
come across a faded night
(Zheng 2022b: 86; draft translation by myself)

In Han Dong's poem, the monad of the narrating self and its detached stance toward both his own body and the surrounding environment predominates (e.g., he shows no concern for the aging of his body, nor for attuning himself to the steppe). By contrast, in Zheng's poem – significantly titled "Body" – the pivotal focus is the intersection between the poet's body and the body of the encompassing environment, which both embraces and transforms her (e.g., the twilight extracting silence from her body, or a curved branch calling to her). Put differently, the body becomes a transcorporeal space-time in which the individual-poet experiences existence as part of an unstoppable, multi-entity continuum.

4. Final Reflections: Renouncing Being Timeless Gods, for (Timely) Being Humans

This conception of time, understood as a language deeply rooted in human experience – i.e. embedded in the way humans perceive and live existence – offers not only an alternative to the dominant narrative but also provokes a profound shift in perspective. In fact, by removing the human beings from a narrative that casts them as the protagonists of a directional, linear, and progressive timeline – thus, from a divine, eschatological, or anyway missionary view of human life on Earth – this shift detaches humanity from the constraints of individuality and the notion of the self as a singular, isolated monad. Instead, it repositions the human being among the "ten thousand beings," occupying an equal, integrated, and osmotic – or transcorporeal – relationship with the environment we inhabit. In this new perspective, human existence is non-linear, devoid of inherent meaning, and resists any explanation: no more a "cogito ergo sum," but "I (transcorporeally, relationally) participate in reality thus exist".

Differently said, abandoning a disembodied, eschatological conception of time means relinquishing the notion of human exceptionalism. Yet, it also offers the possibility of escaping the isolation and depressive states which increasingly affect our ("masculine individualist") contemporary societies (Shaer 2024). Thus, embracing this plural, integrated consciousness – or transconsciousness – may offer a viable path to preventing humanity from becoming the architect of its own extinction or unhappiness. As Zheng Xiaoqiong pointed out in an interview released in 2022, the worsening environmental crisis does not threaten the survival of planet Earth itself, but of humanity (Zheng 2022b: 106).

In conclusion, considering the above-proposed analysis, I suggest that Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry ultimately enacts, demonstrates, and embraces the cognitive dimension of human time, which, like personal identity, is essentially a predictive projection – a functional self-hallucination necessary for existence (Seth 2021: 87).

By acknowledging (a) the cognitive dimension of time and – consequently or simultaneously –, (b) the fictionality of the individual self – that is, of identity as a monad – Zheng achieves what Recalcati calls "nostalgia-gratitude," describing it as the positive outcome of a still incessant work of mourning (Recalcati 2022: 87–88). The work of mourning carried out by Zheng is to be understood as the mourning for a self who could once – but can no longer – identify with their native place, family name, or community of belonging; a self – to sum up – who could once survive as a (distinctly male or female, human or non-human) individual identity – yet can now fully live as a relational, transcorporeal and even transpecific multi-entity. Indeed, I would further argue, this reflection which Zheng's poetry often elicits transcends the categorization of her work within the Chinese "migrant poetry" genre and speaks to global society about some of its most-discussed "crises:" the environmental crisis, but also the psychological and sociological crisis at once faced and caused by increasingly lonely individuals.

As Andersen and Aubry suggest (Andersen & Aubry 2025: 2 and ff.), the concept of crisis has become widely inflated, and often – paradoxically – its use is what justifies postponing concrete action on a 'critical' situation (Gaza humanitarian 'crisis' right now – 25th September 2025 – is indeed a telling example!). In other words, defining a problem as a 'crisis' often allows its exceptionalism to take precedence over its urgency. According to Andersen and Aubry, an effective approach to problematize the concept of 'crisis' is to examine the margins: what happens in border zones. The dynamics at the margins can help us investigate – from a detached and intrinsically hybrid

viewpoint – what we fundamentally mean by 'crisis' and the complexities hidden behind such a simplistic and far-from-innocent word.

We can safely affirm that the linguistic and conceptual dynamics in Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry are indeed examples of dynamics occurring at the margins. Migrant workers live lives that are peripheral to the mainstream rhythms and lifestyles, and their poetry is also labeled as a specific thus marginal genre. Yet, precisely because of this marginality, borrowing Andersen's reflection, Zheng Xiaoqiong's poetry enables us to look at contemporary 'crises' from a different and much potential perspective.

Significantly, the Chinese term for crisis, *weiji* 危机 (literally, "danger" + "opportunity"), is not recurrent in Zheng's poetry – indeed, it is entirely absent in the poems analyzed here. Zheng addresses and represents many of the dichotomies that dominant narratives often label as "critical," but never referring to them in such terms. The dichotomies of individual and society, human and artifact (or human and machinery), nature and artifice, time as natural rhythm and "time" as an abstract concept, are fundamental themes in her work. Yet, the relationship between the two terms of these pairs is never judged by the poet. It is never labeled as "critical" but rather portrayed in all its lively, peculiar and shifting complexity. The dominant discourse would subsume these pairs under labels, urgently reducing their complexities – e.g., we talk about "identity crisis," "environmental crisis," "social crisis," etc., creating word-monsters that are easily targetable as escape goats of our sloth. But reducing these relationships to mere "crises" is actually a way to avoid addressing their complexity (assuming the impossibility of such an undertaking) or to marginalize their scope (by asserting their "exceptional" nature).

Therefore, Zheng's poetry, which investigates these dichotomies without framing them as critical, demonstrates how such relationships are an integral part of our existence and that the distinction between "crisis" and "normality" is ultimately meaningless. If, for me – as a researcher – losing a finger at work would be considered critical or exceptional, for a migrant worker, it might be an entirely normal eventuality – a "screw falling to the ground" (Xu 2015), that, in the roar of the machine, nobody does actually hear. If, in the Polish city where I live, the eventuality of pollution-related health issues would probably seem 'critical' and cause a big stir, for a migrant worker, they are often considered 'normal.' In the marginality of the lives and poetry of Chinese migrant workers and former migrant workers like Zheng, the concept of 'crisis' hence reveals its full inconsistency.

Labeling a situation as 'critical' is thus of little use; it is more useful to observe and represent its dynamics, recognizing them as transcorporeally integrated into our existence, and thus accepting partaking in and responsibility for them. After all, the English word 'crisis' comes from the Greek *krísis*. And *krísis* does not mean 'danger opportunity,' nor 'exceptional catastrophe;' it means 'crucial choice,' or 'decision.'

Hence, Zheng's poetry may not confront us with any 'crisis,' yet it presents numerous 'choices' that call for our thoughtful reflection. One choice – yet Van Crevel (2025) and others have exhaustively addressed this – might be whether to read her poetry as mere 'migrant poetry' or rather as 'poetry' *tout court*. Another choice might be whether to continue conceiving our society according to a 'masculine individualist model,' i.e. as a line of lonely individuals racing down a progressive time, or to question whether this Anthropocene rather invites us to re-explore the horizontality of existence from a 'feminine relational model,' multi-entity perspective, and a sense of time being an all-human language – a time that is essential for human life yet, in reality, neither ex-ists nor flows in any fixed direction: a time that goes nowhere.

(10) All beauty will not live forever

All beauty will not live forever, it will grow old
or die, stubborn words will burn
and disperse, frivolous objects will eventually burst in
and populate the world, the foam will flood us
In the void between one bubble and another, I write poems
I write about lost beauty and eternal love

(Zheng 2022b: 94; draft translation by myself)

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A Conversation with Zhang Huijun: How Poetry and Sisterhood Resemantize and Dismantle Gender Stereotypes

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Zhang Huijun 张慧君 is a Chinese poet born in Xiangyang (Hubei province) in 1989. She obtained a Ph.D. in Medicine from Peking University and has been engaging in poetry writing and literary translation for many years now.

Her poems were published in several poetry magazines and anthologies, like *Selected Poems from China's Women Poets.* Volume 2023 (*Zhongguo nüshiren sixuan 2023 nianjuan* 中国女诗人诗 2023 年卷), edited by Beiyue Literature & Art Publishing House. As an award-winning poet, she received the Jiangnan Poetry Prize, the "New Poet" award within the Liu Bannong Poetry Prize, and others; her verses were also selected for the 38th edition of the well-known "Youth Poetry Conference", annually organized by the influential poetry magazine *Poetry* (*Shikan* 诗刊). In 2022, her translation of Jane Kenyon's collected poems was published as *The Boat of Quiet Hours: Jane Kenyon Complete Works* (Ningjing shiguang de xiao chuan: Jian Kenyong shi quanji 宁静时光的小船：简·肯庸诗全集) by Jiangsu People's Publishing House.

Zhang has long been delving into gender-related issues, not only in her writings but also through the promotion of feminist authors from around the world, as her interests in reading and translation suggest. Her poetry collection *Life Is Like a Pearl* (*Ming ru zhenzhu* 命如珍珠) was published by the Wuhan-based Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House in 2023. Her poetry moves between pure lyricism and a more narrative style, which at times reminds one of pure dramatic techniques, with the use of dialogues and the actual portrayal of different 'scenes', as if her 'characters' moved on the vast stage of the poetic word. Her pen and personal style depart from her embodied experience as a woman as a fundamental lens through which she observes a

reality that, in turn, is re-mediated and offered to readers. Zhang's lyrical imagery is deeply rooted in the apparently trivial elements of everyday life, devices that let her undergo a constant dialogue with the world itself, urging readers to rethink their position and role vis-à-vis others and the universe we dwell in.

In this conversation[1], we talk about topics like motherhood, creativity, history, and mostly the re-semanticization and dismantling of gender stereotypes through poetry and sisterhood, both intended as effective, liberating, practices. Such broad themes are beautifully and insightfully explored in her poetry collection *A Woman to Her Sisters* (*Yi ge nüren zhi ta de jiemei* 一个女人致她的姐妹) (2025), which the author was kind enough to share with the readers of *DIVE-IN*. Sit down, then (or find the position that suits you most – as Italo Calvino invites readers to do in his undying *If a Winter's Night a Traveler*) and embark with us on this journey of words and images, during which we will cross the boundaries of time and space to connect, or reconnect, to our (forgotten) sisters, and more.

Hi, Zhang Huijun! Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. I'm sure readers will enjoy this chat as well. When I first met you at a poetry event in Zhengzhou over a year ago, I was thrilled to meet such an outstanding poet. You also gave me a copy of one of your poetry collections, for which I was and still am deeply grateful. I later learned that you didn't graduate in literary studies, but in medicine. As a medical PhD and a (woman) poet, do you often face gender stereotypes?

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the American poet Adrienne Rich, whom I translated into Chinese, defined patriarchy as follows:

> Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female in everywhere subsumed under the male (Rich 1986: 57).[2]

[1] I am extremely grateful to Dr. Federico Picerni for inviting me to take part in this special issue of *DIVE-IN* and to Lorenza Vianello for her kind help with the final draft.

[2] The excerpts from the works of Adrienne Rich were provided to me in the English, original, version by Zhang Huijun, whom I want to thank for her work and accuracy.

I think that gender stereotypes originate from the patriarchal system's strict designation, regulation and definition of male and female roles. I wrote several poems for my daughter, which were mostly misunderstood, and reduced to an expression of the so-called traditional 'motherly love', but my verses are not at all a eulogy to such a thing. On the contrary, they are an attempt to express a more subversive and critical female consciousness, to voice the real and complex, personal, joyous and sorrowful experiences of being a woman.

I was born in 1989, when the one-child policy was still in effect; hence, I don't have any brothers, I'm an only daughter. My parents have never supported the old-fashioned 'favoring boys over girls' idea, and I was raised on love. They put all their hopes for a son and a daughter on me: they wished I had a bright professional future like a man, but also that I married and had kids like any other woman. The Chinese labor market needs women's participation too, that's why most families are formed by working couples, but women are expected to undertake both traditional tasks (doing housework and raising children) and work unflaggingly to make money. It doesn't matter what job you are interviewing for: if you are a woman, the sharp question you are always asked is "Can you balance work and family?" Currently, women who can do so better fulfill society's expectations (think how busy they are and how hard it must be!). While women who prioritize their career are given the derogative label of *nüqiang ren*,[3] and housewives are belittled because they are seen as women without economic independence, completely relying on men. In my opinion, the phenomenon of working women who appear to balance their job and family is also stereotypical, as it continues to reinforce the idea of 'sacrifice' and 'self-immolation' that patriarchy attaches to women, who are expected to devote themselves selflessly to their family, society, the economy, and the nation.

> I experienced firsthand the hardships most women face when I had my daughter. Caught in a whirlwind of emotions and swept up in the intense experience of childbearing – mostly marked by harsh feelings and pain – overwhelmed with confusion and doubts, I wrote a poem. Unlike the stereotypical image of a 'loving maternity', the kind of motherhood I was taking on was full of unwillingness and reluctance. I was upset even and hated myself for having gotten married and had a child in the first place, letting marriage and motherhood hinder my personal realization as a poet and writer. Isn't being single (unmarried, childless) the best living situation for an ambitious artist? Indeed, between mothering and writing, being a

[3] Literally 'strong women', the term often translates as 'career-oriented women'.

mother and being a poet, conflicts emerged. What I sacrificed is my reading and writing time, making it difficult to keep doing both. In the poem titled *Tenacious*(Zhang 2025: 21–22), I wrote:

> I too experienced pain and hardships, I used to breastfeed while
> holding a book in the other arm, my husband's cakehole and his macho attitude
> I've suffered through, between the delight of reading and being with my child
> a balanced agony, I talk about such trivial matters
> for sharing with you, in case you love reading, or dreaming,
> have writing aspirations, ambitions, don't get stuck in tradition,
> for when talent passes away, kindred souls part, and spring wanes.

There was no way I could find a balance, fulfilling the vocation of being a poet, and the role of a mother in the traditional sense at the same time. When writing "don't get stuck in tradition", I was wondering whether a woman poet should ever step into marriage. In the poem *Another Me* (Zhang 2025: 69-70), I adopted a more direct stance against such an institution:

> You gave your opinion,
> on this withered system.
> You, my navigator,
> with the intelligence and pride of a single woman.
> You could never treat
> innocent children as we do: "My
> sweet baby, my puppet,
> if it wasn't for you
> my life wouldn't be the same".
> From Jane Austen's kind of old maid
> you got the sweet flavor of happiness.

In *New Mothers*, the expectations for my daughter (the next generation) I voice are nothing like those my parents had for me – older generation Chinese people would urge their sons and daughters to marry and have children, not doing so was stigmatized, much like mental illness. I wrote: "Not / all girls marry", since marriage can be "a trap, a cage and a swamp" (Zhang 2025: 64–65). Through my poems, readers can grasp my complex attitude toward motherhood. To read my verses on mother-daughter relationship simply as a celebration of motherly love would be a biased interpretation, a complete misunderstanding of my work.

When translating Rich's poems and reading her biography, I realized that she had gone through everything I was experiencing. Her story proved the truth of mine. She once stepped into a traditional marriage, in which she was a full-time housewife and mom; she gave birth to three children respectively in 1955, 1957 and 1959. She published her second poetry collection, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*, in 1955, and the third one, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, in 1963. Between the two, she lived eight long years of silence, pregnancy, childbirth, parenting, and housekeeping, which made her feel angry and depressed. She went through exhaustion, deep identity conflict and delusion. Those were eight difficult years, during which she could only use the fragmented, or sometimes luxurious, time earned from hiring a domestic worker to write. I feel a strong connection with Adrienne Rich because, as women and poets, I found our similarities striking; our awareness as women was awakened by issues related to motherhood. The only difference is that she wrote great poems and authored *Of Woman Born*, a book about motherhood as a system, which soon became a feminist classic. I really suggest people read it to better understand motherhood as an experience and an institution. In the foreword of the book, she wrote:

> This book is rooted in my own past […] the geographies of marriage, spiritual divorce, and death, through which I entered the open ground of middle age […] But for a long time, I avoided this journey back into the years of pregnancy, child-bearing, and the dependent lives of my children, because it meant going back into pain and anger that I would have preferred to think of as long since resolved and put away. I could not begin to think of writing a book on motherhood until began to feel strong enough, and unambivalent enough in my love for my children, so that I could dare to return to a ground which seemed to me the most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous I had ever traveled, a ground hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings (Rich 1986: 15).

Motherhood, just like the 'second sex', is acquired, is not innate, it's a patriarchal 'institution', a social convention, embedded in the long-standing division of labor established among humans. That is why stereotypes in this regard are common. But I want to write is the truth, my personal, real, experience as a mother, a woman, a poet: my struggles, bliss and suffering.

You have published a new poetry collection, A Woman to Her Sisters. *As soon as I learnt about the title and saw the cover, I wanted to read it. Thanks to this*

interview, you were nice enough to let me sneak a peek at it, and I cannot wait to introduce it to the readers. This poetry collection could be understood as a hymn to sisterhood. Do you believe that sisterhood can be a revolutionizing force, one capable of challenging and perhaps even dismantling gender stereotypes?

My first poetry collection, *Life Is Like a Pearl*, was published in January 2023. Back then, I had not even started translating Adrienne Rich's poetry works. This year, I had the luck to be publishing a poetry collection titled *A Woman to Her Sisters* – which is also the title of a poem from the book. I owe the title to Rich's *Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff*. I translated Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) between my two poetry collections. Originally, my translations were to be published this year, but due to the influence of the instability in the US-China trade war, the publishing house is momentarily facing difficulties. The circulation of American books in our country is now limited – not only is sisterhood important, but brotherhood is too. This is only a glimpse of the destructive impact conflicts and disputes can have. I am afraid the blood, sweat and tears I put into these books will be wasted. I sincerely hope for a peaceful and mutually beneficial world, and I wish the verses by Rich I translated into Chinese will be published soon.

By reading and translating Rich's poems, my blurry and misty female consciousness became clearer and deeper. The shift from the more individualized experience depicted in *Life Is Like a Pearl*, to *A Woman to Her Sisters* represents – starting from the titles themselves – my total embracing of feminism and sisterhood. I agree with the point of view proposed by Adrienne Rich, according to which a woman's strength comes from the connection, unity, and affection with other women. In *The Dream of a Common Language*, Rich explores the possibility of women's strength and its source. Through a revised perspective, she re-defined the concept of 'strength'. Men's strength lies in control, oppression, violence and destruction, while women's strength lies in unity, healing, preservation, nurturing, loving and promoting life. The interference in the publication of my translations caused by the US-China trade war made me understand even better the value women and principles like sisterhood (and brotherhood) have. I dream of a world made of pacific coexistence, reciprocity, cultural exchanges and dialogue. A world which opposes male destructive power, that condemns war and any other form of violence.

In your new book, readers will encounter several well-known 'writing sisters': there's your "Dear Woolf" – as you call her in your verses – but also Elizabeth Bishop, Anna Akhmatova, Jane Austen, and, in a sense, Adrienne Rich, whom you have translated into Chinese. In one of your poems, you write: "We share a common past / one tradition". In this regard, I'd like to ask whether you think that, by actualizing Luce Irigaray's concept of 'female genealogy' through poetry and literature, women can effectively re-write their own history (or histories). How important do you think is this today?

When I wrote these lines: "We share a common past / one tradition", I was reading *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir. At that time, I hesitated because "one"[4], sounded like a simplification to me, an approximation: women from different countries, ethnicities, social strata, etc., obviously have different and diversified past and traditions. In the poem, I decided to omit such complexity to purposedly portray us women as a community sharing a "long history of being enslaved". The poet Jane Kenyon, whom I translated too, once affirmed that she would only have one 'master', Anna Akhmatova. She thus chose Akhmatova as her 'master' and translated her works. The same accounts for me: it is only when reading works by women writers that I feel empathy resonating deep within my heart. This communion of souls is based on the truth of women's experience and history. When it comes to writing, I intentionally look for and try to trace back my own precursors and models, attempting to include myself in such a 'female genealogy'. After experiencing the long road of women's movements and the efforts of generation after generation of women writers, our 21st century is filled with outstanding women authors: we have so many that you cannot count them on the fingers of one hand anymore. From ancient times, the firmament of women's literature has been dotted with a myriad of bright stars. It is beyond all doubt that women can become great writers, poets, and artists. Women have already proven – through countless literary works and poetry practices – that their writings can retrieve and bring back to the surface the voices of those women who had been silenced. By rewriting their history, women can get rid of gender stereotypes while exploring their own invaluable qualities. In this way, they can also build positive female principles, paving the way for an ideal future society, by overturning and replacing men's destructive strength with women's constructive (life-giving)

[4] Note by the interviewer: referring to tradition.

and creative world-changing force. It is crucial to do so, for women's pens have the power to re-interpret and revolutionize the world, making it a better place.

Speaking of gender stereotypes, although the situation has clearly improved overall, it is still far from ideal, and this seems to be true almost everywhere in the world. In one of your particularly insightful poems, you write about divorce employing a powerful metaphor: "The sealed cage was opened". This line reminded me of the short story Love Must Not Be Forgotten *(1979) by Zhang Jie, in which the renowned writer investigates themes such as love and marriage. The story ends with a powerful statement by the young female protagonist: "To live single is not such a fearful disaster. I believe it may be a sign of a step forward in culture, education and the quality of life".*[5] *In the poem that carries the same title of the collection –* A Woman to Her Sisters *– you portray the image of an 'independent' sister, walking by herself; while in From Generation to Generation, you mention a "loveless marriage". In your opinion, are single or divorced women in today's Mainland China still socially stigmatized?*

In the past, among previous generations for instance, single and divorced women were stigmatized indeed. I remember I also had a stereotyped idea of divorced women as pitiful and miserable. Compared to the past, society has definitely improved, it is much more inclusive, and women of my age do agentively choose whether to stay single or divorce. This is why I had to rely on imagination and fiction to write a poem such as *A Woman to Her Sisters*. I wrote it to revise gender stereotypes: a divorced woman can embrace "a happiness she has never had before", she is free, blessed.

In your latest book there's a poem titled His Gaze. *Where does the inspiration for such a poem come from? It reminded me of the interesting paradox pointed out by Lauren Elkin in her book* Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London *(Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2017). According to Elkin women who wander through the city are both the most visible and the most invisible. What do you think about this tension between being looked at and ignored or 'invisibilized'?*

[5] The English translation is by Gladys Yang, Love Must Not Be Forgotten (Beijing: Panda Books, 1986), 13.

The inspiration for *His Gaze* came from personal experience. Just like Madame Bovary who, because of Rodolphe Boulanger's romantic sweet-talk, believed that she was the most beautiful one, women too may fall for similar subtle traps. That is, women feeling better about themselves due to men's validation, courtship, and admiring gaze. Who wouldn't want to be a poet's muse, the beauty sang of? Where's the harm in this? As soon as the admiring gaze becomes one of invalidation and judgment, the 'praise' based on 'being looked at' from the outside, transforms into 'discredit', and the only thing left in the other person's gaze is 'neglect'. Being looked at and being neglected are two faces of the same coin. It would be better if women built a strong and healthy subjectivity by themselves.

In your collection there's a poem titled A Lyric Poem to My Daughter (Zhang 2025: 118-119)*, in which you write: "Her father is a handsome brilliant man, her mother / is a beautiful woman". Is this linked to a hard-to-die gender stereotype? Do you think that the promotion of a more traditional kind of motherhood is currently taking place? May a mother speaking to her daughter through the voice of poetry, with her own language, be understood as a way to break related gender stereotypes?*

This poem reads:

> To me,
> you are a miracle, but what do people say about you by looking at you?
> They assume, «Her father is a handsome brilliant man, her mother
> is a beautiful woman. True love
> must have brought her to this world».
> This applies to happy people, and
> unhappy ones too.

There is a bitter irony hidden in these lines. The subtext is that this little girl's father is not a "brilliant handsome man", and that her mother isn't "beautiful" at all; there was no trace of "true love" there, she was born in a "loveless marriage". But toddlers are as beautiful as pixies, and just by looking at this little girl, without having seen her parents, one may conclude that "her father is a handsome brilliant man, her mother / is a beautiful woman". These are just phantoms, fantasies of happiness shaped by gender stereotypes. A more traditional notion of 'motherhood' is currently being promoted, what I seek to

do with my poetry is precisely dismantling these stereotypes, fiercely voicing the truth about being a woman and a mother.

There are some old, unfortunately popular, refrains like "A woman without talent is a woman of virtue", or "Poetry is not for women". One verse from your Madame Bovary Is Me *reads: "I owe it to poetry, like the joy / of pointing a star to a child". May we sustain that poetry does have a social, affective, and emancipatory value?*

Absolutely. For me, a poet is someone who challenges all sorts of binding forces and restrictions by practicing an essentially free activity – poetry writing – through which the self is liberated and reborn. Poetry as a practice guides my personal growth: awakening women's consciousness, breaking the shackles of the mind, renovating ideas… My poetry moves from my concrete experience as a woman, seeks equality between the sexes and criticise inequality and discrimination, also going beyond gender boundaries by reflecting on humans' strives to overcome passivity, thus carrying an underlying narrative of deep, self-liberation.

In your opinion, have women poets from China finally obtained a "room of one's own", or "a writing desk", to refrain one of your poems?

On a metaphorical level, to have a room of one's own, or a writing desk at least, means that every woman poet should find and have a lifestyle that suits her. Such a lifestyle should allow us to live off our writing, to sustain the flourishing of our creativity and reach the peak of our art. This depends on our life choices and free actions. Most women poets in China have already obtained this.

Your new poetry collection is addressed to 'sisters', but do you hope it reaches male readers too? What would you like them to see in it or learn from it?

I hope that men will read this poetry collection too. It is in this sense that I am a feminist poet: from an outcast, in the darkness of ignorance, aphasic, limited, in great difficulty and weak, I became an awakened, reborn, liberated, empowered, charming person free and able to voice herself. The positive transformation and the hard struggle of those who are disadvantaged and passivized to become active empowered individuals is universal. We share the same destiny of the oppressed ones, regardless of their gender. I wish for a writing that goes beyond gender, even if when I set down on paper I often

resolve to women's experiences, I always keep this in mind as a political issue, something that has to do with freedom, opposing to systems, structures, and so on.

Admission[6]

I can't wake the one sleeping next to me up, to say:
"Look at this moonlight, how beautiful!"
no two kindred poets,
in the room. Outside the window,
almost round, the moon shines bright.
It announces beauty, nobility, calm,
unlike mere grass, unlike yellow glazed roof tiles,
not weak, not vulnerable or erratic like I am.
A bit of darkness was dispelled.

[6] The poem Chengren 承认 (Admission) comes from Zhang Huijun's new poetry collection, *A Woman to Her Sisters* (2025:80). Like the other poems reported here, it was translated by me. I am grateful to Zhang Huijun for generously letting me share her verses with the readers.

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