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Čínsky znak na obálke znamenajúci ‘východ’, pochádzajúci od Liu Xie 劉澥 (1781–1840), bol vyrytý do nefritu podľa vzoru zo začiatku nášho letopočtu. · The Chinese character with the meaning ‘east’ employed on the cover is cut as a seal by Liu Xie, on the basis of models from the beginning of our era.

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Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave
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This volume is dedicated to Marian Gálik (1933–2024), an excellent scholar and founder of Slovak Sinology.

The Linguistic Aspect of the Kumamoto Dialect in Selected Contemporary Manga

Jana ŠVÁBOVÁ

Abstract Role language of different social groups based on gender, character role, or occupation has been analyzed from various perspectives, both in terms of the linguistic aspect of role language and the roles themselves. However, little attention has been given to the role of dialects, particularly concerning the role of dialect speakers within a story. In this study, we analyzed 4,162 dialect occurrences (81 tokens) across five manga series published in the twenty-first century. Despite the relatively high number of tokens, they are mostly limited to specific morphemes or function words that have a high frequency of occurrence. The typical representation of the Kumamoto dialect in manga includes a short form of negation (-n), a verb modifier (-toru), a direct object particle (ba), the adjective "good" (yoka), and the causal conjunction (ken). With this simplification, aimed at functionality, the dialect deviates from the authentic version and leans toward the "pseudo" Kumamoto dialect, which remains comprehensible to the average reader while still preserving the image of the region.

Keywords Japanese linguistics, Kumamoto dialect, manga, role language (*yakuwarigo* 役割語)

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, there has been an increase in the number of studies that deal with fictional languages, focusing on how they are used and what messages authors aim to convey to readers or viewers. In Japan, the first person who drew attention to this issue was Kinsui Satoshi. His theory of "role language", *yakuwarigo* 役割語, shed new light on Japanese fiction and influenced many other

researchers. Kinsui (2003, 205) defines role language as "a set of spoken language features (such as vocabulary, grammar and phonetic characteristics) that can be psychologically associated with a particular character type. (Character attributes include age, gender, occupation, social status, appearance, and personality)." Role language is built upon strong stereotypes based on attributes that can be both positive or negative (Kinsui 2017, 23). For example, the linguistic portrayal of doctors in Japan often includes certain grammatical features of Western Japanese dialects and is associated with wisdom and old age (Kinsui 2017, 4 and 7). Thus, when a recipient hears an elderly character speaking this way, they immediately recognize the character as a doctor, and vice versa.

Although this idea may seem innovative, a great deal of research has been done on similar topics in other languages. Lippi-Green (1997; Lippi-Green and Donati 2012), for example, proved that there is a link between accents and dialects and fictional characters, which can lead to an unequal perception of socially subordinate languages. Hill (1993; 1998; 2005) describes this link between scripted speech and stereotypes in Spanish spoken in the southwestern USA. Likewise, Ronkin and Karn (2002) report about language stereotypes of Ebonics, which are used as mockery on certain websites and do not follow the linguistic features of real Ebonics, which also reinforces anti-Ebonics ideologies. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) explore language and gender and explain how social norms are constructed through naturalization, with the dominant ideology being convincing people that this system is natural (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 43). "Standard" language is consequently positively presented by the media, while other varieties connotate with stereotypes that may devalue their real-life users. While much of this research primarily focuses on stereotypes based on gender or race, or alternatively racism, other social or regional groups are often overlooked.

Role language, as defined by Kinsui, is mainly examined in terms of age or gender, or as sociolects of specific groups (e.g., Unser-Schutz 2015; Dahlberg-Dodd 2018; Hiramoto 2010, and others). It often deals with the use of personal pronouns, ending particles, and interjections (Kinsui 2003, 66). But how does role language work with dialects? Kinsui does not describe the linguistic aspects of dialects, since every dialect is different. However, he notes that they are used by elderly people in rural areas who live simple lives. Kinsui (2017, 34-35) also states

that the dialects depicted are frequently not "real" but rather mixed or fabricated, blending several dialects from a similar area just to create a stereotyped image. The users of some dialects (such as Tohoku) are stereotyped as simple, unsophisticated people, which is why they are used even in translations to depict slaves or uneducated people (Inoue 2003; Hiramoto 2009; Camilleri 2022). Other dialects gained area-unrelated stereotypes because of the popularity of certain movie series, for example, the Hiroshima dialect is used for truck drivers due to the popular movie series Torakku Yarō ("Trucker Buddy") (Hiramoto 2010, 246).

Stereotypes surrounding the Kyūshū dialect, which includes Kumamoto dialect, have two different influences. First, much like the Tohoku dialects, they were stigmatized by the language policy (Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith 2016, 40-41). Speakers from rural areas are, on the other hand, viewed as friendly, warm, and lovable, according to SturtzSreetharan (quoted in Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith 2016, 72), and provide certain positive stereotypes. Tanaka (2011) describes the Kyūshū dialect speakers as manly, emotional, tough, friendly and simple.

Role language has two key aspects: linguistic and character typology. The linguistic typology examines how a character's role is represented through language and which linguistic phenomena are used. The character typology focuses on the characters themselves: who speaks in this manner, their role in the story, and their defining characteristics. Previous research has generally combined these two aspects, but with greater emphasis on the character's role. This means that the research customarily scrutinized each relevant character and their role in the story, and then analyzed their language use individually (for example, Hiramoto 2013). Kinsui (2014) identifies common phenomena in role language within these categories, providing examples of dialectal expressions. However, these examples are spread across multiple generic categories such as the Kyūshū dialect or Ōsaka dialect, while some are labeled simply as "rural language" (*inaka kotoba* 田舎ことば).

We focus on the Kumamoto dialect because it is widely spoken in everyday life in Kumamoto prefecture, yet it is not as well-known as the Hakata dialect from Fukuoka prefecture, which is typically used to represent Kyūshū dialects. In this study, we set aside the character typology aspect[1] and concentrate solely on how the Kumamoto dialect is portrayed in contemporary manga. This approach

1 I researched this aspect in a previous paper (Sedlackova 2023).

led me to the following questions: What are the most typical dialectal phenomena when considering the Kumamoto dialect as a role language in manga? Is the dialect accurately represented or is it used simply to create a particular image? Based on previous research, it appears that the Kumamoto dialect is simplified, mixed with other dialects, and plays a marginal role in the story itself.

1 *Methodology*

We analyzed five selected manga comics where the Kumamoto dialect appears, all of which were or are being published in this century. These works, listed by the year their first volume was published, are as follows: Keroro Gunsō [Sg. Keroro] (1999), Pyū to Fuku! Jaguar [Blow! Jaguar] (2000); Hōkago teibō nisshi [Diary of Our Days at the Breakwater] (2017); Kyō doko san iku to? [Where are You Going Today?] (2018), and Koharu Haru (2020). Hereafter, we will refer to these works by their abbreviations: KG, PTFJ, HTN, KDSIT, and KH. For all but the PTFJ, the analysis was conducted using the first three volumes. In the case of PTFJ, only the twelfth volume was analyzed, since it is the only one featuring the analyzed dialect.

In the table below, we provide a summary of the relevant information on these works, as well as the number of instances where the Kumamoto dialect is used, the total number of dialectal phenomena detected, and the number of individual phenomena that were further analyzed.

Table 1
List of analyzed manga

Manga	Author	Publication of the first volume	Speeches	Dialectal phenomena	Individual dialectal phenomena
KG	Yoshizaki Mine	1999	52	81	25

PTFJ	Usuta Kyōsuke	2000	26	54	26
HTN	Kosaka Yasuyuki	2017	374	523	35
KDSIT	Kanakogi Tomori	2018	447	701	41
KH	Arai Harumaki	2020	1544	2803	58

The degree of dialect representation varies over time. The overall results could be skewed because of the large representation of KH; therefore, I analyzed each comic separately. Additionally, the findings for PTFJ, which was analyzed based on only one volume, might not be representative of the entire series. However, looking at the number of dialectal phenomena, the count for PTFJ is very similar to that of KG, for which three volumes were analyzed.

From the selected manga, a corpus of dialectal phenomena was created. First, all speeches that contained at least one occurrence in the Kumamoto dialect were extracted. The utterances were then segmented, transformed into concordances, and tagged.

Within the tags, we track the way of writing, i.e., the writing system used[2] (hiragana HIR, katakana KAT, KANJI characters). This allows us to focus on the layer of the language to which the specificity belongs. The phenomena are divided into three categories, namely, phonological phenomena (PHON), morphological phenomena (MORPH) and lexical phenomena (LEX). Each category is further divided into smaller subgroups, as listed in Table 2. In the PHON category, we include any word that is similar to standard Japanese (hereafter SJ), but has a slightly different pronunciation; for example, *kon* (this), instead of *kono*. The MORPH category consists of morphemes, modifiers, or word forms that alter the grammatical structure of a sentence; for example, *kōta* (past tense of buy), SJ is *katta*. The LEX category encompasses words that are different but have the same meaning as in SJ; for example, *sekarashika* (annoying), which is expressed as *urusai*

2 The Japanese language uses three different writing systems. Hiragana and katakana are syllabic alphabets, while Kanji are domesticated Chinese characters. For Chinese characters see Ye and Benická 2022; Kandráč 2023.

in SJ. This category also includes words that exist in SJ but have different meanings or usages in the dialect; for example, the verb *oru* (to be) is used in formal or polite contexts in SJ, whereas it is used more commonly in the dialect.

Table 2
List of subgroups

PHON	MORPH	LEX
Assimilation	Adjective ending	Nouns
Diphthong pronunciation	Conjunction of semi-consonantal verbs in the past tense and *-te* forms	Adjectives
Palatalization	Form of imperative	Pronouns
Reduction	Form of negation	Verbs
Vowel changes	Potential	Adverbs
Pronunciation otherwise different from SJ	Prefix	Conjunctions
	Verb modifiers	Particles
	Volitional modality	Phrases and Idioms

These tags help to understand the structure of the use of dialectal phenomena and their intelligibility. Finally, I determined the regional affiliation of each phenomenon, i.e., the region in which it is typical.

This paper is divided into two parts: layers of the language and regionality. In the first part, we focus on the linguistic phenomena which occurred in the corpus and their significance within the overall analysis. The second part covers

regionality of the utterances, exploring which regions of Japan they are associated with and if they are common in the Kumamoto prefecture.

2 *Layers of the Language*

Of the 4,162 dialectical phenomena analyzed, morphological phenomena constituted the largest proportion at 48%, followed by lexical phenomena at 43%, while phonological phenomena were the least frequent, accounting for only 9%. However, the types of phenomena occurred in varying proportions. Lexemes represented the largest proportion at 77.7%, while morphological phenomena made up only 15%, and phonological phenomena comprised the remainder. Thus, morphological features were the most frequent in absolute terms, with a relatively limited number of phenomena, whereas lexemes showed a greater variability.

In the individual comics, the representations of the different linguistic layers were quite similar. Phonological phenomena formed the smallest group, whereas lexical and morphological phenomena had similar proportions. As for the individual phenomena, the largest category is the lexemes. In absolute numbers, KH has significantly more distinct lexemes and morphemes than KG or PTFJ. This may indicate that the variety in KH is influenced by the setting of the story and basic plot. KH is set in the capital of the prefecture, where most characters speak the dialect. In contrast, KG is set in Tokyo and the dialect is limited to frog-like aliens in specific situations.

As mentioned above, the number of types of dialectal phenomena is relatively limited. On the phonological side, we found only six: reduction, assimilation, diphthong pronunciation, palatalization, speech sound changes, and pronunciation otherwise different from SJ. Reduction alone accounted for 90% of all the phonological phenomena, while the remaining categories were marginal.

Several morphological phenomena were observed. These include:

1) The adjective ending *-ka* (*takaka* meaning "high" or "expensive"—the standard form *takai*),

2) Imperative forms (*nasse*—the standard form *nasai*),

3) Inflection of semi-consonant verbs in the past tense (*iuta* meaning "say"—the standard form *itta*),

4) Negation forms (e.g. *kuren,* the standard form *kurenai*),

5) Potentials (situational *-yuru*, ability *-ruru*—the standard version of both is *-(C)eru*),

6) Prefix *utsu-* (emphasis),

7) Verb modifiers (politeness *-su, nasu, nasaru*; verbal aspect *yoru*, *toru*),

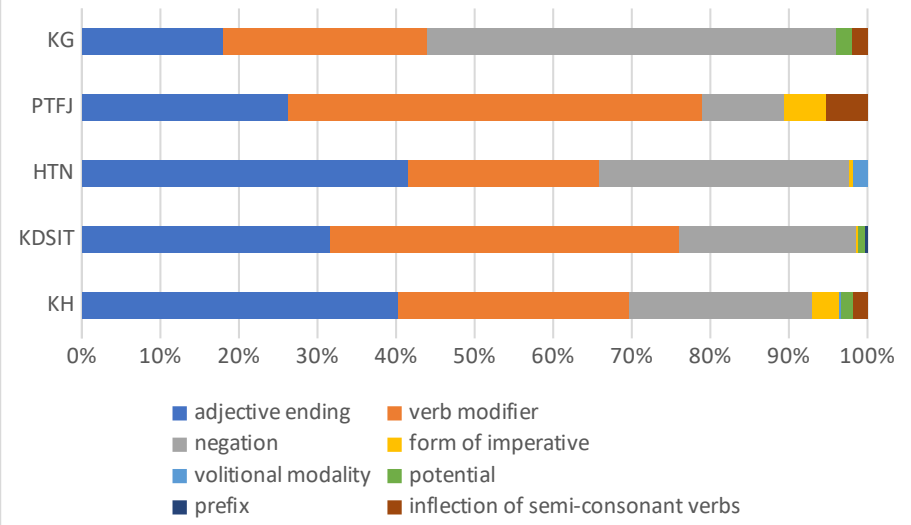
8) Volitional modality (*-nba*—the standard form *nakereba*).

The most frequently occurring phenomena in the utterances were adjective endings (38.1%), verbal modifiers *yoru* and *toru* (29.4%), and negation (24.7%). Thus, out of all the morphological phenomena, those that fall into one of the three categories mentioned above account for 92.2%, whereas the remaining phenomena are marginal.

The standard dialectal use of the *-ka* ending for adjectives is typical for *i*-adjectives. This feature stems from the dialect's historically different development compared to SJ, but in contemporary usage it is also used with adjectival nouns (Akiyama and Yoshioka 1991, 186-187). In the corpus analyzed, the *-ka* ending is used for both types of adjectives (*i*-adjectives and adjectival nouns) and also for some grammatical phenomena, formally *i*-adjectives, such as negation *naka* (standard *nai*) or desiderative *taka* (standard *tai*). Most adjectives occurred in a minority of cases. The most frequent occurrences were *yoka* (good, standard *ii*), and the negative *naka* (standard *nai*).

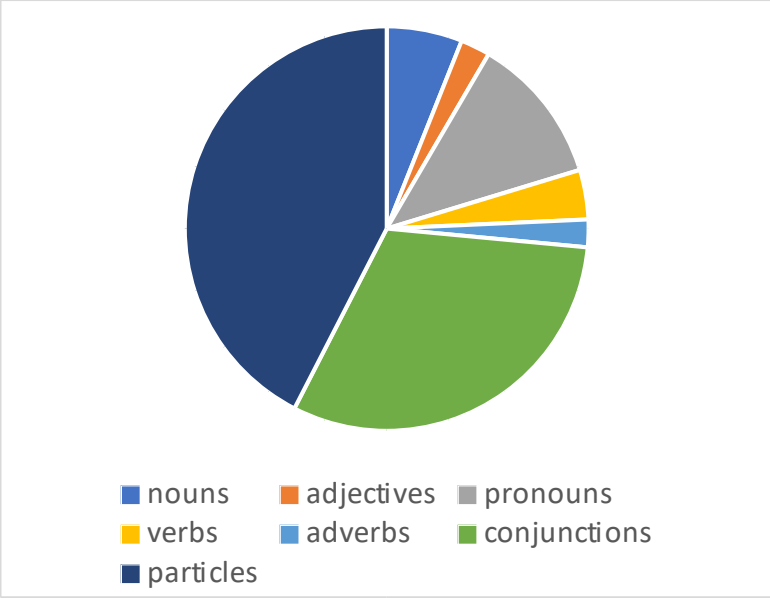
In most Western dialects, verb modifiers like *yoru* (imperfect) and *toru* (perfect) are frequently used to indicate verbal aspect. Although both modifiers are very specific to these dialects in general (Oki 2016, 175-176), *toru* emerged as the most frequently used in the corpus I analyzed, accounting for more than 75% of the verb modifiers. It is therefore apparent that there is a preference for one over the other modifier in the selected works.

The situation is very similar across the individual comics. While categories with the highest value for these works differ—negation for KG, verb modifiers for PTFJ and KDSIT, and adjective endings for HTN and KH—it is still true that together they account for over 90% of all dialectal morphological phenomena used in manga.



Graph 1
Morphological subgroups of individual comics.

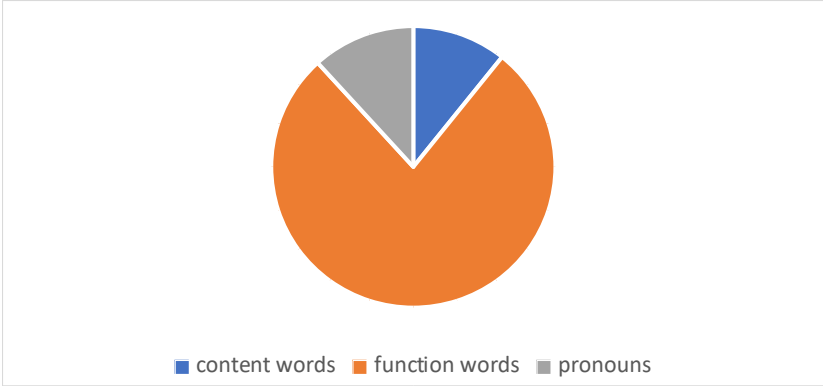
As mentioned above, lexical phenomena exhibit greater diversity compared to other groups, but the use of these individual phenomena is relatively limited. I have categorized these phenomena based on parts of speech, including nouns and auxiliary nouns, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, conjunctions, particles, as well as idioms and phrases. No other parts of speech were detected.



Graph 2
Parts of speech in the analyzed corpus.

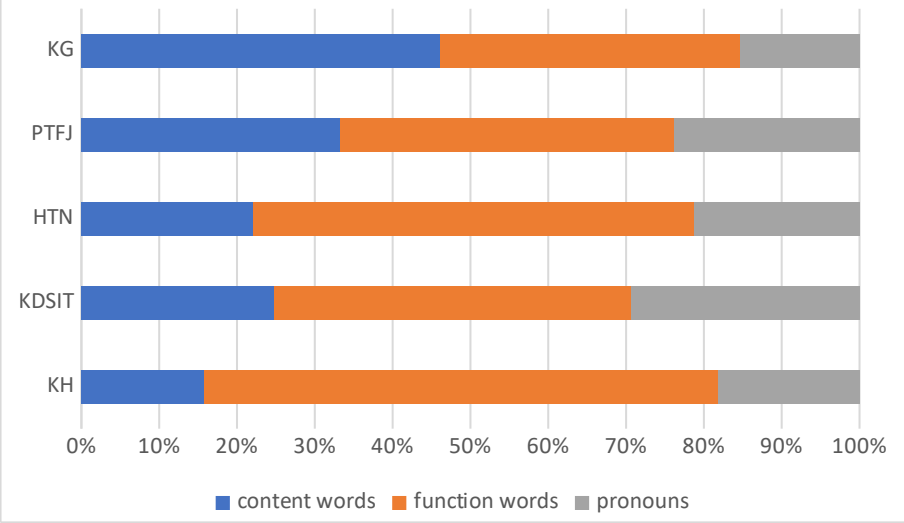
As shown in Graph 2, particles constitute the largest category, accounting for 42% of the lexical phenomena. The most prominent of these is the direct object particle *ba* (standard *o*), which comprises nearly half of all particles in the corpus. Sentence-ending particles such as *bai, tai* (standard *yo*) and *to* (standard *ka*) are also notable. Conjunctions make up 31% of the lexemes in the analyzed corpus. This may be surprising given that only two are used: the causative conjunction *ken* (standard *kara*) and the oppositional conjunction *batten* (standard *shikashi*).

The lexemes can be divided into content words and function words. Content words include nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs, but I have also included phrases and idioms. Function words include auxiliary nouns, conjunctions and particles. Pronouns form a separate group because they could be classified under both content and function words.



Graph 3
The number of function words versus content words.

Graph 3 shows that function words are proportionally more represented than content words, which can lead to a better comprehension of the text. This is because the content words are in SJ and thus more familiar to the recipient, while the function words in the dialect provide an impression of something different. The individual works show a varied distribution, with the highest number of function words in KH and lowest in KG. In the latter content words occurred more frequently. This is surprising because the dialect occurrence was small in KG. It is possible that when the use of dialect is limited, there may be a greater tendency to use typical dialectal phenomena, including content words, to evoke a distinct regional identity, whereas this may not as necessary for works where dialect occurs regularly. However, due to the limited size of the sample, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed or refuted.



Graph 4
Function words and content words in the individual comics.

Some phenomena are shared and fairly common across all the analyzed volumes. The following table lists the five most frequent phenomena along with their percentage representation in the entire corpus.

Table 3
Most frequent phenomena in the corpus

Phenomena	Occurrence in percentages
N[3]	11.4
Toru	11.1
Ken	8.2

3 As a short form of negation.

Ba	7.4
Yoka	7

These five phenomena alone account for 45.1% of the entire corpus. Thus, there is nearly half the chance that any instance of Kumamoto dialect in the speech will feature one of these phenomena at least once. Of course, there is still some variability in the utterances, as both short negatives and the verb modifier *toru* can bind to different verbs.

Since manga is a written medium, we also looked at the written form of the dialect, i.e., which writing system is most used to record it. The vast majority of words (90%) are written exclusively in hiragana. This aligns with the typical use of hiragana for writing native and function words (Kageyama and Saito 2016, 13). About 8.6% are written in combinations of kanji and hiragana, for example, 大きか [*ōkika*] (large)—standard 大きい [okii]. In this combination, the meaning is preserved in kanji while dialectal morphemes are written in hiragana. Only a small number of words are written in katakana, some of which are content words (e.g., オッサン [*ossan*] (uncle), but mainly those words that are emphasized in a given context (auxiliary nouns, etc.). In KH, there is a tendency to combine dialect with kanji by adding the reading in the Kumamoto dialect as furigana,[4] e.g., 歩(きろ)く [*kiroku*], instead of the common reading *aruku*. This approach facilitates understanding of the content while preserving the dialect in a more nuanced form.

3 *Regionality*

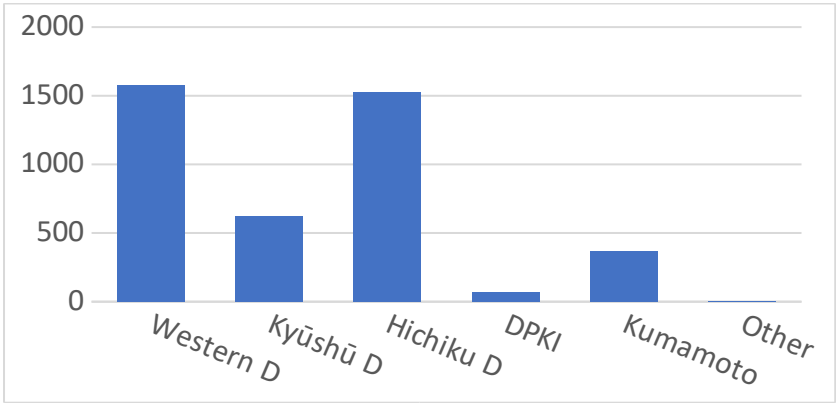
Japanese dialects are traditionally divided into two large groups: western and eastern dialects, which are further divided into smaller subgroups, depending on their geographical location and similarity to neighboring dialects. The Kumamoto dialect falls under the western dialects, specifically the Kyūshū dialects of the Hichiku area. Similar dialects are those in Nagasaki, Saga, and Fukuoka prefectures, although some influence on the Kumamoto dialect is also evident from the southern part of Kyūshū, i.e., Kagoshima and Miyazaki (Akiyama and Yoshioka 1991, 162-164). Therefore, some phenomena that are typical of the

4 Reading of Chinese characters written in smaller font above or next to the character.

Kumamoto area may also be found in other regions of Japan. This raises the question of whether the phenomena used in the manga are distinctively Kumamoto, or whether are they shared across multiple dialects?

We identified nearly all of the phenomena analyzed as expressions used in the Kumamoto dialect. Those that were not typical of Kumamoto (71) were mostly typical of other areas in Kyūshū. This suggests that although the phenomenon in question may not be used universally in Kumamoto, it may occur sporadically in certain areas. Overall, there has been no evidence of influence from completely different dialects and the speech in question is therefore authentic to some extent. However, what is particularly interesting is examining the regional affiliation of each individual phenomenon.

We have divided the regions into six groups. These are 1) western dialects (or part of them), 2) Kyūshū dialects, 3) Hichiku dialects, 4) dialects from a certain part of Kyūshū Island (DPKI), 5) Kumamoto dialect, and 6) others. The first three groups are fairly clearly delineated within the study of dialects. The fourth group includes phenomena that occur in certain parts of Kyūshū but are not typical for Kumamoto. For example, the conjunction *yaken* (because) is typical for the Hakata dialect (Shuyukan Alumni Association 2011).



Graph 5
Regionality of the phenomena analyzed.

Most phenomena are shared across either all or parts of the western dialects. These include, for example, the short form of negative (*-n*) or causative conjunction *ken*, which is also typical of Chūgoku and Shikoku regions (Deutsch 2023). Typical Hichiku area phenomena, which include widespread adjective endings, a volitional modality, and some lexemes, are lightly less represented ("Hichiku Hōgen 肥筑方言 [Hichiku Dialects]" 2016). 15% of the phenomena are consequently shared across Kyūshū or are typical in some parts of Kyūshū. These are mostly phonological reductions, the use of some particles, and politeness verb modifiers ("Kyūshū Hōgen 九州方言 [Kyūshū Dialects]," n.d.). We identified 9% of the phenomena as being unique to the Kumamoto dialect (Nakagawa 2003), often involving specific content words or diphthong pronunciations. We include here the adverbial pronouns which may occur in other domains, but in those cases, they also have the forms *kogen* / *kogan*, etc., so the variant analyzed (*kogyan*, *sogyan*, *agyan*, *dogyan*— corresponding to the standard forms *konna, sonna, anna, donna*) is more typical of Kumamoto.

Certain expressions are very specific to the prefecture, and even an average tourist may easily come across them while visiting the prefecture. These include the nouns *atozeki* (close the door behind you) and *sashiyori* (for now). Yet even these expressions are rare in the analyzed corpus, the former appearing only once in the entire corpus and the latter five times.

4 *Discussion*

The aim of this paper was to recognize the most frequent phenomena of the Kumamoto dialect in selected manga and to discover any patterns in their usage.

When it comes to the linguistic aspects of role language, Kinsui (2003) and others mostly focus on personal pronouns, verbs or verb forms, copula, and ending particles. These categories work perfectly when analyzing gendered or age-based language, such as the different forms of the personal pronoun "I"—*atashi* (casual feminine), *ore* (rough masculine), *boku* (casual masculine), and *washi* (elderly) (Hiramoto 2013, 56). Therefore, the assumption was made that these four categories would also be applicable in dialect speech.

In the analyzed corpus, all four categories are represented; however, copula and personal pronouns are less prominent. This is because of the nature of the analyzed sample, since all the examined words needed to be in dialect, while most of the characters used common personal pronouns or forms of copula typical of colloquial or standard Japanese. Sentence-ending particles form 9% of the corpus, but they are nearly evenly represented by three distinct particles. Consequently, although noticeable, even these particles are not the most typical dialect utterances. This implies that dialect, in terms of role language, is expressed through various aspects.

Specific phonological features is not significantly utilized, so focusing on lexemes and morphemes, the average dialect utterances are reduced to verb forms (mostly negation and verb modifiers of aspect), adjective forms (ending -ka), particles (both case particles and sentence-ending particles), and conjunctions. This may be surprising, as categories like case particles or conjunctions are not usually considered as forms of role language. I assume that these phenomena are peculiar of the Kumamoto dialect, so it is only natural to use these in a fictional version, even if they do not correspond with other role languages.

Secondly, Kinsui (2003) states that dialect used as *yakuwarigo* is rather a "pseudo" dialect, which combines phenomena from different rural areas only to create an image of that area. Similarly, Hiramoto (2009, 259) describes the Tohoku dialect in the translation of *Gone with the Wind* as "a linguistic variety that evokes something like a stereotypically stigmatized Japanese regional dialect, T[ohoku]B[en], while failing to actually be even this inferior dialect." What kind of dialect is then used when it comes to the Kumamoto region?

Regarding the analyzed phenomena, most are not specific to the Kumamoto area only. One-third are shared throughout western Japan, while another third is used in the northern and western part of Kyūshū (Hichiku dialect area). This may lead to the impression that even in the analyzed comics, the dialect only evokes a generalized image. Based on various websites and dictionaries, however, nearly all of the utterances are indeed used in the Kumamoto Prefecture and are listed as the phenomenon of this region's dialect. The most common expressions are often among the first introduced when you start learning this dialect (e.g., Kumamoto kenritsu daigaku nihongo kyōiku kenkyūshitsu 2009). Therefore, although the

dialect utterances are not specific only to the selected region, this does not entirely conform to the earlier described theory of rural language. Instead, the dialect used strives to remain true to its regional character to the necessary extent.

Considering all the findings, the relatively limited usage of predominantly function words, the inclusion of phenomena from a wider area than just Kumamoto Prefecture, and prevalent use of the syllabic alphabet *hiragana*, suggest that the Kumamoto dialect employed in the selected manga helps create an image of the analyzed region without obstructing the basic understanding of the story. This makes the text comprehensible even without an in-depth knowledge of the dialect itself.

5 *Conclusions*

In this paper, we focus on the linguistic aspects of the Kumamoto dialect used in five different contemporary manga comics. Although many linguistic aspects of roles in popular culture have been described, little attention has been paid to the concrete linguistic aspects of the dialect speakers in these works. There have been general theories considering all dialects throughout Japan, but each region is represented differently, as is its local dialect.

We had two research questions. Firstly, what are the most typical dialectal phenomena used in these manga? We analyzed five manga series published between 1999 and 2020, and found 4,162 utterances in the Kumamoto dialect. 75% of these utterances could be categorized into 5 groups: 1) negation, 2) verb modifiers of aspect, 3) ending of adjectives, 4) case- and sentence-ending particles, and 5) conjunctions. Of these, negation, the verb modifier *-toru*, the case particle *ba*, the adjective *yoka,* and the conjunction *ken* are the most widely used. In general, this dialect is mostly represented by grammatical morphemes or function words and is simplified to some extent due to the lack of content words.

Secondly, we investigated whether these phenomena are standard in Kumamoto prefecture. Almost all of the analyzed expressions are assigned to the local dialect of Kumamoto, indicating that the authors did not deviate much from the actual dialect and also did not combine different dialects from other regions of Japan. At the same time, the majority of these expressions are not exclusive to Kumamoto but are also found in Kyūshū or western Japan. This finding suggests

that the text remains comprehensible to general readers, and the role of dialect in contemporary manga, regardless of the speaker's role in the story, appears to be only creating a regional atmosphere without overwhelming the readers with unfamiliar words or complex sentences.

These findings add substantially to our understanding of the role language of the Kumamoto dialect as used by manga characters—a topic previously unexplored. Future studies should further investigate other regional dialects of Japan and their role in popular culture. While the study's scope is limited by sample size and uneven representation across works, we believe it is the first step toward redefining the role of regional dialects in contemporary Japanese pop culture.

Abbreviations

KG Keroro Gunsō ケロロ軍曹 [Sgt. Keroro]. Yoshizaki Mine (1999a, 1999b, 1999c).

PTFJ Pyū to fuku! Jaguar ピュウと吹く！ジャガー [Blow! Jaguar]. Usuta Kyōsuke (2007).

HTN Hōkago teibō nisshi 放課後ていぼう日誌 [Diary of our days at the breakwater]. Kosaka Yasuyuki (2017, 2018a, 2018b).

KDSIT Kyō doko san iku to? 今日どこさん行くと？ [Where are we going today?]. Kanakogi Tomori (2018, 2019, 2020).

KH Koharu Haru こはる はる [Spring of Koharu]. Arai Harumaki (2020, 2021a, 2021b).

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Cross-Cultural Understanding and Acceptance of Islam on Issues Related to the Construction of Islamic Cemeteries in Japan

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Abstract This paper aims to examine how non-Muslim Japanese people come to know, understand and accept Islam, by analyzing their reactions to the construction of Islamic cemeteries in Japan and the various problems that were encountered. The main issues with building an Islamic cemetery arise from the fact that while cremation is a common practice in modern Japan, according to Islam, the deceased should be buried in the ground. Furthermore, Islam remains relatively unfamiliar to most Japanese, and many residents are confused and anxious about the proximity of the proposed cemeteries to their homes. This paper focuses on two cases where plans for Islamic cemeteries led to conflicts with residents, as well as the case of the first Islamic cemetery constructed in Japan. The few Islamic cemeteries that have been constructed in Japan so far were built adjacent to cemeteries of more familiar religions, such as Buddhism, and have relied on Japanese intermediaries who were well-known to the people living in the region. These people do not necessarily know, understand or accept Islam, and it can be said that the construction of the Islamic cemetery was only made possible through the support of a Japanese person who was well-known to them.

Keywords Islam in Japan, Japanese Muslims, Islamic cemetery, religion, diversity

Introduction

In Japanese society, where Islam is a foreign religion, creating an Islamic environment, such as the construction of a masjid (mosque), can prove to be a major challenge for Muslims (Komura 2019, 66-69). Successfully creating an Islamic environment requires not only setting up discussion forums with people living in the same area before construction, but also enhancing their

understanding of the religion of Islam (Komura 2019, 69). One of the solutions is the involvement of Japanese Muslim intermediaries who understand both the Japanese mindset and the religious ideas of Islam. These intermediaries can help communicate how Muslims are willing to participate in community activities alongside non-Muslims (Komura 2019, 69).

In many cases, the construction of Islamic cemeteries has caused conflicts with residents in the areas where the cemeteries were planned to be constructed. This is because Islamic teachings prescribe burial in the ground, whereas in modern Japan cremation is the mainstream practice. Also, for many Japanese, Islam is a religion that is associated with negative images of terrorism and strict religious tenets and teachings (Komura 2015, 206-214).

Many of the sites where Islamic cemeteries are planned are in depopulated areas, such as mountainous regions in rural areas. Japan has a limited amount of land that can be used for housing and agriculture.[1] Nevertheless, some land must be set aside for the treatment of the dead, and a much larger area is needed for burial than for cremation. In order to build an Islamic cemetery in depopulated areas, local government ordinances must be complied for finding land for burials, also funds are needed to acquire land, as well as other construction requirements. The residents of many mountainous areas have lived in the same community from generation to generation. Therefore, if Muslims who previously had no relationship with the community suddenly propose a plan to construct an Islamic cemetery there, the residents must feel uneasy and perhaps confused, and many may be reluctant to allow it, even if the Muslims hold a series of explanatory meetings with them.

The construction of an Islamic cemetery is not an easy task because it requires the inhabitants of the area to understand Islam as a religion. However, such cemeteries are urgently needed. As will be explained in detail later, due to the Japanese government's employment policy for foreign workers (*gaikoku jinzai ukeire seisaku* 外国人材受入れ政策), which has been in effect since 2019, many foreign workers, including Muslims, have arrived in Japan. With the increased

1 Ministry of Environment 2024. The forested area accounts for 67% of the total country's land area in Japan.

presence of foreign Muslim workers, it is expected that some Muslim will die of illness or accident while on the job, and the existence of burial grounds for deceased Muslims will become an issue in the future.[2]

Ideally, Japanese people should be prepared to accept foreign cultures as more and more foreigners live in various areas of the country. However, while in some areas people are willing to accept foreign cultures to some extent, in other areas they are not ready to accept anything foreign. In fact, in some areas, this has developed into a serious problem in the community because of the opposition of the residents. The difficulties in accepting foreign cultures are increased when they involve important elements of life, especially in matters related to the Japanese view of life and death, such as Islamic cemeteries. In other words, there are some fundamental issues concerning Japanese religious values that should be first considered and reflected in the plans to construct an Islamic cemetery before proceeding, so as not to totally ruin the plan.

In this paper, we will begin by briefly outlining the differences between Islamic and Japanese funeral rites and burial practices. We will then examine and highlight the differences between two unfortunate cases where Muslims attempted to construct Islamic cemeteries in Japan. Following this, we will explore the history of the first Islamic cemetery in Japan established in the 1960s, a time when Islam was largely unfamiliar to most Japanese. To clarify the underlying reasons of the issues in these cases, we will analyze how non-Muslim Japanese come to know, understand and accept Islam in the context of the construction of Islamic cemeteries. This analysis will lead to a broader discussion on the perception and acceptance of Islam among non-Muslim Japanese. Finally, we will conclude with insights drawn from these analyses and discussions.

1 *The Difference between Islamic and Japanese Funeral Rites and Burial Practices*

1.1 Funerals and burials in Islam (a case study from Japan)

Islamic funeral rites are as follows: First, after the death of a Muslim, he or she is taken to the masjid (mosque) where the body of the deceased is washed by members of the same sex. The body is then covered with a white cloth and the

2 The Sankei Shimbun 2019.

hands, feet, and head are tied together. A janazah (funeral prayer, in Arabic) for the deceased is recited in the masjid. The body is then taken to the cemetery where it is buried either on its back or right side down facing Mecca.

According to Islamic rules, the body must be buried in the ground within 24 hours of death. However, there is a Japanese law that prohibits cremation or burial within 24 hours because the person who is presumed dead might be in a state of suspended animation and could conceivably be revived.[3] Therefore, Islamic rules have been changed to perform a burial "as soon as possible" to accommodate Japanese law.

It should be noted that in Islam, graves should be simple. Most of them have a stone or a simple low fence as a landmark around the area where the body is buried. Some graves have stones placed at both the head and chest of the dead. Thus, Islamic graves may be found with or without gravestones. Many graves from the Showa period, such as the foreign Islamic cemetery at Tokyo's Tama Cemetery (Tama Reien 多磨霊園), have large gravestones. However, in recent years, many of the graves of those buried in the Islamic cemetery have no names inscribed on them, and it is difficult to identify who was buried.

Islam does not encourage visiting graves.[4] Therefore, graves found in Islamic cemeteries in Japan rarely have decorative gravestones, nor are they always decorated with flowers.

1.2 Funeral rites and burials in Japan

In Japan, funerals are held in accordance with the rules of the religion or sect the deceased believed in. The funeral practice also follows the specific traditions of each religion or sect, and in most cases the deceased is cremated, often without consideration of other options. In the past, burial in the ground was the norm in Japan, and cremation became the standard practice only during the Showa period

3 See also Sobotková 2021.

4 However, at the Islamic cemetery in Enzan 塩山, Kōshū City, Yamanashi Prefecture, for example, flowers are placed on each grave during the annual cleaning of the cemetery, and this can be considered as a visit to grave.

(1926–1989).[5] According to a survey conducted by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare in fiscal year 2022, 99.97% of bodies were cremated.[6] In fact, there is no law prohibiting burial in the ground, and the method of burial is governed by local government ordinances. However, as mentioned above, the cremation rate in Japan is unparalleled in the world,[7] highlighting a distinctive aspect of Japanese funeral customs.

In recent years, there are many Japanese who advocate non-religious beliefs. In some cases, the family members respect the faith of the deceased and do not hold a funeral service; while in other cases, they only hold a farewell party for the deceased in which there is no religious affiliation. There is also a funeral practice called "arboriculture", in which the body is cremated and then the urn with the bones is buried in the ground near a tree,[8] and also the practice of scattering the remains of the deceased in the sea or on recognized land. However, as mentioned above, in recent years most bodies have been cremated and various funeral rites exist according to the faith of the deceased.

2 *Islamic Cemeteries in Japan*

As of 2024, there are seven Islamic cemeteries in Japan: two in Ibaragi Prefecture, one in Hokkaido, and one each in Saitama, Yamanashi, Shizuoka, and Wakayama prefectures. Most of them are located in eastern Japan. The westernmost Islamic cemetery at present is located in Hashimoto City, Wakayama Prefecture, in the eastern part of western Japan. No cemeteries have been constructed in the Kyūshū and Shikoku regions, nor in the San-yō,[9] San-in, and Tōhoku regions. However, Japanese Muslims are planning to construct Islamic cemeteries in these areas in the future.

5 According to Minowa (2014, 493), the cremation rate in Japan did not exceed 50% until 1935.

6 Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2022.

7 The Cremation Society 2019.

8 It is an example of arboriculture practiced in Japan.

9 To be accurate, there is a small Islamic cemetery built in Hiroshima, but only a few Muslims have been buried there until now.

The reason for this is that many foreigners can be employed easily in industries that need manpower, thanks to the foreign human resources admission policy, which has been in effect since 2019. These foreign workers are mainly from Vietnam and Indonesia and came to Japan as technical intern trainees.[10] Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. The acceptance of many Indonesians into the Japanese workforce implicitly means the acceptance of Indonesian Muslims and their religious culture, Islam. Many of them work in less urbanized areas and are employed in industries where there is labor shortage, such as manufacturing, food processing, fishing, and agriculture. Therefore, the number of foreign Muslim workers is increasing in remote regions more than in large cities.

With the increase in the number of foreign workers, there are bound to be cases of deaths due to illness or accidents at work.[11] In such cases, the funeral rites are conducted in accordance with their religious beliefs. In the case of foreign Muslim workers, their bodies could be airlifted to their country of origin at the request of the bereaved family, but this is impractical because it is estimated that airlifting a body would cost more than one million yen. As a result, they are forced to be buried in Japan. However, as mentioned earlier, Islam requires burial in the ground and also requires that the remains be buried as soon as possible. Since most Islamic cemeteries in Japan are located in eastern Japan, if a Muslim die in an area without an Islamic cemetery, even if his or her burial is performed in Japan, there may be a financial burden for transporting the body. Therefore, there is an urgent need to build Islamic cemeteries in western Japan, west of Wakayama Prefecture, as well as in the Kyūshū and Shikoku regions and in the Tōhoku region where there are no Islamic cemeteries yet.

10 With the enactment of the revised Immigration Control Act by the Diet in June 2024, the technical internship system will be abolished, and a new system for accepting foreign workers and the training and employment system will be established.

11 The Jakarta Shimbun 2018.

3 *Cases of Difficulties in Constructing Islamic Cemeteries*

3.1. The case of the challenges faced in constructing an Islamic cemetery in Itakura-chō 板倉町, Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture[12]

Between 2008 and 2010, there was a plan to construct an Islamic cemetery in Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture.[13] According to an article in *Sankei Shimbun*, the Japan Islamic Cultural Center (located in Toshima-ku, Tokyo) secured land in the mountains of the area with the intention of creating a cemetery where approximately 500 bodies could be buried. As mentioned earlier, there is no law in Japan that prohibits burial; rather, it is subject to local government ordinances. Since Ashikaga City does not prohibit burial in the ground, the construction of an Islamic cemetery was technically permitted. The Japan Islamic Cultural Center organized several explanatory meetings with local residents to address concerns. However, the residents tenaciously opposed the project, submitting a petition to the city with a total of 663 signatures against the construction. As a result, Ashikaga City informed the Center that the Islamic cemetery could not be constructed until the people were ready to accept it. Consequently, the plan was abandoned.

Why did the local residents oppose the project? According to the previously mentioned newspaper, "Itakura-chō is a mid-mountainous area where people have lived continuously for generations. It is understandable that many people in such an area were concerned about the unfamiliar concept of burial in the ground." In an interview, a woman in her 60s who lived near the proposed cemetery shared her concerns, saying, "I had a fearful image of Islam because of terrorist attacks in the Middle East. I understand that burial in the ground is their custom, but I

12 In mentioning this case study, the author referred to the results of interviews she conducted on October 21, 2008 in Utsunomiya City, Tochigi Prefecture, with people involved in masjids in the prefecture, a talk given by Mr. A (deceased), a university professor specializing in urban engineering, and an online newspaper article in the Sankei Shimbun [https://www.sankei.com/article/ 20190912-VIV7QKEDZVN57CY2QDP2WBH36E/ (accessed August 4, 2024).

13 According to the author's fieldwork notes from 2008, masjid officials in the prefecture mentioned that they would like to build a masjid and Islamic school next to a cemetery.

didn't want to see an Islamic cemetery built in such a peaceful place and later expanded."[14] The article goes on to say that the project has not been revived since.

3.2. The case of the challenges faced in constructing an Islamic cemetery in Hiji-machi 日出町, Ōita Prefecture[15]

The Beppu Muslim Association (Beppu Musurimu Kyōkai 別府ムスリム協会) in Beppu City in Ōita Prefecture purchased land in Hiji-machi with plans to construct an Islamic cemetery. However, the proposal faced opposition from nearby residents. The primary concern was that the planned site was located near a water source, and burials in the ground could potentially contaminate the water. The residents continued to oppose the plan, submitting a petition to the town council against the construction. One of the common sentiments expressed was "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" (Gō ni itte wa gō ni shitagae 郷に入っては郷に従え),[16] emphasizing that Japan is not a country where Islam is part of the religious culture and that cremation is the only acceptable funeral practice. The issue was resolved when the Beppu Muslim Association changed the location of the proposed cemetery to a town-owned plot of land adjacent to the cemetery of a Christian monastery. However, residents of the neighboring city of Kitsuki 杵築 have since voiced their concerns about potential water pollution.[17] Even though Hiji-machi is not considered a neighboring area under the local ordinance, the Beppu Muslim Association has been holding explanatory meetings to alleviate their concerns.[18]

Gaining residents' approval for the construction of an Islamic cemetery has not been easy due to the fact that burial in the ground is unfamiliar to modern Japanese, and Islam is a foreign religion. However, there have also been some

14 The Sankei Shimbun 2019.

15 This case is based on a situation the author heard about when he was interviewed by a reporter from the Nishi-nihon Shimbun 2020. In addition, the author refers to the Hiji-machi homepage and some newspaper articles, such as Ōita ken Hiji-machi 2023.

16 Ōmuro Natsumi 2021.

17 The Yomiuri Shimbun Online 2023.

18 Ōita ken Hiji-machi yakuba 2023.

successes. Let us now examine the first Islamic cemetery built in Japan in Enzan, Kōshū City, Yamanashi Prefecture.

4 *Case Study of the Enzan Islamic Cemetery, Kōshū City, Yamanashi Prefecture*

Japan's first Islamic cemetery is located next to the Buddhist cemetery of Monjuin 文殊院, a temple of the Jodo sect of Japanese Buddhism. It is managed and operated by the Japan Muslim Association (located in Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo) and it has been gradually developed since the 1960s.

Before we proceed with the history of this cemetery, it is important to mention Masatsugu Suda 須田正継 (1893–1964), a key person in its construction and a well-known figure in regional history. Masatsugu Suda was born in Ichinomiya-chō, part of Fuefuki City in Yamanashi Prefecture. Fluent in Russian, he was invited to work in the South Manchuria Railway Research Department (Minami Manshu Tetsudō Chōsabu 南満洲鉄道調査部) before and during WW II, where he conducted research activities. He was also associated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kwantung Army (Kantō-Gun 関東軍) as a Russian interpreter. Suda had extensive knowledge and understanding of Islam, to the extent that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials often remarked, "If you have any questions about Islam, ask Suda." (Komura 2017, 74).

After WW II, Suda moved back to his native place, Yamanashi. The turning point came in 1956, when a group of five Muslim missionaries from Pakistan, known as the "Tablighi", came to Japan. During their stay in Myanmar, they had met a Japanese man named Murashige 村重,[19] an old acquaintance of Suda's. The five Tablighi members came to Japan with a letter of introduction by Murashige to Suda. Suda was fluent in Russian, but not in English. He introduced them to Sekihei Saitō 斉藤積平 whom he had met through his Ministry of Foreign Affairs connections and who later converted to Islam.

The Tablighi continued to visit Japan every year, and on their third visit in 1959, they were invited to Erinji Temple 恵林寺 in Yamanashi Prefecture. They held a cultural exchange event with Muslims, junior and senior high school

19 This Japanese named Murashige was invited by the Myanmar government to teach judo in the current Yangon city.

students living near the area, residents from other areas, and university students from Tokyo. Additional cultural exchange events with Muslims were held in Yamanashi Prefecture after that. The Buddhist monk of Monjuin was also invited to this cultural exchange event, and after the event, the Tablighi visited Monjuin. Meanwhile, the deaths of a Japanese convert and a Muslim diplomat's family member triggered an urgent need for an Islamic cemetery. At the time, there were no Islamic cemetery in Japan. In the past, a Japanese Muslim had been buried in the foreign section of the Tama Cemetery in Tokyo as a special exception.[20] However, this section of Tama Cemetery is reserved for foreigners. With cremation strictly forbidden in Islam, it became clear that a proper burial place was needed for Muslims in Japan.

Suda, therefore consulted an acquaintance, the then Buddhist monk of Monjuin, about this issue. Later, Sekihei Saitō, president of the Japan Muslim Association at that time, visited Monjuin several times to discuss the construction of a cemetery. In 1961, a joint committee was formed by the Japan Muslim Association and the Muslim Students Association, which consisted of Muslim exchange students in Japan. In 1962, the committee members began negotiations with Monjuin regarding the construction of a cemetery, and in 1963, they began purchasing land for the cemetery. Masatsugu Suda, however, initially held a critical view of the situation. He felt that the Muslims involved in the project did not fully understand the social rules that should be observed, such as national laws and local ordinances, and that they were "presumptuous" (mushi ga yosugiru 虫が良すぎる) (Komura 2017, 81) in taking advantage of the consciences of people around the Japanese Muslims, especially non-Muslim Japanese like himself. Therefore, when Saitō asked Suda to help build the cemetery, Suda angrily responded that "the time is not yet ripe." (Komura 2017, 81).

Later, when the Buddhist monk of Monjuin visited Suda's house alone, Suda explained the reason for his frustration. Although the Japanese Muslims had the

20 When Yoshio Imaizumi 今泉義雄, a Japanese who had converted to Islam before the war, died in 1960, the question arose as to where he should be buried. Muslims petitioned the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, which owns and manages Tama Cemetery, and Imaizumi was allowed to be buried in the foreigners' section of Tama Cemetery as a special exception.

goodwill of the local community, they did not fully grasp the realities of Japanese society; still Suga believed that he could not refuse the request of the Muslims entirely. He recognized the lack of Islamic cemeteries in Japan and foresaw that the foreign cemeteries would eventually run out of burial space. Suda told the monk, "You are expected (by the Muslims to construct the cemetery)." (Komura 2017, 81). The Buddhist monk understood the meaning of those words and worked hard to construct it.

The process, however, faced a significant challenge. The land surrounding Monjuin was orchard land, so the first step was to purchase the land from the landowners and go through the necessary procedures at the municipal office to change its use from agricultural land to a cemetery. This involved complying with local ordinances regarding burial in the ground, as well as ensuring that the organization managing the cemetery met the legal qualifications of a religious corporation. [21] Local authorities, including town hall, were suspicious about why a Buddhist temple would construct an Islamic cemetery. The monk wrote in his memoirs that he had to explain the situation multiple times to the local authorities and prefectural government officials to secure approval for the land use change (Komura 2017, 82). Besides, the residents in the area were concerned about having a foreign religion brought to their land and discussions were needed to alleviate their fears.

After gradually overcoming these obstacles, the Islamic cemetery was approved by Yamanashi Prefecture in 1969. The Japan Muslim Association eventually acquired 7,585 square meters (2,295 tsubo 坪) of land as their own Islamic cemetery.

5 *Analysis*

With an estimated Muslim population of 200,000 in Japan, it is essential to provide proper burial facilities for deceased Muslims. However, there are many problems in establishing Islamic cemeteries. Despite this, there are several ways to solve these problems. For instance, in the case of the planned cemetery in Hiji-machi, Ōita Prefecture, a solution was found in purchasing public land owned by

21 In 1968, the Japan Muslim Association acquired religious juridical status.

Hiji-machi 日出町. This land is adjacent to a cemetery owned by Trappist monastery, a Christian denomination, which has existed for more than 30 years, and where members of the church community have been buried. According to Hiji-machi officials, no issues with water pollution have arisen from that cemetery.[22] This supports the viability of constructing an Islamic cemetery on town-owned land next to the Christian cemetery. However, as mentioned earlier, in reality, the neighboring Kitsuki City has filed a petition against the project, and the matter has not yet been completely resolved.[23] The concerns raised by residents extend beyond fears of water pollution; they reflect more fundamental and emotional reservations of Japanese people about Islam. This sentiment is shown in a journalist's observation in her online essay that she heard the phrase, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" repeated frequently during interviews.[24]

The culture, social framework, political and even economic rules of Islam is rooted in its tenets and teachings. Islam drives every aspect of Muslim life. More importantly, Islam should be regarded first and foremost as a religion rather than merely a cultural system. Religious tenets and doctrines cannot be changed easily, even in response to regional and societal customs. The tenets and doctrines of the Abrahamic religions, not only of Islam but also of Christianity and Judaism, are clear. They are seen as guidelines for life given by God to human beings, and believers are obligated to follow their religious doctrines as their faith in God. This is especially true for Islam, which has a strong fundamentalist tendency. Therefore, we cannot view Islam simply as a cultural phenomenon with religious tenets and doctrine, where things can be easily changed.

The frequent use of the phrase "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" by residents opposing the construction of the Islamic cemetery reflects the belief that Islam *can* be adapted to fit local customs. This notion comes from the unique

22 Ōita ken Hiji-machi yakuba 2023.

23 The election for the mayor of Hiji-machi was held on August 25, 2024. A man who has expressed opposition to the construction of the Islamic cemetery won the election. This will make it more difficult for an early agreement to be reached regarding the ongoing issue.

24 Ōmuro Natsumi 2021.

religious nature of Japanese people. In the history of Japanese religious beliefs and practices, when Buddhism, then a foreign religion, first came to Japan, it blended with the older, indigenous Shinto religion (Koshintō 古神道), which is based on nature worship and Shinto deities. This fusion of Shintoism and Buddhism (Shinbutsu Shūgō 神仏習合) exemplifies how foreign religious practices were integrated into Japanese traditions. As a result, Japanese people may unconsciously expect that Islam *must* also blend with Japan's indigenous religious tradition in order to be fully accepted into Japanese society and culture.

This paper has also discussed the case of Ashikaga City's plan to construct an Islamic cemetery. Similar concerns were expressed by local residents, many of whom had lived in the area for generations. According to the newspaper article, the fact that the cemetery is intended for believers of a foreign religion, Islam, was also a contributing factor to their reluctance and unease at the prospect of a burial ground built so close to their residential area. The unease about the sudden arrival of a foreign religious culture with no prior connection with the community further fueled opposition to the cemetery project. The opinions of women in the aforementioned newspaper article suggest that they have a negative opinion of Islam, and this, combined with the associated image of burial, makes it difficult for them to accept Islamic cemeteries. This was likely the result of the lack of an advocate or intermediary who could dispel these negative impressions of Islam.

A case that supports this analysis is the successful establishment of an Islamic cemetery in Enzan 塩山, Yamanashi prefecture. In this case, a non-Muslim Japanese individual made a great effort to respond to the wishes of the Muslim community, which led to the success of constructing the cemetery. Also, in this case, before the construction of the cemetery, several cultural exchange events between Muslims and the Japanese residents were held, which allowed the residents to become familiar with Islam. There were several factors here that contributed to the success of the construction of the cemetery including the presence of a Buddhist monk who acted as an advocate and mediator. His involvement along with established community ties, made it possible for the project to proceed in the right direction. The monk's efforts made it easier for them to understand and accept the construction of the Islamic cemetery. As Masatsugu Suda mentioned, the cemetery could not have been constructed through the efforts of the Muslims alone, only on faith, without looking at the

reality of the situation and without the help of non-Muslim Japanese people living in the area.

6 *Conclusion*

After reviewing the preceding analyses and case studies, several insights can be drawn regarding the construction of Islamic cemeteries in Japan.

First, the failed cases highlight a key issue: One day Muslims suddenly arrived in a rural community, which had no connection with Islam, and purchased land there for the purpose of constructing an Islamic cemetery, but then they were faced with the insurmountable difficulty in communicating their plan to the residents in order to obtain their approval. This difficulty stemmed from a fundamental clash in the funeral practices: in Islam, burial of the deceased is an absolute requirement, whereas cremation is the standard funeral custom in modern Japan. This divergence in the funeral practices is further rooted in the different religious values between Muslims and Japanese people.

In addition, for many residents, the construction of an Islamic cemetery means bringing into their community an unknown religion, which they have never been in contact with, and which will create a situation where they will have to accept Islam without sufficient time to come to know and understand it. Since many Japanese people are unfamiliar with Islam and have mostly a negative perception of Islam, the construction of Islamic cemeteries also tends to evoke a negative image for the residents. Moreover, Islam has recently been portrayed in Japan as a religion of fundamentalism or even of terrorism, and thus many residents probably see the occasion as a potential threat to their way of life.

Historically, Japan itself practiced ground burial, but during the Meiji period (1868–1912), the government mandated cremation of the dead to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. The practice of cremation spread gradually, although the rate of spread varied from region to region. Since WW II, cremation has been the mainstream practice in Japan. Today, there is no national law in Japan requiring cremation. However, it has become a common norm, deeply embedded in Japanese views of life and death. Many Japanese are unaware of the fact that ground burial is still legally allowed in modern Japan.

It is obvious that the combination of a burial practice, uncommon in modern Japan, and Islam, a foreign religion little known in Japan, has caused the Japanese residents to strongly reject the projects of Islamic cemetery, especially in rural or less-populated areas.

The successful case of the construction of an Islamic cemetery indicates that there was an intermediary who had a precise understanding of Islam and was a prominent figure in the regional community. Before the construction of the Islamic cemetery, the local and Muslim communities came in contact with each other and built a good relationship for cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, there was the involvement of a Buddhist monk, whose religion is familiar to Japanese people. All these factors increased the likelihood of a successful relationship between the local people and Muslims.

Although not mentioned in detail in this paper, there are two other successful cases of Islamic cemeteries, one of which was constructed in Shimizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, and another in Hashimoto City, Wakayama prefecture. Both were constructed on cemetery lands owned by Buddhist temples, demonstrating that it is easier to build Islamic cemeteries as extensions of existing cemeteries of other religions, rather than building them independently. Local communities may be less resistant when such projects are planned in association with religions that are already well-known and familiar to the residents.

However, it remains uncertain whether these people truly understand or accept Islam in terms of mutual cultural understanding. Even when they were able to accept the construction of an Islamic cemetery, it was constructed through the intercession of a non-Muslim Japanese. It seems that the stronger the relationship the intermediary has with the community, especially if it is a prominent figure in the region or a Japanese Buddhist monk, the more readily they agree with his or her opinion and accept the cemetery plan. In some cases, being forced to agree with the intermediary's opinion can be seen as what is commonly referred to as "collectivism" in Japan, but this depends on the context in which the cemetery construction project is being undertaken and the residents' feelings towards Islam at the time. These issues vary in every individual case, as it is also a question of interpersonal relations within the community.

In conclusion, the process of constructing Islamic cemeteries in Japan highlights both positive and negative factors, and what lies at the root of the problem is the difference in religious values between Islamic and Japanese cultures,

particularly concerning burial practices. In addition, the construction of Islamic cemeteries is often associated with the existing religion of Buddhism. This is shown in the fact that non-Muslim Japanese find it easier to accept Islam when it is associated with established Japanese religions such as Buddhism, even if they do not understand Islam itself.

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Can Xue's Avant-Garde Novels *Frontier* and *The Last Lover*: Representatives of Her International Acclaim

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Abstract This paper examines Can Xue's 残雪 avant-garde novels *Frontier* (*Bianjiang* 边疆) and *The Last Lover* (*Zuihou de qingren* 最后的情人) in the context of her international acclaim. Renowned for fragmented plots, dreamlike narratives, and ambiguous settings, Can Xue's works often blur the line between reality and the subconscious, evoking similarities to magical realism. By addressing the universal themes that transcend cultural and national boundaries, her writing has garnered broad reputation outside China. Through an analysis of two of Can Xue's most discussed novels, this paper illustrates how her works resonate more strongly with international audiences than with her domestic readership.

Keywords contemporary Chinese literature, avant-garde, magical realism · Can Xue 残雪, *Frontier* (*Bianjiang* 边疆), *The Last Lover* (*Zuihou de qingren* 最后的情人)

Introduction

Can Xue 残雪[1] is the pseudonym of Deng Xiaohua 邓小华, a Chinese avant-garde[2] writer and literary critic born in 1953 in Changsha, Hunan Province. Due to her family background,[3] she was denied access to further education and completed only elementary school. She began writing in 1983 and published her first short story, "Soap Bubbles in Dirty Water" (*Wushui shang de feizao pao* 污水上的肥皂泡), in 1985.

While Can Xue is considered a highly influential and respected figure in literary circles, her avant-garde literary works might not be as widely popular in China,[4] where readers often criticize them as "difficult to read". Her writing style

1 The term "*canxue*" 残雪 translates to "snow that has not yet melted" in old Chinese, or more literally, "the remains of snow". When queried about the significance of this pseudonym, Can Xue 残雪 highlights two distinct dimensions. First, the lingering snow, especially on mountaintops, symbolizes an unbridled spirit and, consequently, the pinnacle of artistic expression that she aspires to attain through her work. The second facet pertains to "*canxue*" in its commonplace meaning of "the dirty snow that refuses to melt" (McCandlish, 2022) often seen in urban streets. These seemingly opposing meanings come together to form what Can Xue calls an "artistic residual snow" (*yishu de canxue* 艺术的残雪).

2 The Chinese Avant-garde stands as a literary avalanche at the economic dawn of the Reform Era. The shaping of depoliticized and fragmented postmodern texts, is somewhere along the lines of an ontological transaction with a post-ideological literature where the permanent struggle is no longer waged between classes, but within personal identities. The narrative moves from socialist realism to experimental forms, from realism to abstract expressionism, forging an alternative literary paradigm distinct from the dominant mainstream (Castelli 2021, 34).

3 In 1957, her father, an editorial director at the *New Hunan Daily News,* was condemned as an Ultra-Rightist and sent to reform through labor. Her mother, who worked at the same newspaper, was also sent to the countryside for labor.

4 The Chinese literary landscape has historically been influenced by cultural and political factors. Writers whose works explore unconventional themes or challenge established norms often face challenges in gaining widespread popularity, especially if their works are perceived as too avant-garde or experimental. While Can Xue's work may not have achieved mass popularity in China,

is experimental, avant-garde, and often challenging for readers accustomed to more conventional narratives. Her novels lack a plot (or have very fragmented plots),[5] have undefined settings in both time and place, the boundaries of reality and the subconscious are blurred, and employ surreal and dreamlike narratives.

Susan Posborg (1993, 92) argues that "Can Xue's texts invite another way of reading which does not give or seek an answer to what the story means, but rather asks the question how the story means or how the story reads." Similarly, Wang Ban suggests that in discussing Chinese fantastic fiction, we should not ask "What does it mean?" but rather "How does it work?" (Reismüller 2019a, 236). Reismüller (2011, 196) further contends that

> Can Xue considers herself an island of art and pure literature, [...] in a spiritually declined world, but at the same time she seems not to care about the external world, because in her works, she is looking for universal values of the human soul. The way to discover these values leads, paradoxically, through exploring one's own subjectivity, exploring that should not, however, be made on the basis of rationality.[6]

These theoretical grounds are intuitively projected in her literary depiction of a worldview filled with grime and cold interpersonal relationships developing into nightmarish visions that are sometimes fascinating, sometimes frightening or even grotesque. As Can Xue once said in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist (2021):

> for me personally, writing is a spontaneously unfolding performance of the body and the soul. With many years of practice, I have already mastered the profound mystery of this kind of literary performance. Moreover, my performance is also a summons to readers. Through my writing I send out signals to their bodies and souls, stimulating

she has garnered significant acclaim and recognition in literary circles and has received attention and praise internationally for her unique and thought-provoking contributions to literature.

5 "Plot never dominates Can Xue's work; rather, her novels build upon images and affects that repeat, vary, and recombine, giving rise to patterns at once original and tinglingly familiar. While readers approaching *Frontier* [and other Can Xue's literary works] as a cipher to be decoded are therefore likely to grow frustrated, those who allow themselves to be immersed in it as in music or painting will begin to perceive the novel's complex harmonies." Larue 2017.

6 Self-reflection is the magic formula for creation, a particular self-reflection different from passive self-examination. This kind of self-reflection brings all one's strength to bear on entering the profound world of the soul, and makes what one has seen there appear again through a special kind of language (Can Xue 2003, 211).

> and inspiring them to turn on the mechanism of their bodies and souls. Once this contradictory mechanism of art is started, they will take part in my performance, with their own experiences as a foundation, performing together with me this new literature of the new millennium.[7]

Reismüller (2011, 196) suggests that though there are various approaches to interpret the techniques and motifs in Can Xue's works, two of them stand out as the most significant and commonly applied: the (socio-) political[8] and the (sexually) psychological.

Based on observations and the analysis presented in this text, the key characteristics of Xue's novels can be summarized as follows:

- Non-linear narratives with fragmented storylines.
- A rich use of symbolism and ideographic metaphors.[9]

7 In Can Xue's case, her literary points of reference are writers in whose works she glimpses resonance with her own endeavor to write from a spiritually individual core. These include Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Dante, William Shakespeare, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Bachner 2005, 170).

8 Wedell-Wedellsborg (1994, 16) argues that her particular mode of writing privileges a highly subjectivist vision, but the image of individual "character" she portrays is so profoundly shaped by societal structures that it becomes impossible to separate an autonomous "self" with well-defined—even if irrational—psychological responses from the very societal forces it ostensibly resists. Her whole body of work from the early 1980s till the 1990s can be read as variations on the theme of the individual versus the socializing forces of Chinese mentality, culture, and society.

9 Avant-garde writing represents a kind of rebellion against discursive orthodoxy. The novels do not follow a traditional, linear narrative. Instead, they present a fragmented and non-chronological structure, the storyline may jump between different perspectives, times, and locations, challenging the reader to piece the narrative together. The plot is difficult to follow, and the atmosphere captured by the descriptions of nature is more prominent. Recurring motifs, such as roses, cats, snakes, and insects often appear, creating a specific atmosphere. The novels are thus full of ideographic metaphors.

- Magical realism, dreamlike storytelling,[10] allegory and social fantasy.[11]
- Enigmatic and mysterious characters.

Furthermore, Can Xue's novels often resemble music more than literature. Motifs and sentences tend to recur across different contexts and chapters, creating patterns that echo musical composition.

Can Xue's Popularity Abroad

Can Xue, known for her obscure and unique literary style, is less noticed by Chinese readers but has been repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature due to her popularity among English-speaking readers.[12] This article analyzes two of Can Xue's novels that have received the most positive reception abroad: *Frontier* (*Bianjiang* 边疆*),* which has garnered the highest number of

10 Can Xue's novels have been renowned for their dreamlike quality. This extends not only to her frequent incorporation of characters' dreams directly into the narrative structure—using dreams as both a tool and a means of storytelling—but also to the overall ambiance and plot construction, which often mirror the nature of dreams themselves. The speech of the characters feels like a dreamy murmur, akin to sleep-talking, where the boundaries between fantasy and reality blur, becoming indistinct and elusive. It is uncertain whether "Zhuangzi 庄子 is the butterfly or the butterfly is Zhuangzi?" (see *Zhuangzi,* Inner chapters, Qiwu lun 齊物論). This dreamlike narrative quality remains prominent in *Frontier* and *The Last Lover*.

11 Easily reminiscent of Kafka's nightmares and Salvador Dali's fantasy, the grotesquerie of Can Xue's imagination highlighted in these quotations contrasts so sharply with the aesthetics of socialist realism—rooted in a realistic representation of the human condition—that her works form a discordant voice, grating against the expectations of critics and readers alike (Chen 1997, 349).

12 This divergence has naturally piqued the curiosity and interest of Chinese scholars, resulting in numerous research papers analyzing the translations and reception of her works. Some studies focus on specific novels as examples to provide insights into the broader patterns of translation and reception, such as those by Sun Huijun and Zheng Qingzhu 2015; Ye Yan and Xiang Peng 2017; and Cen Qunxia 2018. Other papers have explored the overseas dissemination and reception of Can Xue's novels and the reasons behind it, including works by Wang Wenqiang and Guo Enhua 2016; Jiang Mengying 2017; and Liu Kun 2017.

reviews in the English-speaking world, and *The Last Lover* (*Zuihoude qingren* 最后的情人), which won the prestigious *2015 Best Translated Book Award for Fiction*.

Xin Xiaoxiao (2023: 43) compared global library holdings of ten of Can Xue's translated novels with those of prominent Chinese authors Mo Yan 莫言 and Yu Hua 余华. The following statistics emerge from the findings.[13]

Table 1
Mo Yan

English translation	Chinese original	Global library holdings
Red Sorghum	*Hong gaoliang jiazu*红高粱家族	955
Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out	*Sheng si pilao* 生死疲劳	762
Frog	*Wa* 蛙	718
The Garlic Ballads	*Tiantang suantai zhi ge* 天堂蒜薹之歌	698
Big Breasts and Wide Hips	*Feng ru fei tun* 丰乳肥臀	623
The Republic of Wine	*Jiuguo* 酒国	532

Table 2
Yu Hua

English translation	Chinese original	Global library holdings
China in Ten Words	*Shige cihui li de Zhongguo*	789

13 The author conducted the research based on the global library catalogues available through the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) using the WorldCat database.

	十个词汇里的中国	
Brothers	*Xiongdi* 兄弟	551
To Live	*Huozhe* 活着	499
Chronicle of a Blood Merchant	*Xu Sanguan mai xue ji* 许三观卖血记	315

Table 3
Can Xue

English translation	Chinese original	Global library holdings
Five Spice Street	*Wu xiang jie* 五香街	919
The Last Lover	*Zuihou de qingren* 最后的情人	691
Love in the New Millennium	*Xin shiji de aiqing gushi* 新世纪爱情故事	541
I Live in the Slums	*Pinminku de gushi* 贫民窟的故事	262
Old Floating Cloud: Two Novellas	*Canglao de fuyun* 苍老的浮云	260
Dialogues in Paradise	*Tiantan li de duihua* 天堂里的对话	228
The Embroidered Shoes	*Xiuhua xie* 绣花鞋	191
Frontier	*Bianjiang* 边疆	160
Blue Light in the Sky and Other Stories	*Tiankong li de lan guang he qi ta gushi* 天空里的蓝光和其他故事	150

The data indicates that Can Xue's *Five Spice Street* has nearly as many library holdings as Mo Yan's famous novel *Red Sorghum* and even surpasses the highest-held translated works of Yu Hua. Can Xue's *The Last Lover*[14] also demonstrates significant international reception, with global library holdings of 691. This number exceeds those of several notable works by Mo Yan and Yu Hua, specifically Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (623) and *The Republic of Wine* (532), as well as Yu Hua's *Brothers* (551), *To Live* (499), and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (315).

These statistics emphasize a strong presence and influence of Can Xue's works in the global literary arena. *The Last Lover* in particular has resonated with an international audience, underscoring the unique appeal and literary value of Can Xue's narrative style and thematic exploration. This global recognition is a testament to her innovative approach to fiction and the effectiveness of translation and dissemination efforts that have expanded her readership. This suggests a considerable international interest in and acceptance of Can Xue's works, reflecting her global literary significance, despite her relative obscurity in her home country.

Through searches in databases such as CALIS, JSTOR, EBSCO, ProQuest, Gale, and Google Scholar, and by filtering out irrelevant materials, "researchers collected 86 reviews of ten of Can Xue's novels translated into English, spanning from 1989 to 2021." (Xin Xiaoxiao, 2023: 45). First, according to Xin, from the number of reviews we can see that all ten novels received attention from professional readers in the English-speaking world, showing an overall upward trend (see Table 4), indicating increasing interest in Can Xue's works among critics.

14 Notable translators like Annelise Finegan Wasmoen have played a crucial role in bringing Can Xue's works to an English-speaking audience. Wasmoen's translation of *The Last Lover* won a prestigious 2015 *Best Translated Book Award for Fiction*, highlighting the high quality and literary value of her translations.

Table 4
Number of English book reviews for the English translation of Can Xue

Title	Translator	Publisher and publication date	Number of reviews
I Live in the Slums	Karen Gernant & Chen Zeping	Yale University Press (2020)	9
Love in the New Millennium	Annelise Finegan Wasmoen	Yale University Press (2018)	9
Frontier	Karen Gernant & Chen Zeping	Open Letter (2017)	16
Vertical Motion	Karen Gernant & Chen Zeping	Open Letter (2011)	8
Five Spice Street	Karen Gernant & Chen Zeping	Yale University Press (2009)	11
Blue Light in the Sky and Other Stories	Karen Gernant & Chen Zeping	New Directions Books (2006)	4
The Embroidered Shoe	Ronald R. Janssen & Jian Zhang	Henry Holt (1997)	7
Old Floating Cloud：Two Novellas	Ronald R. Janssen & Jian Zhang	Northwestern University Press (1991)	6
Dialogues in Paradise	Ronald R. Janssen & Jian Zhang	Northwestern University Press (1989)	6

Notably, *Frontier*, translated and published in 2017, received the most reviews, totaling 16, mainly published in prestigious outlets such as *The New Yorker*, *World Literature Today*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Publishers Weekly*. This heightened attention may have stemmed from the "award effect", as reader interest spiked following *The Last Lover*'s win of the *2015 Best Translated Book Award for Fiction*. *Five Spice Street* and *The Last Lover* ranked second and third, with 11 and 10 reviews,

respectively. In terms of the number of professional reviews, *Frontier*, *Five Spice Street*, and *The Last Lover* garnered more widespread attention and readership in the English-speaking world.

Frontier

Frontier (*Bianjiang* 边疆),[15] originally written in 2008, is a highly experimental and surreal literary work that doesn't follow a conventional narrative structure. It eschews well-defined protagonists and consistent clues leading to an explicit plot. Instead, the novel offers the readers a series of enigmatic characters and motifs woven through surreal, dreamlike sequences that resist apparent logical progression, embodying what has been described as "anti-realistic" narrative—disrupting the mimetic ability of the text and defying closeness to reality (Reismüller 2011, 190).[16]

The Preface to the Chinese edition of *Bianjiang* (2008) convey the following information to the reader:

> 《边疆》继承《楚辞》与布努埃尔、安东尼奥尼等西方电影大师荒诞如梦幻般的叙述风格 [...]."[17] (*Frontier* inherits the absurd and dreamlike narrative style of "Chuci" 楚辞, Buñuel, Antonioni, and other Western film masters [...].).

15 The term "frontier" in *Frontier* can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. On a literal level, it may refer to physical frontiers that the literary protagonists traverse or wish to cross, like river, desert, border of the country of desire (i.e. Holland), or various surreal landscapes**.** Metaphorically, the frontier symbolizes the limits of human experience and consciousness.

16 This avant-garde literary piece on purpose challenges the *objective* portrayal of reality, Can Xue deliberately suppresses rationality in the sense of referring to the natural logic of the real world. The narrative is filled with surreal events and landscapes, where the boundaries between reality and imagination dissolve.

17 All citations from the Chinese original are from Can Xue 2008, hereafter cited as *Bianjiang* (*Bianjiang,* title page).

"Frontier", a crucial location in the novel,[18] both geographical and metaphorical, is described as being situated somewhere around "the northernmost" place (Can Xue 2017, 132), next to a small town called Pebble Town (*Xiaoshicheng* 小石城), which serves as the locus of the story. Beyond the detail that the town lies adjacent to the northern border, the exact location remains unspoken.

Pebble Town is depicted as a place where snow leopards and wolves roam the streets, and the narrative is suffused with a magical abundance of animals and plants.[19] Throughout the novel, individuals, wildlife and plant life function as significant symbols, prompting readers to interpret deeper meanings in their actions. The author does not provide explicit explanations for these symbols; instead, Can Xue offers a clue to their significance in the preface to the 2019 edition: "In *Frontier*, everybody, every animal is a pattern of freedom, and the background is the background of that great pattern of freedom."

By using the artistic liberties of magical realism, Can Xue also appears to subtly critique the political status quo in China.[20] This is reflected in passages such as:

> Your dad says we're willing to dig trenches all our lives. The volunteers all around us give us confidence. Straightening up in the trench, we can see the red flag through the fog and hear the birds singing sadly in the forest. At this, your dad says, "This is truly a bloodless war." All of us volunteers are silent, because through silence we can broaden our horizons greatly. (*Frontier,* 310).

18 边疆地区一个最大的特征就是，屋外的景色总是对人的情绪有巨大的压迫。每当她生活中出现一种变故，周围的风景就充满了那种变故的暗示，而且十分强烈。(*Bianjiang*, 120).
The biggest feature of the border area is that the scenery outside always exerts tremendous pressure on people's emotions. Whenever there is a change in her life, the surrounding scenery is full of hints of that change, and it is very strong. (All English translations are from Can Xue's *Frontier* [2017], translated by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping; hereafter referred to as *Frontier*).

19 No other novel by Can Xue features so many animals and plants.

20 Concerning the problems related to the regime, it is surprising how few Can Xue has faced throughout her career. According to her own accounts, she encountered minimal censorship, exceptin 2000 when the publication of her novel *Yellow Mud Street* was banned in Beijing. She has also had difficulties with the publication of her autobiographical essay "A Summer Day in the Beautiful South" (McCadlish 2002 [online]).

> 你爹爹说，就是挖一辈子战壕也心甘情愿。看看我们周围这些志愿者，我们就有了信心。我和你爹在战壕里伸一伸腰，看到雾中的那面红旗，听到附近树林里鸟儿凄苦的叫声，这时你爹就说："真是一场不流血的战争啊"我们这些自愿者都很沉默，因为在沉默中我们的心境会变得无比的开阔。(*Bianjiang,* 319).

> Ever since the old director died, work has turned into a hobby for everyone. This institute of ours hasn't had a leader for a long time: it's more a concept that's leading us. The institute is still in good shape. (*Frontier,* 305).
> 自从老院长去世之后，上班的事就变成每个人的个人兴趣了。我们这个院，早就没有领导了，是一种观念在领导着我们，但院里的工作还是井井有条。(*Bianjiang*, 314).

While some readers may decode the latter passage as a direct reference to a Taoist notion of *wuwei* 无为 (doing by not doing), we tend to interpret it as the author criticizing "large institutions" whose true purpose remains unclear to most people.

The (Magical) geographical setting itself plays a significant role in the novel. As mentioned earlier, the novel's narrative is characterized by ambiguity, fragmentation, and surrealism. Nonetheless, amidst this complexity, certain geographical settings—aligned with the four cardinal points—are distinctly delineated, and we believe that they as such carry deeper meanings or convey rather clear messages to the reader. In conjunction with the surreal and ambiguous narrative, these geographical elements could be deemed a manifestation of "magical geography".

The north-southern verticality is particularly strong in the novel. The *frontier* is very clearly situated in the *north,* in the "the northernmost" place, next to Pebble Town, which lies at the foot of a mysterious Snow Mountain (*Xueshan* 雪山).[21] The "northernmost" Pebble Town is described as a *magnetic place* (*hen you xiyinli de* 很有吸引力的; *cichang* 磁场), which attracts wanderers and settlers, yet where "everything is yet unresolved" (所有的事都悬而未决):

21 The snow on the top of the mountain seems to be a very clear symbol, that of free spirit. See note 1.

> [Nancy] I'm puzzled by lots of things here; they're mixed together. Still, this place is magnetic (***hen you xiyinli de*** 很有吸引力的). Look at that eagle, flying and stopping [. . .]. Everything's unresolved." Qiming thought to himself, this young woman [Nancy] who has just arrived has already become a Pebble Town local. (*Frontier,* 74).
> 年思表情怪怪的，像在同某个看不见的人讨论问题一样，说："嗯，我感到这里啊，很多事情分不清，全夹杂在一块。怎么说呢，这里还是很有吸引力的，你看那只鹰，飞飞停停的……所有的事都悬而未决啊" 启明心里暗想，这位新来的小女人，已经成为小石城的一员了。(*Bianjiang*, 57).

> [Qiming said]: "Our Pebble Town is a huge magnetic field, attracting people who are fascinated with secret things." (*Frontier,* 292).
> 我们小石城像一个巨大的磁场，吸引着那些对某种隐秘的事情着迷的人。(*Bianjiang,* 299).

The north seems to represent magic, attractiveness, freedom, the undisclosed and unresolved, as well as the presence of the *frontier* (mental and physical), which *can* be crossed or just traversed.

In contrast, the south symbolizes structure, order, or life confined within conventional restraints[22]—south represents what remains fixed, structured, or framed within definitions. It is a realm that one must break free from in the pursuit of freedom.

> The old man spoke to Liujin: "Our son came here from the south. He died many years later, and it's said that he was very happy in this place. We didn't believe it until we came down here." [...] "His name was Zhou Dashu. He had colon cancer. But is that important? His mother and I think this place makes people happy. All you have to do is look at these fish in the stream, and you know."[23] (*Frontier,* 292).

22 Lee and Grace had come to the Design Institute a year before Nancy and José. While living in Mountain City in the south, they too had seen the recruiting ad, though the ad wasn't the main reason they had come to Pebble Town. This couple had long dreamed of once again escaping their old lives (*Frontier,* 159).

23 This sentence seems to be a reference to a famous conversation between ancient philosophers Zhuangzi 莊子 (369?–296 BCE) and Hui Shi 惠施 (370–310 BCE), in which a Taoist is discussing with a logician about happiness of the fish. See *Zhuangzi,* Outer chapters, Qiushui 秋水.

老头吃惊地看了看她，说："不，他是叫周大树，他患有结肠癌。可是，这很重要吗？我和他妈都认为，这是一个使人幸福的地方，只要看看河里这些鱼就明白了。" (*Bianjiang,* 300).

The *frontier* that the protagonists traverse, physically or metaphorically, is a surreal landscape that mirrors the inner journey of the characters. Details about their background, motivations, and characteristics are intentionally ambiguous. The characters are only minimally developed, sometimes remaining nameless, their age or even gender often unspecified. Information about their social status is seldom provided, and their actions are not indicative of their traits, as these actions are often arbitrary, impulsive, and lacking distinctive purpose. The protagonists of this novel are often uncertain about who they are, how or when they arrived, and what they want. The characters embody abstract concepts or archetypes, navigating themes of freedom, identity, existential anxiety, and loneliness. For instance, Meng Yu 孟鱼, a neighbor of the novel's central figure, Liujin, descends into madness and dismantles the rear wall of his house,[24] or Marco (Mage'er 麻歌儿), a returned adoptee who tries to make his way back to "Holland" by crossing *the border*.[25]

Most of the novel's characters are linked in some way to a Design Institute (*Jianzhu shejiyuan* 建筑设计院), built "long ago" on a rocky hill.[26] Unlike the

24 "Liujin suddenly recalled how wild this neighbor was when he was home. That autumn, this old man had gone crazy and dismantled the rear wall of his house. Luckily, the roof was covered with light couch grass, so the house didn't collapse. In the winter, he warded off the cold north wind with oilcloth (*Frontier,* 25).

25 A young man named Marco, whose identity is one of the least stable in the book ("in a split second he became a different person"), was adopted by a Dutch family as a child and later sent back. He longs to return to Holland (which Pebble Town also supposedly borders) and undertakes a dangerous journey across a river and through a desert attempting to reach his idealized Western past.

26 This symbol bears a resemblance to Kafka's *Castle. The Castle* is a surreal narrative following the protagonist K., who arrives in a nameless village with the intention of working as a land surveyor. The village is dominated by a mysterious castle situated on a hill that K. is determined to access. However, he faces numerous obstacles and frustrations in his attempts to reach the castle. Kafka's

inaccessible castle in Kafka's *The Castle,* Can Xue's Design Institute is an accessible place, frequented by numerous individuals. Yet, the nature of their work in the institute and purpose for their presence there remain shrouded in mystery. The place itself is described as resembling "a giant grave".[27]

The Director of the Institute, a woman with "snow-white hair", stands out as the most enigmatic figure in the novel. Her role as the director is unclear, and her actions purposeless or peculiar. In one instance, she was pronounced dead but inexplicably returned to life.[28] Haizai 海仔, a man from the south who volunteers in the morgue (*Frontier*, 81), once spent an entire night talking to this previously "deceased" director.

Qiming 启明 (Venus), an elderly custodian at the Design Institute, is consumed by an obsession with a Uighur woman he met years ago. Though he cannot truly be with her—she is married, has children, and lives beyond the Snow Mountain—her "love" has become a permanent purpose of his existence. He performs a special ritual every day:

> "Washing the face is a kind of exercise," the middle-aged man [Qiming] said. [...]
> "[...] I'm bathing with the chilly breeze blowing in from the Snow Mountain. Every morning, I stand here and bathe in the wind, and listen to the birds on the mountain and the cries from the snow leopards and the black bears." (*Frontier,* 49).
> 我在沐浴雪山吹来的凉风呢。我每天早上都要站在这里做风浴，倾听山里头的那些鸟啊，雪豹啊，黑熊啊它们发出的叫声。(*Bianjiang*, 31).

Wind bathing becomes a profound ritual for Qiming, with each wind bath intensifying his unfulfilled passion for the Uygur woman. Another character in the

influence on Can Xue's work has been examined in detail by Halfmann, who claims that while Can Xue adopts Kafka's motifs and develops them in her work in original ways, the fundamental character of Kafka's work is lost due to the author's misconception (Halfmann 2009: 478).

27 "On a night like this, the Design Institute, which was built on the rocky hill, seemed like a giant grave." (*Frontier,* 125). The Institute director's adopted relative, Ying 樱—the only black man living in Pebble Town—wanders the grounds of the Institute like a "timekeeper" (*Frontier,* 124), evoking the image of a god of death, counting down everyone's seconds.

28 "She was in an accident in the interior several years ago and was taken to the hospital, where she was pronounced dead. But after a day in the morgue, she came back to life." (*Frontier*, 80).

novel, Xiao Gui 小贵, also enjoys the wind because "it brings her information" (小贵很喜欢风，因为风会给她带来信息).[29]

The narrative of the novel centers on Liujin 六瑾, a young woman embarking on a mysterious journey through a fantastical landscape—much like the actions of all other characters in the novel. She encounters a variety of strange and symbolic figures along her journey. Liujin is the only main character in the novel born in Pebble Town, making her a native of the *frontier*. This heritage gives her an innate sensitivity to the local fauna and flora, and a heightened awareness of the peculiar sensations and events unique to Pebble Town. She feels lonely and emotionally abandoned.[30] Her sense of abandonment is mainly directed toward her mother Nancy (Nian Si 年思).

> [...] [Nancy] had fled from Liujin, left her behind with José [Hu Shan], and hidden here because she couldn't stand the baby's crying. And because of the baby's gaze. Her daughter was so little, and yet her gaze was so bright—not like a baby's gaze. Nancy had grown up in Smoke City and was accustomed to people's blurry expressions. And so when her eyes met her daughter's, she felt hollow inside, as if she were going mad. Her daughter's crying was kind of strange. She didn't seem to cry because of feeling uncomfortable. Rather, her crying sounded threatening. (*Frontier,* 123).
>
> [...] [年思] 她之所以逃避六瑾，将她扔给胡闪，自己躲到这里来，除了受不了婴儿的哭声以外，还因为婴儿的目光。她的女儿确实不太像一个婴儿，那么小，就有那么明亮的目光。年思是烟城长大的，习惯了人们那种朦胧的眼神。所以当她同女儿对视之际，她就感到体内全部空掉了，似乎要发狂。女儿的哭闹也有点奇怪，好像不是因为身体不舒服，哭的节奏里头有种示威的味道。(*Bianjiang,* 110).

Emotionally abandoned, Liujin seeks connections through fleeting relationships with a revolving cast of people: she allegedly had numerous lovers, with whom she would rendezvous at the Snow Mountain Hotel—a place that has since vanished.

29 *Bianjiang*, 163.

30 The element of loneliness and the isolation of the individual from society is present in the writer's work almost constantly. It is an undeniable fact that Can Xue experienced more than enough loneliness in her youth. In particular, the time when she was left alone in Changsha at a relatively young age must have left a lasting impression on her psyche.

Liujin's parents José (Hu Shan 胡闪) and Nancy, once moved to Pebble Town from Smoke City (Yancheng 烟城), because in Smoke City "people's expressions were very blurry" 习惯了人们那种朦胧的眼神, *Bianjiang*, 110), and everything was obscured by a veil of smog. In the new destination, Nancy begins searching for a floating tropical garden (*redai huayuan* 热带花园), a vision she glimpsed once from a neighbor's window. This continual searching for an elusive garden, filled with unusual flowers and trees, becomes a recurring motif throughout the novel. The character's persistent, futile quests for the garden, coupled with absurd reasons for its elusiveness, reminds us of Luis Buñuel' film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.[31]

The Last Lover

The novel *The Last Lover* (*Zuihou de qingren* 最后的情人) immerses readers into a surreal dreamscape where human souls intertwine with animal spirits, navigating the realms of love and loss, and embarking on journeys that weave through both a semblance of reality and magical landscapes. Unravelling the plot proves challenging, as *The Last Lover* orbits around key couples residing in an uncertain western country named A, within the confines of city B.

At the narrative's core are Joe (Qiao 乔), an avid reader who loses himself in the pages of books, and his wife Maria (Maliya 马丽亚), a housewife who weaves mystical tapestries and conducts mystical experiments with her cats and rose bushes. Their teenage son Daniel (Dannier 丹尼尔), who chooses gardening over conventional education, introduces a subtle shift in the family dynamic. Joe works as a sales manager for the Rose Clothing Company in city B but spends his office hours immersed in books. His secret has been unnoticed by his clients for years. In fact, Joe lives partly in the world of his books, sometimes finding himself experiencing vivid erotic fantasies.

31 *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* is a 1972 surrealist film directed by Luis Buñuel. The film centers on a small group of upper-class individuals attempting to share a meal, only to have their plans continually disrupted by a series of surreal and absurd events. Buñuel employs satire and absurdity to critique the hollowness of bourgeois life.

> In everyday life, he had never known women from the East, and due to his conservative nature, he also never had vain sexual hopes about strange women. But once inside his stories it was a different matter. More than once he'd had intense feelings for young women and mature women wearing kimonos. (*The Last Lover*, 83).
> 在日常生活里，他从来不认识来自东方的女人，而以他保守的性格，他也不会对陌生的女人产生性妄想。可是到了故事里头就是另外一回事了，他不止一次地对身着和服的少女和妇人产生过强烈的冲动。(*Zuihou de qingren,* 79).

Vincent (Wenlinte文森特), Joe's employer and owner of the thriving clothing company, grapples with distractions, sparking suspicions of infidelity from his intense wife Lisa (Lisha 丽莎). While deeply in love, the couple faces mid-life crises that manifest in peculiar ways, such as Vincent chasing a woman in black from his dreams, who keeps disappearing.

Most characters in the book are ambiguous. While the primary couples—Joe and Maria, their son Daniel, and Vincent and his wife Lisa—are clearly defined, many of the love stories remain vague. It is often unclear whether they take place in dreams or reality. For example, the woman Vincent pursues is sometimes Chinese, sometimes Arab, and at times even a male.

Reagan (Ligen 里根), an orphan, a 50-year-old self-educated bachelor and owner of a rubber plantation, lives alone. He becomes infatuated with Ida (Yida 埃达), a mysterious young woman who is also an orphan. Ida, who fled an unnamed island country in Southeast Asia, works on his farm, which is later described as an orphanage, as many of its employees are also orphans. Their relationship takes on an overtly surreal quality, yet defies conventional domesticity. An initial feeling of Raegan for Ida, as a daughter figure, takes a dramatic turn after they become intimate, transforming the dynamic of their relationship completely. Ida possesses a fierce spirit, she is an avid diver, often diving into the deep lake at the farm where she can drown and gets intentionally bitten by snakes living around the farm. Ida tries to abandon Raegan and the farm, fleeing to an unknown city where she starts living in a bar. Her absence provokes intense emotional response from Reagan: "A day without Ida is like a nightmare and like a liberation." (没有埃达的日子既像一场噩梦，又像一次解放) (*The Last Lover*, 180). He desperately searches for her,

even believing that she has reincarnated as a young boy on the farm. When Ida eventually returns, she discovers that everything has changed.

Interwoven with the lives of these central characters is a mysterious ensemble of Asian and/or Middle Eastern women, peculiar servants, eccentric loners, and a variety of animals. Earthquakes, fires, floods, and magnetic roses disrupt the characters' worlds, blurring the lines between assumed reality and dreams. Sexual desire emerges unpredictably, challenging the characters with moments of intense arousal and surprising attractions.

Sensual moments in the story are described in profoundly surreal terms:

> As for Vincent, in his sexual encounter he lost all his perception. Before, with Lisa, he used to imagine himself as a tropical animal, like a zebra, and through that kind of fantasy he grew thousands of times more amorous. But with this woman it was a different matter. He abandoned fantasies about himself, following her into a drifting world of water. Together they entered dark ravines and made love there. A voice was always in his ear: "Is this the sea or is this a lake? Is this the sea or a lake? [...]." He thought it ought to be the woman speaking, but she'd shut her lips and eyes tightly in the deep, swaying water, and was not inclined to speak at all. Vincent's fervor ran high as he felt himself using his mind to make love. He tried his utmost to recover his amorousness, but he was defeated. The undulation of the water favored their sexual rhythm. The manifestation of his flesh and blood became unimportant. (*The Last Lover*, 64).
>
> 对于文森特来说，这是一次完全失去判断力的性活动。以往同丽莎在一起时，他习惯于把自己想像成斑马这种热带动物，他在那样的想像中变得风情万种。可是同这个女人却是另外一回事，他放弃了对自身的想像，追随她在水的世界里游荡。他们两人一道钻入那些阴暗的沟壑里，在那种地方进行交媾。他的耳边老是响着那同一个声音："这是海还是湖？这是海还是湖 [...]."他觉得应该是女人在说话，但女人在晃动的深水中紧闭嘴唇和双眼，完全不打算说话。文森特激情高涨，他觉得自己正在用头脑做爱。他竭力要恢复从前那种风情万种的样子，但他失败了。水的波动促成了他和女人交媾的节奏，他的肉体表现变得完全不重要了。(*Zuihou de qingren,* 59-60).

Characters often lose themselves in their dreamy reality, as it happens to Lisa.

> She thought of Vincent. What was Vincent? He was her dream, the dream she hadn't woken from for many years. And Vincent also lived inside of a dream. She remembered him saying to her that he was going to the farm he'd seen in his dream. Because of the

> dream he came here, and then he left. But she, following the landscape of his dream, remained lost inside that landscape. Now she was so strong Vincent wouldn't even recognize her. (*The Last Lover,* 58).
>
> 她想起了文森特。文森特是什么呢？他是她的梦，她的长年不醒的梦。而文森特自己又是生活在梦里的。她记得他对她说，他要去他梦见的农场。于是他就这样来了，然后他又走了。而她，追随他梦中的景物，就迷失在这些景物里头了。现在她变得多么强壮了啊，文森特一定认不出她了。(*Zuihou de qingren,* 54).

As the narrative unfolds through successive layers of unreality, the characters meander through places that may or may not exist, effortlessly transitioning between dreams and reality. Geography becomes a (mere) state of mind, [32] and permanence is subjective. The novel challenges the conventional notions of reality, making it nearly impossible to distinguish from dreams.

One of the major themes is exploration of partnership and relationships, particularly that of Joe and Maria. Despite their apparent differences and separate lives, their intangible connection strengthens through shared absences. Maria weaves Joe's experiences into her tapestries, living vicariously through the fabric and binding their marriage.

The Last Lover is structured along a kind of vertical or anti-gravitational drive, escaping the gravitational drive of rationalism (Donatich, 2015).[33] The characters' "Mental journeys"—part pilgrimage, part chase—have all the solidity of the actual movement, and easily become indistinguishable with its many episodes of "real" travel. Space is disconcertingly fluid in the novel's physical world as well, and characters drift—at times imperceptibly—between the "real" world and their various virtual ones. No one involved, however, seems surprised or perturbed by this everyday spatial flux (Pach 2014).

Other sensations are present too, such as the smell of tropical trees and the fragrance of roses. According to Kim, a long-time client of Joe, "roses are flowers tended by people who regard themselves highly" (玫瑰花，好，那是自命不凡的

32 Various uncertain countries emerge in the novel, with the East represented by Vietnamese and Korean families, while south and north are alluded to repeatedly but remain undefined.

33 Critic Boyd Tonkin describes the novel as "a delirious cross-cultural hall of mirrors. The East dreams the West, which imagines the East as it conjures its own West.

人养的花).[34] The visual descriptions of the farm and other places leave equally strong impression of something unreal. The author builds a picture that constantly changes, with smell often being predominant. When Ida leaves Reagan, she feels like she has returned to her hometown:

> Surely Ida stood on the mud of her hometown. That softness could not be forgotten in a lifetime. The rain carried a thick fish smell, and it fell without stopping."
> (*The Last Lover,* 179).
> 她的确踩在家乡的泥土上面了，那种柔软，就是到死都忘不了。还有带着浓浓的腥味的雨，下个不停，很快她的头发就全湿了. (*Zuihou de qingren,* 175).

Places change, but the novel maintains a dreamlike ambiance. Joe embarks on a long journey to the East but eventually returns and at the culmination of the story, the characters begin a Long March. Although the connection to China's historical Long March is not explicit, it symbolizes the characters' naïve and honest attempts to find love and a path to their beloved ones. As the saying goes, the long march can begin anywhere.

Maria experiences a profound reunion with her family, which goes deep into her consciousness:

> Maria couldn't see Daniel, but she knew he was nearby. This mutual searching and pursuing in the nighttime sent a warm current through Maria's heart. After so many years, she experienced for the first time the way blood kept relatives together. Maria touched the enormous book pages with a shaking finger. She touched one after another of the letters protruding from the pages, and those letters jumped slightly, giving off electricity. Suddenly she comprehended the book's meaning." (*The Last Lover,* 305).
> 马丽亚看不见丹尼尔，她知道他也在附近。黑夜里的相互寻找与追逐使马丽亚心中泛起阵阵暖流。多少年来，她第一次体会到，亲人之间的确是靠血缘联系在一起的。马丽亚用发抖的指头摸着那些巨大的书页，她摸到了一个一个凸出纸面的字母，那些字母还微微地跳跃，发出电流。猛然间，她领悟了这本书中的内容。(*Zuihou de qingren,* 323).

Through a surreal dialogue with her son, Maria finds herself emotionally and intellectually connected with Joe, ultimately finding herself in the forest made of Joe's books:

34 *The Last Lover,* 75.

> There was a dim light in the forest of books, but when Maria looked up she couldn't see the sky. Was there even a sky? There were grass, stones, a path, and she heard water flowing from a spring. But the air was filled with the fine smell of old books. This was Joe's story. This story belonged to her, forever. Maria's heart was full of gratitude. She pricked her ears, awaiting the nightingale's singing again. She waited till it sang, but it wasn't one call, it was many, many calls. One rising as another fell. (*The Last Lover,* 297).
>
> 书的森林中有微光，当马丽亚抬头望去时，却看不到天空。那么，究竟有没有天空呢？这里有草，有石头，有小路，还听得到泉水流动的响声。但空中弥漫着陈年旧书的美好的气味。这是乔的故事，这故事属于她，永远。马丽亚心里充满了感激。她竖着耳朵在等待那夜莺的下一声啼叫。她终于等到了，但不是一声，而是许许多多，许许多多。此起彼伏。(*Zuihou de qingren,* 325).

On the imaginary long march, Maria, trying to speak with Vincent, experiences something unreal:

> An ocean of light spread in all directions. Her voice reverberated for a long time. She still couldn't see. She was moving ahead, but she couldn't even see her own feet. She suddenly thought, maybe this was a snow-capped mountain? Long ago, Vincent had said to her that letting the light of a snowy mountain become the light inside one's eyes would surely be fascinating. Lisa wanted to speak to him now about her own feeling of "blindness". Joyner had not deceived her. Vincent was nearby. In the midst of the light she saw his inner heart. This light was a cold light, but her eyes were suited to it.
>
> "Vincent, I want to speak with you!" she shouted again.
>
> She felt profoundly that Vincent had transformed into this light. At this very moment he was touching her neck, her eyes. She recalled the events that had just happened. Wasn't she in the flower shop not far from the office, where she'd met the black woman, Joyner, and then come here?" (*The Last Lover,* 298).
>
> 四周变成了光波的海洋，她的声音长久地回响着。她仍旧什么都看不见，她在往前走，但她连自己的脚都看不见。她突然想到，也许此地正是雪山？好久以前，文森特对她说过，让雪山的光芒变成自己眼睛里的光，那必定是十分有趣的。丽莎此刻很想对他谈谈自己的"盲目"的感觉。乔伊娜没有骗她，文森特就在附近，她在这光波中看到了他的心底。这光是冷光，然而她的眼睛是多么适应这一切啊。
>
> "文森特，我要对你说话！"她又喊了一声。

她深深地感到，文森特化为了这些光波，此刻正抚摸着她的脖子，她的眼球。她回忆起刚刚发生的事，她不是在离办公室不远的这家花店里同黑女人乔伊娜相遇，然后来到这里的吗？(*Zuihou de qingren,* 326).

Who is the last lover? The answer remains unclear. The novel features several love stories, some real and others existing only in the protagonists' dreams, but none are intense enough to be deemed as the most important. The plot lines wind like the paths of the tropical forests depicted in the story.

Is the novel truly about love? It explores the difficulties in communication between loving couples—emerging in their dreams and unconscious minds. And the *novel* takes shape through the happenings in their dreams and subconscious.

Conclusion

When comparing the two most frequently cited translations of Can Xue's novels, *Frontier* and *The Last Lover*, which are also the most popular among non-Chinese readers, several similarities emerge. Both novels feature a dreamlike reality, inviting comparisons to Latin American magical realism or Kafka's works. Another shared element is their portrayal of a hazy and undefined geography. While geographical terms like "south" and "north" are introduced somewhat differently in the two books, the common feature is their ambiguity and strong symbolic significance.

In *Frontier*, the north, where the novel is set, is imbued with magical qualities typical of Can Xue's "magical geography", whereas the south represents structure and order. In *The Last Lover,* the south embodies an enigmatic element, with its wild jungle vegetation and the recurring mysterious appearance of snakes and cats in Maria's house and surroundings. The novel also features Ida, a character from a Southeast Asian Island. Meanwhile, the east is also prominent in *The Last Lover* through allusions to China, Vietnam, Japan, and Korea. The motif of a floating tropical garden introduced in *Frontier* becomes even more pronounced in *The Last Lover*, where part of the plot takes place on Reagan's rubber plantation in the south, enveloped in lush southern vegetation such as coconut and rubber trees.

Can Xue has received far more recognition internationally than in China, where her novels attract less attention than those of other contemporary Chinese writers. Her works have received a warmer response from foreign audiences than

from readers in her homeland. Her international acclaim stems partly from the successful translation of *The Last Lover*, but other factors contribute as well. Unlike other contemporary Chinese authors whose works reflect typical Chinese features and cultural connotations, Can Xue's novels are characterized by their ambiguity and a lack of overt Chinese cultural markers. This sets her apart from other Chinese authors such as Yu Hua and Mo Yan, whose works often resonate with traumatic historical events familiar to Chinese readers. Can Xue's earlier novels, such as *The Hut on the Hill* (*Shan shang de xiaowu* 山上的小屋),[35] contained these elements, but their absence in later works fosters a dreamlike quality that may alienate Chinese readers seeking familiarity and cultural resonance.

As a result, Can Xue's novels, particularly *Frontier* and *The Last Lover,* belong more to an international literary context than to Chinese literature. Her works are more rooted in international literary traditions and aesthetics, and her literary values are more universal. The absence of Chinese historical references makes her novels easier for Western readers to understand, solidifying her position as an internationally acclaimed writer.

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Achievements of Inculturation in the Indian Catholic Church

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Abstract This paper examines the powerful ideological and theological concept of inculturation, which greatly influenced the Catholic Church in India in the last three decades of the 20th century. The paper begins with a general definition of inculturation, followed by an introduction to its relevance in the Indian context. Inculturation, particularly in the 1970s, was extremely influential in the Indian Church and was associated with many expectations. The paper demonstrates this through the case of the All-India Seminar on the Church in India Today, and its implications in the years that followed. The Seminar identified key areas for inculturation, including liturgy, monastic communities, spirituality, and Christian art. The paper outlines developments in each of these areas, drawing on the most significant contributions of Indian scholars as well as insights gained from long-term field research. Although the original concept of inculturation later faced criticism, its influence in these areas remains an inalienable legacy of the Indian Catholic Church.

Keywords India, Christianity in India, Catholic Church, inculturation, liturgy, ashrams, spirituality, Indian Christian art

Introduction

For over half a century, inculturation has been one of the most extensively debated concepts within the Indian Catholic Church. Although the term began to appear in the writings of Indian theologians and official Church documents in the mid-1970s, the complex ideological concept behind it had been taking shape in India since the late 1960s, closely linked to the reformist spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Whether met with enthusiasm and expectation, embarrassment, misunderstanding, moderate and severe criticism, or even outright rejection,

inculturation has arguably attracted more attention within the Indian Church milieu than any other concept.

In broad terms, inculturation is the process by which Christianity enters a foreign, distinctive cultural world and becomes an integral part of it. During this process, certain local cultural values are accepted and transformed through their integration into Christianity and, at the same time, Christianity itself is transformed through these originally foreign values. In India, the process of inculturation is uniquely complex due to the country's pluralistic culture, which is not a unified whole but with its partial manifestations firmly embedded in a complex social structure. Because the nature of this structure is hierarchical, the cultural expressions and values of different social groups in Indian society, which in fact create and carry forward many different Indian cultures, often find themselves in conflict with each other.

The progressive Indian theologians who initiated inculturation in the Catholic Church in the late 1960s and 1970s chose Sanskrit culture from the rich variety of Indian traditions. Throughout Indian history, this culture has been regarded as an elite cultural stratum, a "great tradition" cultivated for centuries by the Brahmins, who were the elite representatives of Indian society and hegemons of this culture. They received support from many Hindu rulers, who found it advantageous to be on good terms with the Brahmins, since the Brahmins could sanctify the rulers' status through their religious authority and enhance their prestige by cultivating traditional cultural values in their courts.

The motivations behind these Catholic theologians' choice of Sanskrit culture for inculturation mostly stemmed from their personal intellectual, social, and spiritual backgrounds. All who became agents of inculturation were educated theologians with a broad outlook and a deep interest in various religious traditions, particularly their spiritual aspects; some could even be classified as Sanskrit scholars. However, the changing context of the era also played a role in their choice. The agents of inculturation based their understanding of India and its cultural landscape on ideas that had already taken shape in the nineteenth century, with Brahmins—key informants of the first generation of Indologists—serving as mediators or even co-creators of these concepts.

Additionally, 19th century reformist Hindu organizations, responding directly to the influence of various Christian churches and the missionary activities, played an important role in shaping the idea of the religious essence of Hinduism. These organizations sought to purify India's religious and cultural milieu of anything that appeared controversial during the height of colonialism and in the eyes of its proponents. Their aim was to present or even reinvent Hinduism as a modern religion that could easily equal or even surpass Christianity. At the same time, in the context of the growing need for a common national identity, these organizations sought to present Hinduism as a unifying religion. In the second half of the 20th century, this idea was subsequently adopted and further nurtured by Catholic theologians, who sometimes even understood it as the essence of the religious world of the whole of India, and thereby implemented their own concept of inculturation.

The most significant change that proved fatal to the original concept of inculturation emerged with the advent of Dalit liberation theology during the 1980s. This theology focused on the most marginalized segments of Indian society—the Dalits—placing their socio-economic conditions, life needs, spiritual aspirations, and cultural values at the forefront of the intellectual discourse that has unfolded within the Indian Church since then.[1] As a result, the understanding of inculturation has inevitably changed. This shift prompted a search for new answers to key questions concerning the meaning of inculturation for the Indian Church, the goals to be achieved through it, the means to be employed, and who should act as the agent of inculturation.

The literature on the topic of the inculturation of Christianity in India is extensive. However, with a few exceptions—most notably Collins (2006) and Gravend-Tirole (2014)—it is written exclusively by Indian authors and usually published by small Indian publishing houses or local theological journals. Most of these valuable contributions are therefore not well known outside India. The authors of these works are personally involved in the current developments within the Indian Catholic Church and, with few exceptions, are critical of the original concept of inculturation today, aligning their views with the current social and theological discourse mentioned above. They usually chart the development of

1 See also Hons 2020.

inculturation in India, point out which of the stated goals its proponents have failed to achieve, and aptly discuss the main reasons for the supposed failure.

This article, in contrast, aims to highlight and briefly present the achievements of inculturation as it was envisioned in the Catholic Church in India during the 1960s and 1970s and implemented in the following decades. In the early years, inculturation received support from the Church authorities and it briefly became part of the official program for renewing the life of the Church in India in accordance with the ideals of the Second Vatican Council. Later, however, the partial steps of inculturation took place more on the periphery of the Church's interest, sometimes in the "ecclesiastical shadow" or often against the wishes of the relevant authorities. Although the tangible fruits of inculturation may appear insignificant after fifty years of development, compared to the lofty expectations of its early days, they cannot be ignored or completely disregarded, for many of them have become functional and legitimate parts of the life of the Catholic Church in India.

1 *The Term and its Context*

Scholars generally agree that the term inculturation was first used in 1962 by the Belgian Jesuit and Indologist Joseph Masson when he expressed the urgent need for "a Catholicism that is inculturated in a variety of forms" (e.g., Shorter 2006, 10; Nellikunnel 2020, 27). Masson coined the term shortly before the Second Vatican Council, reflecting the Council's constitutive idea of bringing the Church closer to contemporary life and the world—a complex process Pope John XXIII, the Council's convener, referred to as *aggiornamento*. To remain relevant in a post-war, post-colonial world where previously politically subjugated nations were asserting their identities, the church needed to adequately reflect their domestic cultures.

The change in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards non-European cultures and their religious traditions, as officially declared in the conciliar documents like *Nostra Aetate*, stands as one of the most important contributions of the Council. This shift marked the end of a long historical phase in the

development of Christianity, during which the missionary efforts in non-European countries promoted not only the Christian message but also cultural uniformity. This approach stemmed from the Eurocentric belief that Christianity was inherently tied to European cultural forms, through which it had to be expressed and transmitted.

In the 1970s, the term inculturation gained popularity and appeared in the final statement of the first Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) held in Taipei in 1974, which called for a truly "local Church" that would be an "inculturated Church" (Pinto 1985, 12). A letter from the Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Aruppe, played an important role in the term's acceptance in the international theological circles. The Jesuits had led an active interest in non-European cultures since the sixteenth century, and they did not hesitate to using elements of these cultures for missionary purposes (e.g., Roberto De Nobili in India and his well-known, although controversial, *accommodatio* approach). In his letter to the entire Society, Aruppe described inculturation as "the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context". In contrast to many earlier approaches, which he said amounted only to "superficial adaptation", Aruppe understood inculturation as "a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it to bring about 'a new creation'" (Aruppe 1978, par. 1). This emergence of something new through a creative, dynamic relationship between the Christian message and local culture—as inculturation is aptly defined by the widely quoted A. Shorter (2006, 11)—has become an alluring yet risky goal for attempts at implementing inculturation, especially in the field of liturgy.

The term inculturation first appeared in an official papal statement in 1979 (John Paul II 1979, 53) and later received significant, de facto definitive attention in the 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*. In this encyclical, Pope John Paul II describes inculturation as "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures" (John Paul II 1990, 52, par. 2). Through inculturation, the Church, he says, also transmits "her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within" (Ibid., par. 3). In the same breath, however, the Pope acknowledges (or perhaps warns) that this is "a difficult process, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith" (Ibid., par. 2).

Indian theologians also began to use the term inculturation extensively from the mid-1970s onwards. In line with international theological discourse, they preferred it over older terms which, in light of the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council, appeared inadequate for various reasons.[2] J. Saldanha (1997, 14) defines inculturation as "the process by which a particular Church expresses its faith and life in and through the local culture". The result of this process, often described as a dialogue between faith and culture (Amaladoss 2005, 143), is meant to be mutually enriching: the Christian message transforms the local culture and is itself transformed by that culture (Wilson 2010, 243). It does not change the content of the Christian message but rather reinterprets it in the local context, giving it a new expression. New ways of expressing the Christian faith through elements of local culture bring fresh impulses to Christianity, expanding the self-understanding of the local Church and even contributing to the universality that the Church claims.

However, the range of cultural elements that might be accepted, "purified" (Amalorpavadass 1976, 209), and embedded in the Christian tradition is very wide. It includes symbols, rites, customs, rites of passage, festivals, ways or methods of personally experienced spirituality, linguistic idioms, artistic expression, and more. In the judgment of some theologians, inculturation should above all respond adequately to the broad context of local life, including "its economic, political and historical implications" (Kavunkal 1993, 183).

2 *The All-India Seminar and its Plan for Inculturation*

Even from this brief introduction to inculturation, it is perhaps clear how all-encompassing, but at the same time very broadly or rather vaguely defined the concept of inculturation is in the thinking of theologians. Some even openly judge that the process of inculturation should cover absolutely all aspects of Christian

2 E.g., acculturation, indigenization, adaptation, etc.; for an exhaustive list of these terms, with concise though vague definitions, see Chupungco 1992, 14-28; Pinto 1985, 8-12; Nellikunnel 2020, 27-30.

life and every Church activity (Amalorpavadass 1978, 27-28; Amaladoss 1991, 151-152). Yet, as early as the late 1960s, the Indian Church attempted to identify specific areas for inculturation to set clearer objectives for its development.

In 1969, the All-India Seminar on the Church in India Today was held in Bangalore, South India, to chart a path for its renewal. The Seminar was attended by over 600 representatives from various sectors of Church life and was seen both as the culmination "of a long period of reflection inspired by the Second Vatican Council" and as "the point of departure for a new stage in the history of Christianity in our country" (All India Seminar 1970, 246).[3] The main challenge identified for renewing the Church in India was the historical inability of the Church to integrate fully with the local environment (Ibid., 8). Consequently, the general objectives formulated by the Preparatory Commission prior to the Seminar (Ibid., 9) and the specific recommendations in the final documents (i.e., the Declaration and Resolutions, representing participant consensus) directly addressed this task. The Seminar sparked great interest among Christians and ecclesiastical circles in India and abroad, even prompting a letter of blessing from the Holy See (ibid., 63). Prominent representatives of the Indian Church actively participated in the Seminar, and a sense of collective enthusiasm accompanied its proceedings, as the seminar report shows. The final documents can thus be described as a veritable manifesto of the post-Second Vatican Council Catholic Church in India. Although the term inculturation does not yet appear in these documents—as it did not become part of the discourse on the Church's relationship with local cultures until several years later—some of the recommendations adopted by the Seminar fit the concept of inculturation exactly as presented above.

Many of the recommendations stem from the Declaration's opening statement, which recognizes the unquestionable value of Indian culture as well as religious traditions (Ibid., 240). These traditions are suggested as sources of creative inspiration for developing an inculturated liturgy (Ibid., 242) that should

3 This and the following quotations come from the official comprehensive report on the Seminar (627 pages). It describes the sequence of events leading up to its organization, provides a faithful record of its progress, and includes a subsequent evaluation. This important source includes the partial conclusions of the various working groups, the recommendations adopted and the official declaration of the Seminar.

take on an Indian character "by integrating authentic Indian forms of worship" (Ibid., 254). First and foremost, an Indian ambience should be created during the liturgy, and the liturgical prayers should draw from India's spiritual tradition. The recommendations also advocate for the study of sacred scriptures of Indian religions so that Christians can discover their spiritual richness (Ibid., 259 and 262). The topic of small monastic communities (ashrams), whose way of life reflects the Indian monastic tradition, was a recurring theme during the Seminar, and thus appears prominently in the final recommendations (Ibid., 243, 253 and 259). These Christian ashrams should foster the contemplative life among Indian Christians, nurturing an Indian Christian spirituality. Emphasis on meditation and inwardly experienced spirituality emerges as a central motif in many recommendations, as the contemplative spirit was recognized as one of the main characteristics of the Indian religious milieu (Ibid., 249-250). Indian Christians should therefore be encouraged to adopt spiritual practices proven successful in Indian religious traditions (Ibid., 250). Additionally, the recommendations explicitly call for bold creativity inspired by India's cultural heritage to stimulate the development of Indian Christian art, including architecture of sacred buildings and visual art (Ibid., 259, 262-263).

3 *Achievements of Inculturation*

The constitutive idea of the Seminar was to renew the life of the Indian Catholic Church in a holistic way. The recommendations cited above represent only a portion of the many proposals put forth in the Seminar's final documents. However, all these recommendations are directly relevant to inculturation as presented above and can therefore serve to assess whether, and to what extent, the goals set by the Seminar were achieved in the ensuing years, thereby revealing the achievements of inculturation. Each of the three areas of inculturation examined below corresponds with one of the Seminar's recommendations. For each area, relevant developments that followed the Seminar will be briefly outlined. Finally, the common characteristics of each of these areas will be identified along with a concise evaluation.

3.1 Inculturation of liturgy[4]

Both proponents and critics of inculturation have always paid the greatest attention to the liturgy, and the first steps in this area were taken successfully shortly before the Seminar. At its first meeting following the Second Vatican Council in 1966, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) made the decision to establish a national center to implement the ideas of the conciliar decrees in the Indian Church. In 1967, the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) was founded in Bangalore. D. S. Amalorpavadass (1932–1990), a Tamil priest, theologian, and the most active promoter of inculturation in India, was appointed as its first director and served as the secretary of the CBCI Commission for Liturgy. Under his leadership, NBCLC's inculturation laboratory developed a program of liturgical renewal, which was planned in three successive phases and implemented in stages over the course of the subsequent years (Leeuwen 1990, 70).

In early 1969, the CBCI Commission for Liturgy formulated a list of specific liturgical changes aimed at creating an Indian atmosphere during the service. This list is referred to as the "12 points of liturgical adaptation"; CBCI members agreed to it by a two-thirds majority and, just two weeks before the Seminar began, the list was approved by the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship. During the Seminar itself, masses incorporating these liturgical changes were held, reportedly leaving a deep impression on the participants (Manickam 2000, 94-95).

The 12 points of adaptation cover the external aspects of the liturgy: seating of the celebrant and the faithful throughout the ceremony, performance of the greeting of peace using a gesture of clasped hands and a slight bow, full prostration of the priest and the faithful before the Liturgy of the Word, simplification of the celebrant's vestments, frequent use of the traditional Indian rite of *arati* (i.e., the circular waving of a lamp in homage), substitution of some liturgical instruments with those used for sacred purposes in a Hindu setting, use of flowers, incense sticks, and oil lamps as offerings on the altar during the service and not merely as decorations, etc. (Amalorpavadass 1978, 81-86). These changes were intended to

4 Liturgical inculturation is a topic that has been extensively explored by Indian theologians and scholars. Its development, interpretation and critique have been dealt with in countless papers in theological journals and in several monographs. For the most comprehensive treatment of the subject, see Nellikunnel 2020.

be introduced into the liturgical practices of the Indian Church gradually and after thorough education of the faithful and therefore a certain degree of freedom in their introduction was left to the will and discretion of the bishops in various dioceses.

The aim of the second phase of liturgical inculturation was to create original compositions for liturgical texts, including the Eucharistic Prayer (Anaphora), which is the heart of the Catholic mass. The expert team of the Commission for Liturgy developed a text of this Anaphora and forwarded it to the CBCI. However, at the CBCI's 1972 meeting, the Anaphora failed to receive sufficient support due to disagreements over the exact size of the voting majority required, and therefore, it was not forwarded to the Vatican Congregation for consideration. According to Leeuwen (2000, 250), this procedural error posed the first serious setback to liturgical inculturation. Nevertheless, in 1973, the CBCI Commission for Liturgy prepared the full liturgical text for both the Latin and the Syro-Malabar rites,[5] recommending its trial use in selected experimental centers to gather feedback for further modifications.

The text of the Latin liturgy, entitled *An Order of the Mass for India* and including the Anaphora, was published in the same year with an accompanying theological and liturgical commentary written by Amalorpavadass (1973). Although the structure of this Mass fully corresponds to the Latin rite, some of the ritualistic elements or gestures of the celebrant mimic the ritualistic acts of Brahmin priests in Hindu temples. The liturgical text is full of Sanskrit phraseology and idiomatic language,[6] with numerous paraphrases of verses and direct quotations from Hindu scriptures such as the *Rigveda*, *Upanishads*, and *Bhagavad Gita*. The Anaphora itself incorporates the elements of Indian religious thought into the Christian understanding of salvation history, and even expresses this understanding repeatedly through Hindu religious and philosophical concepts.[7]

5 The Catholic Church in India is a communion of three individual *sui juris* churches: Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara.

6 See also Syed et al. 2023: 47.

7 E.g., "God of the nations, / You are the desire and hope / of all who search for you with sincere

In the third phase of inculturation, sacred texts from non-Christian religions were to be incorporated into the liturgy. Under the leadership of Amalorpavadass, the NBCLC organized a Research Seminar on Non-Biblical Scriptures in 1974, in which leading Indian theologians participated. In its conclusions, the seminar identified these Scriptures as divinely inspired and recommended appropriate passages for inclusion in the Liturgy of the Word, prayers, hymns, sermons, and the Anaphora (ed. Amalorpavadass 1974, 689). The participants themselves were aware of the revolutionary nature of this perspective and its far-reaching theological implications. Indeed, at the outset of their final statement, they described this phase of inculturation as the most controversial but crucial for the Indian Church (Ibid., 663). In their judgment, the Church in India would never become truly Indian—that is, an inculturated Church—"without being familiar with, and feeding on her [i.e., Indian] scriptures." (Ibid., 693).

A sternly dismissive response from the Vatican came in 1975, just months after the publication of the full report on the seminar. Cardinal James Knox, then Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, called on the CBCI to ban the use of non-Biblical texts during the liturgy, as well as the Order of the Mass containing the controversial Anaphora. This prohibition was to apply to the celebrations of Eucharistic sacrifices in public, experimental communities, and private settings (Saldanha 1997, 71). The ban caused confusion among Indian bishops, as some had already applied the modifications to the entire process of liturgical inculturation, including the 12 points of adaptation. As a result, the initial enthusiasm for the renewal of the liturgical life of the Indian Church in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council ideals suffered an irreparable blow (Leeuwen 2000, 253).

The freedom granted to bishops for introducing the 12 points of adaptation has led to varying degrees of dissemination and adoption across different dioceses. The only research conducted on the subject was by the CBCI Commission for

heart. / You are the Power almighty / adored as Presence hidden in nature. / You reveal yourself / to the seers in their quest for knowledge, / to devout who seek you through sacrifice and detachment, / to every man approaching you by the path of love. / You enlighten the hearts that long for release / by conquest of desire and universal kindness / You show mercy to those who submit / to your inscrutable decrees." (Amalorpavadass 1973, 90). For the main points of the critical analysis of the Anaphora and the whole Indian mass, see Collins 2006, 228-234.

Liturgy, ten years after the 12 points were approved.[8] This research showed that 58% of respondents to a questionnaire agreed with the adaptation, as it enabled them "to worship God in keeping with the spirit and genius of India" (Study Report 1978, 142). Approximately 15% of respondents did not find significant value in adopting these points for themselves but felt they could be meaningful for new converts and "those whose lifestyle is deep-rooted in the traditional Indian culture." (Ibid.). On the other hand, 17% percent believed that "Christian worship possesses its own characteristics which should not be confused with the indigenous elements of various cultures." (Ibid.). 5% of respondents expressed serious doubts that the 12 points of adaptation had received proper approval from the CBCI and the Holy See. The remaining respondents stated that they were unaware of the 12 points of adaptation.

The survey also revealed that only a few of the 12 points had become integral to Catholic liturgy across India (e.g., the greeting of peace by clasping hands) and that these points were better received in northern than in southern India, in rural areas rather than in urban ones, and in communities of religious professionals rather than in parish congregations. Consequently, the results of this inculturation have been of considerable variety in the external aspects of Catholic liturgy, often depending on personal preferences and the conservative or progressive stance of the bishop concerned.

8 The final report of this research was compiled by D. S. Amalorpavadass (A Study Report of Facts, Procedures and Survey on Liturgical Renewal in India since the II Vatican Council, 1978, 157 p.). The report has never been published, but it can be found in the archives of the NCBCL. A copy of this report, from which the quotations and information in this paragraph were drawn, is in the possession of the author of this article.

3.2 Inculturation through ashrams and their spirituality[9]

Christian ashrams are historically older than the concept of inculturation and date back to the late 19th century. However, within the Catholic Church, these ashrams represent the purest embodiment of inculturation, as they encompass practically all the planned areas outlined in the Seminar's recommendations. Despite being a marginal phenomenon or even an anomaly of the Indian Catholic Church due to their limited numbers, ashrams attracted extraordinary attention during the 1970s to 1990s. During these thirty years, which marked the peak of the Christian ashram movement, the ashrams were seen as a much-coveted opportunity for the Church, and indeed the whole of Christianity in India, to integrate more deeply with the domestic cultural and religious milieu. At the same time, however, they also faced harsh criticism from not only conservative Church circles and members of the laity but also from leading proponents of Hindu nationalism and its activists.

In general, ashrams can be characterized as loose, open communities centered around a teacher who guides his followers and students on their spiritual journey. Each ashram, whether Hindu or Christian, is unique, because its structure inevitably emerges from the teacher's personality and is shaped through the community's dynamic influence. At the same time, however, Catholic ashrams remain legitimate entities within the Church and must justify their existence within its framework. Individual ashrams are linked by numerous relationships, notably interpersonal, economic, and sometimes institutional. In Christian ashrams, spirituality is cultivated using effective Hindu spiritual practices, following the patterns established mainly by 19th-century leaders of modern Hinduism or Neo-Hinduism (e.g., different meditation techniques, modern forms of yoga, etc.). The lifestyle of ashram members and visitors is ideally suited to the cultural milieu of India in all respects, with a great emphasis on a vegetarian diet, simple clothing, and barefoot walking. These ashrams often serve as sites of bold experimentation with liturgy, ritualism, religious symbolism, or theological

9 The subject of Christian ashrams has also received well-deserved attention, be it from their apologists, critics, or scholars. For three comprehensive monographs, see Ralston 1987; Pattathu 1997; and Štipl 2020. The following insights are based on the research in Catholic ashrams that the author of this article has been conducting since 2009.

concepts. They are meant to be places of lively dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism, primarily through a contemplative way of life.

Before the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church had only two ashrams: Saccidananda / Shantivanam, founded in 1950 in Tamil Nadu, and Kurisumala, founded in 1958 in Kerala. Both could be described as peculiar curiosities quietly tolerated by the Church authorities at the time. However, beginning in the late 1960s and closely linked with the Seminar, ashrams evolved into a Church-wide phenomenon. Priests attracted to ashram spirituality received support from their bishops, and some bishops even directly commissioned suitably selected priests to establish ashrams within their dioceses. The number of ashrams grew rapidly during the 1970s, and by the 1980s, several dozens of them had been established all over India. Paradoxically, it was at this peak period that the expectations associated with ashrams began to seem unrealistic. Despite their openness to interested outsiders, the ashrams remained experimental communities. The spirituality cultivated within them did not spread significantly beyond their walls and, therefore, did not contribute to the creation of a new, indigenous identity for Indian Christians that would become fully inculturated into the Indian milieu. This crisis became particularly evident with the natural departure of the founders of the ashrams in the 1990s, intensifying in the first decade of the new millennium. Most of the ashrams ceased to exist during this period as only rarely did a suitable successor emerge from the ashram communities to sustain continuity and facilitate desirable generational renewal.

However, not all Catholic ashrams suffered such a fate. From the once rich array that included several different types of ashrams (see Štipl 2020, 193-194), only two appear to be functional and viable today. More traditional and historically older are the ashrams of monastic communities. These "ashram monasteries" remain open to temporary guests who can participate in the daily life of the community. They undoubtedly have their place in the Indian Catholic Church even after more than half a century of existence, as their communities have maintained stable membership throughout and have successfully undergone generational renewal, both in terms of the superior and the ordinary monks. In addition to their long tradition, secure affiliations with religious communities based abroad has contributed to their viability. In the case of Shantivanam, the

Italian Camaldoli congregation of St. Romuald took the ashram under its auspices in 1982, while Kurisumala ashram became an autonomous abbey of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance in 1998. These international affiliations provide both ashrams with a degree of independence and freedom from the broader developments within the Indian Catholic Church.

The second type includes ashrams that function today as training centers for Indian Christian spirituality in a broad sense. These small, permanent communities hold multi-day spiritual programs with a wide range of themes. These can be comprehensive and carefully planned programs, such as those held monthly at the Anjali ashram in Karnataka since the early 1980s. This ashram was founded and subsequently run by Amalorpavadass until his untimely death in 1990, and his work continues to be carried on by his disciples. According to the carefully kept records of the ashram, over 10,000 participants attended these programs between 1983 and 2004 (Anjali Ashram's God-Experience 2005, 9-14). Other ashrams of this type hold courses in meditation and modern yoga (e.g., Aanmodaya in Tamil Nadu or Vidyavanam in Karnataka), seminars on inter-religious dialogue, and interpretative readings of scriptures from different religious traditions (e.g., Sameeksha in Kerala). These programs are organized either on a regular basis for interested members of the public, mostly of middle-class urban backgrounds, or for specific closed groups such as seminary students, religious men and women, or students from religious schools that have long-standing collaborations with these ashrams.

In addition to an emphasis on personally experienced spirituality, liturgical inculturation forms an integral part of daily life in the ashrams. It is created by the permanent members of the ashrams or maintained in the form bequeathed to them by its founder, while temporary visitors partake in it or are systematically introduced to it during the spiritual programs. The 12 points of adaptation presented above have been seamlessly adopted by the ashrams, sometimes with slight modifications tailored to the community's needs, mostly for practical purposes. However, the ashrams continue to experiment with the other two phases of liturgical inculturation, despite the Vatican ban.

As far as the Indian mass is concerned, it is now regularly held only at the Kurisumala ashram every day except on Sundays and holidays under the name of *Bharatiya Pooja*. This mass is based on the liturgical text for the Syro-Malabar rite, adapted for the Syro-Malankara Church, to which Kurisumala belongs. Francis

Mahieu (1912–2002), the Belgian Cistercian Trappist and co-founder of this ashram, contributed greatly to this adaptation. Unlike the text of the Latin rite, the liturgical text of the *Bharatiya Pooja* has never been officially published, as it is intended only for the internal use of the ashram. This text also features extensive Sanskrit phraseology, contains quotations from the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, and incorporates borrowed mantras, where names of Vishnu, Krishna, or other revered Hindu gods are often substituted with the name of Christ. The *Bharatiya Pooja* liturgy also draws inspiration from Hindu ritual practices. This inculturated mass can be celebrated at Kurisumala only with the permission of the local bishop, who holds a protective hand over the ashram's unique liturgical practices.[10]

At the Anjali ashram, participants in spiritual programs are periodically introduced to parts of *An Order of the Mass for India* from the Latin rite, though never to its entirety and always excluding the controversial Indian Anaphora. In other ashrams, the liturgy follows the officially approved rite.

Sacred scriptures from non-Christian religions are used daily in all ashrams during the divine office and paraliturgies. Communal prayer meetings are usually held three times a day—at dawn, noon, and dusk, i.e., transitional times that are considered auspicious for ritual and spiritual activities in the Hindu tradition. During the prayers, the community recites mantras from the *Rigveda* or *Upanishads*, and passages from the Indian religious scriptures, drawn especially (though not exclusively) from Sanskrit religious texts, are read alongside biblical psalms. Most of these texts are translations into English, which remains the lingua franca of the ashram milieu. Local Indian languages come into play in the singing of devotional hymns, known as *bhajans* in the Hindu context. In some ashrams, these hymns have been published in the form of hymnbooks, exclusively for internal use and especially with temporary visitors in mind. These hymnbooks serve as interesting study material from both religious and lexical perspectives, as they communicate Christian religious content through local cultural and religious idioms. The divine office and paraliturgies are either preceded or followed by a longer period of communal meditation. As already mentioned, the emphasis on a systematically cultivated spiritual life is a key feature and the de facto reason for

10 For a concise ethnographic description of the *Bharatiya Pooja* liturgy, see Karásek 2019.

the existence of Catholic ashrams. In this regard, meditation is the method through which inculturation within the ashrams is accomplished.

3.3 Inculturation of architecture and art[11]

The exterior design of cathedrals, churches, and chapels in India is mostly faithful to European architectural models. Therefore, the first empirical impression of Indian Christianity reinforces the ideological premise of inculturation, according to which Christianity has failed to integrate into the local environment and remains in the position of a foreign phenomenon. Some interesting experiments with sacred architecture in the second half of the 20th century sought to soften this impression of Europeanness.[12] These inculturated Christian structures adopt various architectural elements from Hindu temples, such as the stepped and ornate towers characteristic of the South Indian Dravidian style, the tall, curved towers of the North Indian Nagara style, the symbols of blooming lotuses crowning the towers from which the cross rises, pagoda-shaped roofs, or the richly decorated, rounded towers in the Rajput style—a hybrid of Hindu and Mughal structural design.

The interiors of these churches and chapels are often minimalistic, usually an entirely open space where worshippers sit on the floor. The altar is also unusually low for these reasons, and in some cases its shape resembles to that used for Vedic fire sacrifices. A small, separate room behind the altar may contain the Eucharistic tabernacle, which is kept dark to give the impression of the innermost sanctum of a Hindu temple, traditionally housing an image of the deity to whom the temple is dedicated. The stained-glass windows, window grilles, paintings, or mosaics on

11 For two pioneering works on the development of Indian Christian art, see Butler 1986 and Lederle 1987. For the most important apologetic contribution on inculturated architecture, see Sahi 1998. For a comprehensive overview of Indian Christian art, see Amaladass and Löwner 2012. Although this last work is mainly descriptive, it can be considered a reference source thanks to its many pictorial examples. This extraordinary publication, together with data collected during the author's field research on inculturated religious symbolism conducted in India since 2022, serves as the main source of information for the following insights.

12 The first sacred buildings consciously inspired by Hindu temple architecture were created as early as the beginning of the 20th century in the environment of Protestant Churches in South India. The Catholic Church followed suit only after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

the walls often depict scenes of Christ attired in Indian religious garb. He is most often depicted in the lotus meditation pose, employing a non-verbal language of gestures typical of both Hindu and Buddhist iconography. In inculturated churches, the portrayals of the risen Christ, symbolizing victory over death, are more prevalent, while the image of the crucified Christ is conspicuously absent. This accentuation undoubtedly reflects the fact that the idea of a dying or dead god is foreign to the Indian religious context and therefore difficult to grasp.

As advocated by the Seminar, inculturated religious art extends beyond sacred spaces and is evident in the artwork of many Indian Christian artists. Some of the most important contemporary Catholic artists whose work has received attention outside of India include Sister Claire (b. 1937), Jyoti Sahi (b. 1944), and Lucy D'Souza (b. 1949). A common characteristic of their work is that it is not "art for art's sake" (Amaladass and Löwner 2012, 193). The artists understand their art as an expression of their own faith experienced within an Indian religious setting, where Jesus as a historical figure rooted in a specific place and time is not central to their artistic expression (Lederle 1987, 72). The meditative focus during the creation process is both an act of prayer and at the same time a prompt for reflection on the meaning of being an Indian Christian.

Unsurprisingly, the artists situate the Gospel scenes in typical Indian natural or rural settings and use numerous motifs from the cultural reality of India. The figures are depicted with Indian hairstyles, ornaments, clothing, and their eloquent gestures speak a language that is understandable to the local environment. Moreover, these artists often adopt significant visual concepts from Hindu and, to a lesser extent, Buddhist artistic traditions, especially their symbolic imagery.[13]

The lotus flower, symbolizing purity, is probably the most popular motif. It represents the human soul rising from darkness into light or the person of Christ being born from the lotus or seated on a lotus throne. Another common motif is that of the wheel of dharma, symbolizing human and cosmic law. Footprints, which have been long used in Buddhist art to signify the presence of the Buddha

13 Examples of adopted motifs and symbols along with a brief explanation of the meaning they take on in a Christian context are given by Raj (1993, 98). His observations are particularly interesting because he uses them to explain his own artwork.

and the path he set forth and which must be followed, also feature in these artworks. The symbol of the upraised right hand assuring divine protection, which is ubiquitous to both Buddhist and Hindu iconography, is used with similar connotation. Additionally, Christ is most often depicted as an Indian ascetic, yogi, or guru in these works.

The adoption and reinterpretation of symbols from other religious traditions to convey Christian content has caused controversy in several cases. The most famous example is the syllable *OM*, which is understood in Hinduism as the most sacred mantra, the primordial and eternal sound from which all creation arose. Inculturated Christianity often equates this mantra with the eternal Word, that is Christ, and uses it extensively in liturgy at the beginning or end of prayers and as a symbol in artistic expression. The *OM* symbol thus can be seen embedded in the center of the crosses, in the stained-glass windows of chapels, or even on the tabernacle doors. It can also be found in the works of Christian artists, particularly J. Sahi, who has varied the symbol several times in his paintings, sometimes overtly and at other times subtly, such as in the shape of a dove with its head lowered; in this form, the sacred mantra symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

Another example is the symbol of the three-headed male figure, called *Trimurti*, through which Hindu iconography expresses the triple aspect of divine existence, i.e., the creator, sustainer, and destroyer. Inculturated Christian art has reinterpreted this symbol to express the mystery of the Holy Trinity (for an interpretation of this symbolism, see Lott and Sahi 2008, 57-58). A similar reinterpretation has been given to one of the most famous iconographic representations of the god Shiva, depicted as the king of dance, whose dynamic movements symbolize both the creative and destructive energies of the god. In the works of some Christian artists, again led by J. Sahi, Shiva's dancing figure with outstretched arms has been replaced with the crucified Christ. This motif also appeared as an illustration in the 1974 Indian edition of the Novus Ordo English Missal and in the catechetical series "God with us" from the late 1970s. This depiction of the dancing Christ also adorns altarpieces in some modern chapels.

These and other examples of the adoption of Hindu symbols have often faced strong criticism from Hindu activists and conservative Christian circles. Under persistent pressure from them, the publications featuring such illustrations were withdrawn from distribution, and some artistic representations of the adopted

symbols in sacred spaces suffered the same fate.[14] Even some of the artists involved in the development of Indian Christian art, such as the highly respected Sister Geneviève (1919–1995), have expressed strong disapproval of the use of Hindu symbols. In her view, these symbols cannot be taken out of their original religious context and reinterpreted within Christianity. Many of these symbols retain meanings attributed to them by their original milieu and are therefore inappropriate for Christian use—for example, due to their tantric or erotic connotations (Amaladass and Löwner 2012, 260-262; Lederle 1987, 75).

4 *Characteristics and Evaluation of Inculturation*

The main, shared feature of inculturation across the three areas discussed is its inspiration drawn from Sanskrit religious culture. The ritual practices, phraseology, and sacred texts used in the inculturated liturgy; the lifestyle and methods of spiritual practices cultivated in the ashrams, forming the basis of inculturated Christian spirituality; as well as the architectural elements and religious symbolism of the inculturated art—all come from this culture and the so-called "great tradition" of Hinduism. The agents of inculturation consciously chose this source of inspiration, as Sanskrit culture represents relatively uniform tradition within India's culturally pluralistic environment. It has always connected different regions of India and has a continuous three-thousand-year tradition. By Indian standards, this Sanskrit culture could even be described as cosmopolitan in its historical development (Lott 1986, 4-5).

Attempts to inculturate Christianity into this very high and elite culture, which had always been the exclusive domain of the Brahmins, stemmed from a

14 The most notable case, which after many years of litigation reached court, is associated with the NBCLC in Bangalore. Amalorpavadass, the mastermind behind the artistic design of the entire campus, which is a textbook example of inculturated symbolism, had the Hindu Trimurti and the Shiva dancer depicted on the window grille of the chapel; the artist of this work was J. Sahi. Although the court proceedings decided in favor of the NBCLC, Amalorpavadass chose to have both the controversial depictions removed in 1979.

particular understanding of India and its religious traditions at the given time. This understanding is related to the Indological and colonial perspective on India, which was influenced or directly shaped by the Brahmins as key informants to the first few generations of European Indologists. Although this perspective, which created a Brahmanically idealized India, originated in the 19th century, it continued to influence Indological discourse for most of the 20th century. When Indian Church leaders in the late 1960s attempted to change the Church's relationship with local culture following the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, they naturally gravitated toward Sanskrit culture.

Critics of inculturation as it was ideologically planned at the time and partially implemented in the years that followed, sometimes refer to it as a Catholic version of Sanskritization, a process familiar within Hindu context (Raj 2005, 419). However, by embracing Brahmanical values, Christianity risks abandoning its traditional role as a protector of the poor and socially ostracized, especially the Dalits, who now make up the majority of Indian Christians. Through inculturation, the Church potentially alienates those who seek refuge in the hope of liberation, because the Brahmanical values embedded in Sanskrit tradition have been the cause of their oppression for centuries. Numerous social groups of Dalits have tried to escape this oppression by converting to Christianity, and therefore they find it difficult to embrace the ritual elements, phraseology, methods of spiritual practice, or religious symbols associated with the Brahmanical religious milieu. They want to be liberated from this oppressive environment and thus be "deculturated, rather than to be inculturated" (Theckcinath 2008, 301).

At this point, however, it is fair to defend the original concept of inculturation by claiming that the issue of Dalit oppression had not yet taken center stage in the theological discourse at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. It was only in the following decade that this discourse gave rise to liberation theology. Amaladoss (2021, 426) considers this theology to be a truly inculturated theology, which is the antithesis of the original concept of inculturation. In the context of Dalit liberation theology's critical stance towards inculturation, the question arises whether the entire Brahmanical Sanskrit tradition should be discarded because of certain values that undeniably perpetuate social injustice.

Another common feature of inculturation is the belief held by its agents that they have the right not only to adopt significant elements from the local culture but also to reinterpret them within Christianity. Amalorpavadass (1976, 209)

argues that this is neither an act of theft nor imitation, because all that is good within other religions is part of the history of salvation and aligns with God's plan for humanity. Through inculturation, Christianity discovers these meaningful elements of other religious traditions for itself and consecrates them to God. The eminent Indian theologian M. Amaladoss does not regard Hinduism as another religion but as a part of his own cultural heritage. The sacred scriptures of Hinduism, its rituals, symbols, and methods of spiritual practices are not foreign to him, and therefore, as he expressed, he has "the right and the liberty to integrate them as part of my spiritual tradition" (Amaladoss 2004, 654).

The elements that are adopted and integrated into Christianity through inculturation are seen as cultural constructs. Christianity does not create them but adopts them from the surrounding culture and gives them new meaning by reinterpreting them through integration. The problem, however, is that many such elements do not lose the meaning attributed to them by their original environment, and this meaning, along with these elements, finds its way into Christianity, whether it be ritual acts, adopted idioms, or afore mentioned religious symbols. While the educated theologians who set inculturation in motion can explain the reinterpreted meaning to themselves and others, many Indian Christians must inevitably be confused when they encounter the adopted elements because they are either unfamiliar with, disagree with, or have doubts about the inculturation process.

The question of the right to adopt elements from one tradition (especially Hinduism) and reinterpret them in another (Christianity) is one of the most fundamental problems of inculturation that remains unresolved. The issue extends to interpreting the meaning of the original religious context of these elements. While an agent of inculturation may understand a particular ritual act as merely a general Indian cultural practice without inherent religious content (e.g. the *arati* ceremony), a Hindu practitioner may see it as deeply religious. This question thus involves both the tension between authoritative and external interpretation and the relationship of Indian Christians to the majority culture that surrounds them and of which they are inevitably a part.

Broadly speaking, this question relates to the boundaries between culture and religion, and whether there are limits to adopting cultural and religious elements.

Although many theologians are aware of the existence of these limits (e.g. Amaladoss 2008, 141), none of them clarify where exactly these boundaries lie or who should establish and enforce them, or by what means.

The agents of inculturation used selected elements from Indian culture as a medium for indigenizing Christianity in India. Behind this instrumentalization of culture is the assumption that Christianity is independent of culture, transcending it because of its universal and immutable validity. Culture, in contrast, is viewed only as a variable and relative external aspect in which Christian content can be embedded. However, this perspective thus greatly underestimates the importance of culture, since each culture is an organic whole (Wilfred 1988, 423). For a culture to thrive, it must be dynamic. A truly living culture is made up of living people; it takes place and evolves within a social and political context to which it inevitably responds. Inculturation, however, as a planned process, is rather static. It is a creation of theologians and Catholic intellectuals; it comes from experts, not from people. As a result, it is presented as something for people to accept and identify with, though it does not necessarily address their needs.

Inculturation was set in motion by progressive theologians—whom Raj (2005, 421) calls "maverick theologians"—with support from the Church hierarchy at the time. Consequently, this inculturation was carried out from the top down, making it neither spontaneous nor fully alive. Liturgical inculturation, in particular, appears to be merely an intellectual expression of Christian testimony disconnected from the emotional dimensions of everyday life (Michael 2009, 54). Inculturation also focuses on the past, from which it draws archaic ritual elements, symbols, or entire institutional concepts such as ashrams, and idealizes them. This emphasis on the past risks introducing anachronisms into the life of the contemporary Indian Church (Pattathu 1997, 373).

The whole complex process of inculturation is intended to foster an Indian Christian spirituality, which is purposely cultivated in ashrams and other experimental centers, finding its expression in the liturgy and through adopted religious symbols and inculturated art. This spirituality, however, seems to be focused exclusively on the individual, making it largely vertical—concerning the relationship of the individual to God—rather than horizontal, as it lacks relationships within a community that collectively relates to God in some authentic way (Amaladoss 2004, 646). This fact, however, corresponds faithfully

to the Seminar's recommendations, which called precisely for the deepening of the spirituality of the individual.

Inevitably, it must be a passive spirituality that does not participate in the everyday concerns of the world because through meditation, the individual consciously and intentionally withdraws from the world to establish a personal and profound relationship with God. It is obvious that such spirituality is not for everyone and that it introduces an element of elitism into the Indian Church. According to G. Soares-Prabhu (1991, 98), a most rigorous critic of inculturation, it is a spirituality created and nurtured only by "an affluent, privileged class, able to afford the leisure for self-cultivation". The whole concept of inculturation thus far is particularly suited to Christian ashrams, communities and individuals inclined to a persistent search for the divine presence through a life of silence, prayer, and meditation.

Despite the initial high expectations, inculturation has been, remains, and probably will continue to remain relevant only to a tiny minority of Indian Christians. Because inculturation from the very beginning was not intended for the Indian laity, it had very little to do with these large masses, to whom Dalit liberation theology has since turned its attention. Inculturation does not cater to the daily needs of the laity, nor does it reflect their problems, whether related to religious experience or to the social, economic, and political realities of their lives. This raises a question of whether the value and significance of a particular religious phenomenon should be determined solely by its appeal to the masses.

Conclusion

Despite these criticisms and its apparent failure, the idea of inculturation has not been completely abandoned in the Indian Catholic Church. Even after the turn of the millennium, it continues to appear in theological journals and in official reports from the meetings of Indian bishops and theologians. For example, a report as recent as 2000 calls for drawing inspiration from "mystical and ascetic traditions" as well as from "the ashramic heritage". There are renewed calls for an appreciation of India's religious, social, and cultural traditions, which Indian

Christians are encouraged to regard as their holy land—"*punya bhoomi*" (Inherited Traditions of Faith and Inculturation 2000, 454-455). While other reports and some theological contributions have made similar points, these are usually very broadly stated tasks that the Church is supposed to fulfill. However, such hesitancy, which is limited to mere proclamations, is not surprising in the context of previous developments.

The experiments with Sanskritized inculturation in the early 1970s were clearly too bold and novel. Rushed and inadequately informed, they failed to gain the expected reception from the lay community or even from some Indian bishops. Some bishops showed hesitation at this early stage or blocked the whole process through inaction. After the Vatican banned the Indian Anaphora, many bishops felt that caution was indeed warranted. In the 1980s, the advent of the liberation theology, which was the opposite of the original concept of inculturation, only strengthened their conviction. This theology views Sanskrit culture as antagonistic to Indian Christianity, to be fought against rather than reinterpreted and adopted.

The idea of inculturation as such has not been completely rejected, nor could it be, because it continues to receive vague endorsement from the Vatican and many Asian bishops. In the case of a religiously and culturally plural India, however, no one knows exactly how to implement inculturation, since each ethnic, linguistic, and social community would require a unique approach. Moreover, for inculturation to result into an authentic, dynamic, and truly living Indian Christianity, it must start from the bottom up, set in motion by the laity themselves. The laity, however, are neither educated nor encouraged by the Church to engage in such assertive activity. Instead, they make do with their unofficial rites of passage influenced by local cultural and religious traditions and feel no need to formally sanctify or codify these practices with ecclesiastical authority.

Furthermore, the rise of Hindu nationalism, supported politically by the ruling party over the last decade, has introduced considerable confusion into the notion of what it means to be an Indian Christian. Indeed, religious minorities in contemporary India are not infrequently the target of aggressive verbal and physical attacks by the proponents of Hindu nationalism. This experience of an ostracized minority inevitably has led to questions as to whether this minority

should even seek to become part of the Indian cultural sphere when the majority often makes them feel unwanted in India.

Christianity in contemporary India is undergoing extremely dynamic development, and as this development is taking place in a pluralistic religious, cultural, and social context, it takes on various forms. Some scholars therefore speak of not one but multiple Indian Christianities (Bauman and Young 2014, ix). Despite earlier criticisms, the inculturated Christianity envisioned in the late 1960s and early 1970s has found a subtle but meaningful presence in India. Nonetheless, a question remains: will this form of Christianity endure merely as a relic of the recent past or can it somehow continue to evolve? Only time can provide an answer.

Abbreviations

CBCI	the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.
NBCLC	the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre.

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Raising Daughters and Sons in Contemporary Chinese Fictions

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Abstract This literature review examines representations of family relationships in contemporary Chinese fiction, focusing specifically on mother-daughter and father-son dynamics. Both relationships are generally portrayed as more conflicted than warm. In the mother-daughter relationship, the daughter both loves and hates her mother at the same time. By "scrutinizing" her mother, the maturing daughter gains a sense of gender identity and the two eventually forge an alliance grounded in sisterhood. Similarly, the son holds a dual attitude towards his father that graduates from negation to reevaluation. Although he challenges the authority and ideals associated with fatherhood, he also revers his father as a figure with admirable qualities such as decisiveness and morality. The son fails in seeking the absent father who is portrayed as a spiritual leader, eventually realizing that he can only seek his own self. The paper identifies a trend in Chinese New Era fiction of breaking traditional parental myths, positioning fathers and mothers in the roles of ordinary women and men. As narrators, daughters and sons are portrayed in their search for their own identity in relation to their parents. This review provides fundamental insights for further exploration of key themes in Chinese contemporary literature, such as the evolving dynamics of family relationships and the construction of individual subjectivity.

Keywords family relationships, mother-daughter relationship, gender recognition, sisterhood, father-son relationship, seeking the self, contemporary Chinese literature

Introduction

The portrayal of family theme in literature is an interdisciplinary research subject that continues to attract academic attention across fields such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, and literary studies. This topic has become increasingly prominent in Chinese fiction since the 1980s, a period when the daily

lives of ordinary people became a significant subject in literary writing. Among family relationships represented in contemporary Chinese literature, the mother-daughter and father-son bonds have aroused most academic interest over the past three decades. For example, Xu Kun discusses the mother-daughter theme in her work *Shuangdiao Yexingchuan, On Chinese female writings in the 1990s* (Xu 1999, 20), while Lin Danya's 2003 monograph, *A History and Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Women's Literature,* analyzes the phenomenon of "deconstructing motherhood" (*jiegoumuqin* 解构母亲) (Lin 2003, 325). Jia Zhifang and Wang Tongkun's publication "The tilting and dilapidation of the statue of father: A conversation on the 'desecration of father' motif in Chinese literature in the 20th century," sets the starting point and direction of studying the father-son bond for future research (Wang and Jia 1996). Wang Yidian (2020) explores the same topic in "Narrative of father-son relationship in Chinese children's novels after the 1990s."

The mother-daughter relationship is often studied in the context of feminist framework. Lu Shengshu investigates this relationship in her Ph.D. dissertation, *Contemporary Chinese Literature and Mothering* (Lu 2000), while Wu Hongkai examines the theme in the context of the concept of maternity in her paper "Maternity: From the Myth to the Narration About the reconstruction of the maternity in the 90's female literature" (Wu 2002). The father-son relationship, generally viewed as emblematic of parent-child dynamics (including mother-son or father-daughter bond), is typically analyzed within the broader context of social change. For example, Shi Wanpeng in *Father and Son, the Semantic Field of Chinese Modernization Anxiety* analyzes the themes of father-son relationships that appear across various literary narrative types within 20th-century Chinese literature, including avant-garde literature (*xianfeng wenxue* 先锋文学), root-seeking literature (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学), and works by the new generation of writers (*xinshengdai zuojia zuopin* 新生代作家作品). Shi discusses recurring themes such as patricide (*shifu* 弑父), father worship (*chongfu* 崇父), father-seeking (*xunfu* 寻父), and teasing the father (*xifu* 戏父) (Shi 2005). He argues that these portrayals of father-son relationship reflect the shift in socio-political and cultural trends in the literature accompanying the process of China's modernization over the past century. He concludes that the alternating appearance of conflict and harmony in the father-son relationships in these novels represents different responses to the

anxieties about modernity (*xiandaixing jiaolü* 现代性焦虑) during this period (Shi 2005).

Additionally, some studies focus on the family relationships as depicted by particular authors. For example, Ruan and Jiang (2019) explore family dynamics in Yu Hua's works in their paper "On the family relationship in Yu Hua's novelettes". The mother-daughter bond in the novels and stories of Chen Ran 陈染 (1962–), Zhang Jie 张洁 (1937–2022), Wang Anyi 王安忆 (1954–), and Chi Li 池莉 (1957–) are consistently analyzed (Bai and Lei 2012; Shao 2017, 87-89; Zheng 2020, 55-58; Qi 2006; Fu 2006). Meanwhile, Mo Yan 莫言 (1955–), Yu Hua 余华 (1960–), and Su Tong 苏童 (1963–) are the among the most studied authors for insights into father-son relationships (Ren 2014; Jin 2013; Xing 2023; Li 2018; Pan 2021). Other studies investigate this theme in a range of family novels across different eras (Shi 2000; Yang 2006; Chen 2009; Liu 2004; Zhou 2005; Shan 2010).

In her Ph.D. dissertation, *Alienation and Longing: A Study on the Maternal Theme Novels of Female Writers in the New Era,* Huang He writes that women authors show "a dual tendency of alienation and longing towards maternity" (2021, 93). However, the mother-daughter relationship is not the central topic of her dissertation, and she does not provide a clear explanation of how these two tendencies manifest in the corporeal bond. Liu Wenxiang and Zhu Xianzhen (2017, 88-89), in their "The father-son relationship writing in texts of authors born in the 1970s", argue that "a cold relationship with plentiful mild conflicts exists between the two generations." So far, no review has yet mapped research from the new century on both relationships as presented in New Era literature (*xinshiqi wenxue* 新时期文学).

In an attempt to address this gap, in this review, I examine the status of studies on the representation of family relationships in Chinese fiction after 1979. In the first section, I investigate the development of studies on the mother-daughter relationship in women's literature, while in the second section, I analyze articles dealing with the father-son relationship.

Methodology

This literature review is based on publications concerning family relationships, specifically mother-daughter and father-son relationship in contemporary Chinese literature. Sources were gathered from the CNKI database as well as from

various Western academic platforms and search engines, such as JSTOR, ResearchGate and Google Scholar. The articles and dissertations were systematically examined by coding each text with topic tags and tracing the temporal development of these topics across the collected texts.

1 *As Women and Women: The Reconstruction of the Mother-Daughter Relationship*

Mother-daughter relationship has emerged as an increasingly prominent theme in women's writing worldwide since the 1980s. According to Irigaray's feminist theory, this corporeal bond is fundamental for building women's subjectivity (Sambuco 2012, 19). Cheng (2023), in her article "Across a century, mother-daughter relationship writing is still oscillating between hesitation and breakthroughs," writes that China's first generation of women authors joined the May 4th Movement in the 1910s, fighting together with male writers by writing against traditional family order. Since then, the mother-daughter relationship has become a recurring subject for Chinese female authors.

Xu Kun comments that "tracing female genealogy and rewriting mother-daughter bonds was one of the four main themes in Chinese female literature in the 1990s." (Xu 1999, 20). Literary representation of this relationship likewise has attracted the interest of China's women scholars in the past three decades. Aligning with Beauvoir and Irigaray's feminist theories, researchers examine the topic either separately or within the concept of "mothering". In the latter case, writing about the complex relationship is addressed as part of a larger project of dismantling the myth of motherhood and reconstructing maternity, a dominant research subject in Chinese female literature since the 1980s (Lu 2000, 99; Wu 2002, 87; Yang 2006, 145). Many writers adopt the daughters' point of view in their books. Scholars suggest that a trend of women-women relationships emerges between mothers and daughters, reflecting the gender identity consciousness of both roles. In the following passages, we will organize the discussions by dividing them into two subtopics: tensions, and gender recognition and sisterhood.

1.1 Tensions

In contemporary fiction, mother-daughter relationships are often portrayed with more conflicts and confrontations than harmony. Scholars mostly focus on the expressions and underlying reasons of these tensions in literature. In 2000, Lu investigated this theme in the works of Chinese female writer Chen Ran, specifically her two books, *Wu chu gaobie* 无处告别 (*Nowhere to Farewell,* 1991) and *Lingyizhi erduo de qiaojisheng* 另一只耳朵的敲击声 (*The Knocking Sound in the Other Ear,* 1994). Unlike the emphasis on the "mother-daughter bond" (*munü niüdai* 母女纽带) and the "celebration of motherhood" (*gesong muxing* 歌颂母性) found in the works of Chinese "first-generation modern female writers" (*diyidai nüzuojia* 第一代女作家), Lu argues that Chen Ran's portrayal of mother-daughter relationships highlights "the opposition between mother and daughter (*munü duili* 母女对立)" (Lu 2000, 110). The asymmetry in the attention that mothers and daughters pay to one another, combined with the generational gap, contributes to an exceptionally tense relationship (Lu 2000, 112). In her analysis of the second novel, Lu claims that the daughter experiences an ever-lasting guilt complex characterized by fear, affection, pity and depression towards her mother. Their relationship is marked by a pattern of voyeurism and counter-voyeurism (Lu 2000, 110-116). Though full of tensions, Lu adds that the bond is presented as "a mix of love and hate" in the first novel. When their relationship faces the crisis of brokenness, "love of the other" always serves as a common point to reach harmony, maintaining the relationship in its complexity of both love and hate (Lu 2000, 111-113).

Chen Li (2005a and 2005b), in her publications echoes findings about the mother-daughter relationship from adult fiction in her analyses of Chinese children's novels written by women. She writes about how daughters seek to escape from their mothers. Daughters avoid their mothers when they start keeping secrets during their growing-up phase. For instance, the adolescent daughter runs away from her mother and searches for her own space in Chen Danyan's 陈丹燕 (1958–) *Shangsuo de chouti* 上锁的抽屉 (*Locked drawer,* 1986) (2005a, 57; 2005b, 57). In Qin Wenjun's 秦文君 (1954–) *Shiliu sui de shaonü* 十六岁的少女 (*A sixteen-year-old girl,* 1988), Chen Li describes how the growing daughter and the increasingly aging mother see through each other's "secrets" and how this awareness affects their relationship (2005a, 57; 2005b, 57). Another form of escape happens when adolescent girls become conscious of their mothers' passiveness and

other unexpected traits, particularly when the mothers "lose their authority". In response, daughters determine not to repeat their mothers' roles in the future, choosing instead to break away from them (2005a, 57; 2005b, 57). Chen Xuemei, in "Harmony to alienation to revolt, reflections on the mother-daughter relations in Chinese modern and contemporary feminine literature" suggests that the confrontation between mothers and daughters are caused by either "overwhelming maternal love which results in the daughter turning away from the mother" or by "the lack of maternal love, which results in the daughter's hatred towards the mother" (Chen 2009, 38-39).

Cao Nina, in *The Writing on the Conflict between Mother and Daughter in Feminine Texts of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature,* concentrates on the conflictual relationship between daughters and mothers. She distinguishes four types of conflicts: those between uneducated and educated women; confrontation between mothers and daughters in daily life circumstances; mothers obstructing their daughters' growth; and conflicts within the female alliance itself (Cao 2006, i). Tan Fengxia, in "Towards the identity crisis of the mother's mirror: mother-daughter relationships in childhood narratives by contemporary female writers", directly correlates the mother-daughter relationship with the mother's image in childhood narratives in women's literature under the theme of "scrutinizing" the mother (Tan 2008).

The daughters in Wang Anyi's 王安忆 *Liushui sanshi Zhang* 流水三十章 (*Thirty years like flowing water,* 2002) distance themselves from their mother who values her role as a wife more than that of a parent. This kind of tension further intensifies when the mother's sexual life—especially instances of extramarital affairs—becomes exposed to her daughter. Such revelations induce the young girls' opposition to their mother in Tie Ning's 铁凝 (1957–) *Dayunü* 大浴女 (*The bathing woman,* 2000). Additionally, Tan examines this theme in the books by New Realism Writers, such as Fangfang's 方方 (1955–) *Fengjing* 风景 (*Scenery,* 1987) and Chi Li's *Ni Shi Yitiao He* 你是一条河 (*You Are a River,* 1995). She concludes that "daughters initially wish to get closer to the mother who endures adversity, yet in the end, they all develop aversion and denial due to her crudeness, indifference, or even cruelty" (Tan 2008, 172). Lastly, Tan Fengxia examines Xiaobin's *Yushe* 羽蛇

(*Feathered Serpent*, 2000), describing daughters' escape from their mother who only abuses her maternal authority (Tan 2008, 170-172).

Gao Xiaohong explores the themes of gender oppression and resistance within mother-daughter relationship in her "Recognition and confrontation—the mother-daughter relationship writing in women's Bildungsroman in 1990s" (2011). She writes that the "authoritarian mother who keeps monitoring and intervening in her daughter's life in the name of love, destroys the latter's growth" (Gao 2011, 79). Moreover, these tensions manifest through "public or secret abuse and victimization, with control and counter-control between the two sides" (Gao 2011, 80). Gao explains that this extreme antagonism is most explicitly demonstrated through violent punishment, mental abuse, and masked as reasonable yet ruthless constraints placed on the daughter (Gao 2011, 80). Despite these conflicts, the novels tend to end with a "scene of reconciliation", facilitated often because of the maturing daughter's forgiving attitude. Gao suggests that this gesture indicates the daughter's "maturity" and "spontaneity" (Gao 2011, 81).

Yang Lixin examines the theme from the evolving aspect of maternity in her article "Feminism and the development of maternal themes in 20th century Chinese women's fiction" (Yang 2006). She claims that the varied and complex nature of the mother-daughter bond in women's literature post-1980s reflects a "retrospection on maternity" (Yang 2006, 143-147). The relationship described in these texts focuses on the negative influences that mothers can pass on to their daughters.

Firstly, a mother's love, rooted in traditional ethics of "a loving mother and a filial daughter" can be selfish, burdensome, demanding, and even coercive, consequently placing both material and spiritual strains on daughters. Secondly, in a patriarchal society, mothers often find themselves helpless, vulnerable, and distressed, unable even to protect their daughters. This triggers the darker side of their humanity, transferring their own pain and struggles onto their daughters. Lastly, narrow-minded, coarse, ignorant, morally compromised mothers may even stifle their daughters' hope of being noble and good (Yang 2006, 147).

1.2 Gender identification, sisterhood

In addition to exploring tensions, researchers likewise notice a close relationship based on gender recognition between daughter and mother within New Era female literature (*xinshiqi nüxing wenxue* 新时期女性文学). Wu Hongkai, in

"Maternity: From the Myth to the Narration About the reconstruction of the maternity in the 90's female literature", writes that the common life experiences provide a foundation for closeness between mother and daughter (Wu 2002). Whereas, maternal impulses—such as the urge to control, invade privacy, and envy—hinder the creation of "Feminist Utopia" (*nüxing Wutuobang* 女性乌托邦; Wu 2002, 87). She notes that "the equalization of mother and daughter" in Chen Ran's works subtly changed their relationship as woman to woman (Wu 2002, 87). She mentions the same trend in Zhang Jie's writing on this theme in *Wuzi* 无字 (Without Words, 2002), but does not elaborate on it (Wu 2002, 88). Similarly, Hu Xin, in an article adapted from her presentation at "Perspective on Female Literature in China" seminar, stresses that "sisterhood" between mother and daughter has become the focal point in contemporary same-sex writing, representing a "disappointment in masculinity" and a "resistance to patriarchy" (Hu 2002, 110).

Gao Xiaohong provides a detailed and insightful analysis of the formation of mother-daughter alliances. She suggests that sexual identity recognition happens when a daughter discovers her mother's private emotions and desires, including love affairs that were previously concealed, intentionally or unconsciously, behind the role of the "altruistic mother" as encouraged by the patriarchal norms (Gao 2011, 77). Initially, young daughters experience shock and disappointment as their idealized image of a "pure" mother is shattered. However, they eventually start to comprehend and accept their mothers' sexual identity and simultaneously, they become conscious of their own sexual identity. The mutual recognition of same-sex identity finally forms an alliance between them (Gao 2011, 78).

2 *From Negation to Seeking: The Son's Attitude towards the Father*

As a traditional motif in literature, father-son confrontation serves as a common drive for plots connected with grand narratives of social change. During the rapid industrialization period, themes such as "seeking the father" that contrasted with "judging the father" or "patricide", emerged in Western novels. Zhou Shuitao, in his commentary on the portrayal of fathers in rural novels since the 1990s, notes

that in essence, "seeking the father" involves searching for a spiritual pillar and seeking cultural ideals (Zhou 2005, 43-48). This theme serves as a vehicle for writers to express their artistic aspirations to rebuild societal order and revive humanistic beliefs (Zhou 2005, 48).

In contemporary Chinese literature, writers continue with the "desecration of father" theme of modern literature and gradually develop a narrative around "seeking the father". In these novels, sons often serve as the narrators, engaging in the processes of "judging" and "seeking" the fathers. Such explorations reflect the sons' views on their fathers, directly or indirectly implying a relationship between them. I will begin by recounting the portrayals of the parental negation, followed by the evolution of "level gaze" between the two. Finally, I will review studies focused on the topic of "seeking the father".

2.1 Negating the father

The theme of "negating the father" originates from a conversation between Wang Tongkun and his teacher, Jia Zhifang. Wang records this dialogue in his paper "The tilting and dilapidation of the statue of father: A conversation on the "desecration of father" motif in Chinese literature in the 20th century" (Jia and Wang 1996). He later summarizes the result of the discussion in his article "A Century of Embarrassment of the Father" (Wang 1997). According to Wang, in the first decade of the 20th century, Chinese writers emphasized the autocratic and tyrannical side of the father. During the next twenty years, fathers are described as increasingly outdated figures. They are depicted as loyal, honest, and conservative elders, sometimes as fathers who are ridiculed, or even zombie-like characters who are incapable of managing daily life independently at the beginning of the story. In the "seventeen years literature" (*shiqinian wenxue* 十七年文学), fathers are set as figures who cannot catch up with social change. Fathers are positioned as objects of revolution by "progressive" sons (Jia and Wang 1996, 94-99; Wang 1997, 29).

The trend of "negating the father" continues in Chinese fiction post-1980s, illustrated through terms like "losing father", "absent father", "patricide", "desecration of father", which all highlight the father's diminishing authority and power over the son (Shi 2005; Shan 2010; Liu and Zhu 2017). Scholars draw slightly varied conclusions based on their textual selections. Shi Wanpeng argues that in the avant-garde literature of the 1980s, the father figure embodies ethics, values,

ideologies, and he further states that it constrains individuality, life, and creativity (Shi 2005, 130). Consequently, the rebellion of the younger generation against the older generation becomes more thorough as well (Shi 2005, 129-132).

In "The Father-Son Relationship Writing in Texts of Authors Born in the 1970s", Liu and Zhu explore the "desecration of father" phenomenon, referring to it as "no father" in the novels and stories of the Chinese authors born in the 1970s. This group's stories and novels are mostly published after the year 2000. The term "no father" indicates that the fathers are portrayed as humble, deceased, physically or mentally ill, or marginalized. "Their relationships with their sons are weak. Close and joyful father-child relationships are rare. Yet, intense conflicts are hardly seen as well." (Liu and Zhu 2017, 87-88).

2.2 Level gaze between the father and the son

Some researchers notice an equalization in the father-son relationship. Shi claims that it can be observed in the novels of New Generation Writers (*xinshengdai zuojia* 新生代作家) such as that of Wang Shuo 王朔 (1958–) and Zhu Wen 朱文 (1967–). In these novels, the father's authority ceases to exist: "The weighty discourses imposed upon them by culture and revolution have dissipated." Moreover, in Zhu Wen's novels, *Wo Ai Meiyuan* 我爱美元 (*I Love Dollars,* 1994) and *Xingkui Zhexie Nian Youle Yidian Qian* 幸亏这些年有了一点钱 (*Fortunately, I've Had Some Money These Past Few Years,* 1996), the son "enlightens the father's desires" in modern consumer cities (Shi 2005, 132). Shan Xin contributes on this theme in *The Anxious Variation: On the Father-Son Relationship Mode in Chinese Contemporary Initiation Stories* (2010). She notes that since the 1980s, the father figure has transitioned from "spiritual leader" to ordinary family member, as seen in Wang Anyi's *Liujiu Jie Chuzhongsheng* 六九届初中生 (*A Junior Middle School Graduate in 1969*, 1984). There, a "level gaze" emerges between the younger and older generation (Shan 2010, 74). Later protagonists exhibit stronger self-awareness. Some writers apply irony and banter expressing the abnormal father's image and intergenerational relationship, as seen in Ye Zhaoyan's 叶兆言 (1957–) *Meiyou Boli de Huafang* 没有玻璃的花房 (A Greenhouse without Glass, 2003) and Wang Shuo's 王朔 *Wo Shi Ni Baba* 我是你爸爸 (*I am Your Dad,* 1991; Shan 2010, 75).

Wang Yidian concludes that the father-son relationship evolves from conflict to reconciliation, from opposition to agreement (Wang 2020, 160).

2.3 Seeking the father

Alongside themes of negation, a "seeking the father" motif also appears. This term refers to both the literal search for father and the longing for a father as a companion or guide in life. Phrases like "dialogue", "admiring father", and "seeking for the self" have been applied under the topic. While this motif implies an even weaker relationship between the father and the son, it also suggests a reevaluation of the father figure from the son's perspective.

Shan Xin explores the transition from the trend of "negating the father" to that of "seeking the father". She suggests that in Yu Hua's and Su Tong's works, the father represents the "embodiment of external regulation". For sons, criticizing and resisting the father's authority is a manifestation of their seeking for "freedom". Su Tong's *Shujia Xiongdi* 舒家兄弟 (*The Shu Brothers,* 1993), portrays the most extreme form of this resistance through physical "patricide" (*shifu* 弑父). This sort of "freedom" is associated with being "out of control" (Shan 2010, 75).

After the father's disappearance—both spiritually and ethically—the child begins to look for the "father". This theme appears in Hong Ying's 虹影 (1962–) *Ji'e de nüer* 饥饿的女儿 (*Daughter of the River,* 1997) and Dongxi's 东西 (1966–) *Erguang Xiangliang* 耳光响亮 (*A Loud Slap,* 1996; Shan 2010, 76). Wang Fang, in her paper "Seeking for Father: On the Structure of Yu Hua's Literary Works" published in 2003, argues that Yu Hua's narrative on father-son relationship presents a process of negating the father in various forms, such as disrespect, fatherlessness, absence, or loss, eventually leading to an acceptance of the father (Wang 2003, 7).

Liu Weidong, in his article "A Fresh Inquiry into the Image of 'Father' in the Family Novel of the 1900s," writes that the plots of New Era family novels are about the process of seeking, analyzing, and "authenticating" the father. Sons "seek father" in order to answer the question, "Who am I?" These novels explore individuals' unique experiences amidst historical upheavals (Liu 2004, 49). Liu argues that there is a relation of dialogue between the two generations in these works of fiction: "It is not a question about whose road is right and whose is wrong. They [the experiences of the elders and the youngers] are complementary, and together constitute a whole." (Liu 2004, 48-49).

Shi believes that the younger generation does not gain authority after patricide. Instead, after overturning and deconstructing the old political, cultural, and ethical authority represented by the father, the younger generation feels a sense of panic. The literary trend in father-son narratives turned to "seeking the father" in the 1990s, with a stiff relationship, yet not devoid of warmth, appears in Yu Hua's *Huozhe* 活着 (Live, 1993) and *Xu Sanguan mai xue ji* 许三观卖血记 (Chronicle of a Blood Merchant Xu Sanguan, 1995). Meanwhile, the veteran fathers in these novels are frequently appreciated for their passionate and uncompromising attitude toward life (Shi 2005, 131).

Zhang Yanling in her Master's thesis *The Theme of "seeking father" in New Era Novels,* provides a complete and clear analysis of the father-son relationship in contemporary literature (Zhang 2007). She continues the lineal idea of "patricide" and "without father" to "admire father" then to "seeking father". According to her, "seeking father" is the actual developmental state of father-son narratives (Zhang 2007, i). She separately studies the father-son relationship dynamics in novels from the 1980s, 1990s, and the beginning of the 21st century. In the novels of 1980s, the father is a spiritual symbol representing the ideal, strength, and faith. Representative works include Zhang Wei's 张炜 (1956–) *Yuanxing zhi zhu* 远行之嘱 (*Instructions for a Journey,* 1989), *Xiaoshi de ren he suiyue* 消逝的人和岁月 (*The People and Time Passed,* 1992), *Jiazu* 家族 (Clansmen 1995), Yu Hua's *Zai xiyu zhong huhan* 在细雨中呼喊 (*Cries in the Drizzles,* 1992), and *Huozhe*, Xu Sanguan's *Mai xue ji*, etc. (Zhang 2007, 11 and 17-20). Sons "seek their fathers" with "the bewilderment and dissatisfaction toward their fathers" and their attitude to the latter gradually changes from "hostility" toward "understanding and recognition" (Zhang 2007, iii).

In the fiction of 1990s, "writers remodeled the great image of "traditional father" and "heroic father" in the retrospection through recalling the elder's heroic history." (Zhang 2007, iii). Her analysis of this theme appearing in the "new century literature" (*xin shiji wenxue* 新世纪文学) is insightful. She writes that the practice of "seeking the father" in the literature of the early 21st century is in fact "seeking for the self" (Zhang 2007, 42). Zhang notices that in these narratives, the quest for the father happens in "real" life. The relationship between father and child in these stories is strained. An ordinary father disappears on an ordinary day.

The child begins to reflect on the role of the father, "the younger generation embarks on a path, from reflection and repentance to self-salvation." (Zhang 2007, 33). The son emphasizes the blood bond between him and his father. The father's fate arouses the son's anxiety about the future. "Writers highlight the stark contrast between the two sides, the fathers' forbearance, magnanimity, and selflessness and the sons' hypocrisy, selfishness, and pettiness." (Zhang 2007, 35). "The search for the father ends in failure. This outcome made the younger generation to cherish the value of 'fatherhood' more and to realize the importance of self-reflection." (Zhang 2007, 38).

Ten years later, Liu and Zhu re-examine the manifestations of "seeking the father" theme in the new century fiction (Liu and Zhu 2017). They claim that this motif appears in the form of tracing the stories of ancestors or ritualization of the practices of seeking fathers, such as regularly admiring father's photo or reading father's dairy. In this way, absent fathers contribute to their children's growth. A third type of expression of this search for a father involves estrangement with mothers who are in conflict with the father (Liu and Zhu 2017, 90-92).

Between the two extremes of "no father" and "seeking father", Liu and Zhu notice the existence of the image of the "departed father". Writers born in 1970s let the father leave home, yet remain in the minds of his children as a "loving father". This allows sons to reconcile their internal conflict between negating and needing a father (Liu and Zhu 2017, 92-93).

Furthermore, they argue that women authors deal with this theme differently than male authors. In their works, though deceased, fathers guide the protagonists' growth in a quasi-religious manner. The protagonists are aware that this image of the father is a "construct", with the daughters essentially creating the image of the "father" themselves. Women writers are also inclined to let the mother replace the father's role as a source of authority and guidance (Liu and Zhu 2017, 94-95).

Conclusion

The mother-daughter and father-son bonds are central interests for scholars studying family relationships in contemporary Chinese fiction. The two themes are examined independently. Existing studies suggest an image of conflictual intergenerational relationship within these narratives. Children often dismantle

the idealized image of the parents and attempt to define themselves by scrutinizing the elders.

Researchers analyze the physical and emotional bond between mother and daughter within a feminism framework. Daughters avoid their mothers because of the mother's authoritarian love, lack of mothering, and other "ugliness" as a person. Nevertheless, they typically hold a mix of love and hate attitude toward their mothers. Despite the broken maternity, maturing daughters form an alliance with their aging mothers, rooted in a shared understanding of gender identity.

The father son relationship in contemporary Chinese novels are likewise conflicted and with a tendency toward equalization. Sons challenge the superiority and idealized image traditionally ascribed to the father. Simultaneously, they seek their fathers in various ways. The absent father, in this context, is worshiped as a spiritual leader or seen as the giver of imagined paternal love.

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