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The Spring 2025 *East Asian Studies Forum and Review* features a total of five papers from five Johns Hopkins University students and six students from institutions across the country. We are thrilled to have such diverse perspectives in this edition of the *Forum and Review*. Submissions consist of course papers as well as independent research.

We would like to thank not only all of the student writers, but also our committee members, editors, and distinguished faculty members for making this publication possible.

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Understanding the Landscape of the Japanese Retail Industry After Its Golden Era

Huijing Zhu, The Johns Hopkins University

Abstract

From the optimistic consumer situation in the 1980s to the bursting of the housing bubble in the 1990s, Japanese households faced a downgrading of consumption. The productivity and profitability in retailing declined. The retail industry moved toward price wars or expansion of store space. The paper will seek to understand if the Japanese retail sector has become a “sunset industry” during the period of low interest rates and onward. It examines the regulatory factors, the influx of external foreign firms, and companies’ strategies including potential technological advances that contribute to restructuring in such markets.

Introduction

Japan announced its first interest hike in nearly two decades, ending its long period of negative interest rates in March 2024. The history of the low interest rates traces back to the late 1990s when the Japanese economy suffered from slow growth and recession. The era of low interest rates reflected not only the Bank of Japan's adoption of ultra-loose monetary policies, but also hinted at the changing landscapes of consumer behaviors—the shifts towards money saving, and business' operation strategies during a secular stagnation. Retailers, who typically benefit from growing economies with high-level purchase power, took a severe hit during the recession of the past decades. Some retail businesses, however, outperformed others within the same period. For instance, Shimamura Co., Ltd., an apparel company founded in 1953, gained a top 10% quartile return in 1993, as it opened its 300th store in Japan in 1994.

The retail industry in Japan has seen a continuous contribution to the nominal gross domestic product (GDP) in the past decade. Wholesale and retail trade as a share of Japan's nominal GDP ranged from 12.5% to 14.4%. At the same time, the industry has undergone a general decline in the number of retail stores. In 1991, the number was reported at 1.61 million, compared to 0.88 million in 2021 (C. Diep, 2024). The statistics showed both sides of the retail industry, which was profitable, yet in decline. Several policies enacted in this sector also prompted debates among critics. In 1997, the Japanese government announced plans to remove one of the regulations that restricted the opening of large retail stores.

In the early stages of deflation, the Japanese retail sector struggled to steer clear of inefficient strategies, yet there's modest evidence that businesses may benefit from market deregulations and perhaps even innovate through adversity. This paper will seek to explore the opportunities and challenges in the Japanese retailing industry during the era of low interest

rates. It will begin by examining the policy changes in the industry, mainly focusing on the enactment of the Large-Scale Retail Store Law. Then, it will outline several strategies taken by retailers during a period of regulatory relaxations and explore whether there are any growth opportunities in the industry moving forward.

Analysis

The Large-Scale Retail Store Law: A Policy Case Study

The retail industry regulations that protect small and medium-sized retailers from the competition of large stores date back to the early 1930s. The small store owners were considered a powerful political voting bloc by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—Japan’s ruling party. Tending to their interests, the Department Store Law was enacted in 1923 by “introducing an approval system for establishing or expanding stores” (Shirai, 1994). The law was abolished, revised, and re-introduced later as the Large-Scale Retail Store Law, which became effective in 1974. It regulated the opening of new large stores, operating hours, and other aspects of the business. For example, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) would seek input from neighborhood retailers if there was interest in building a store larger than 500 square meters (Mak & Sunder, 1998).

The close relationship between the government and businesses could be seen as another form of cooperative relationship flourishing in Japan’s early developmental stages. After World War II, Japan faced high unemployment rates, as well as food and energy shortages. The government sought to protect small businesses as an approach to absorb surplus workers, and thus created social welfare. This form of state-private relationship had some benefits, such as offering small retailers benefits for economic survival and maintaining the competition level in the sector. The number of small retail stores reached a peak in the 1980s (Mak & Sunder, 1998).

However, it's hard to assert whether the rise in store numbers is attributed to the regulation or from the optimistic consumer sentiments during the "golden era," right before the market crash a decade later. Either way, the effectiveness of the government's supplements were growing thin. Though facing increased costs and time in opening new stores, some large retailers still managed to gain profits (Dawson, 2008).

The regulation was reformed in 1991 due to U.S. and foreign trade partners' criticism of the law acting like trade barriers. The reform of the Large-Scale Retail Store Law brought forth deregulation in the retail sector. In the early 1990s, several changes were present in the Japanese retail industry. First, the asset bubble burst has put recessionary and deflationary pressure on the economy. Consumers saved more, spent less, and grew more price-sensitive. Secondly, shifts in the political environment, such as anti-corruption moves and waning support for regulatory protection, have pushed small businesses to "survive only on life support" (Rosenbluth & Thies, 2010). If there was still a hint of developmental state guidance in the sector previously, it can hardly be found in this era of recessions. Japan was moving further into the quadrant of the market economy. This suggests that innovation would become a key factor for businesses to thrive, yet the industry lacked this very quality since its competition level was maintained at a low level in the past decades. Eventually, the Large-Scale Retail Store Location Act was established in 2000 to replace the previous regulation.

Company strategies in response to deregulation

The changing operating conditions in the era of low interest rates spurred different responses from retailers. Retail sales in Japan hit a record low of -14.0% in March of 1998 (CEIC). Without support from the government, retailers faced greater pressure to compete for customers. During this era, some resorted to discount retailing, employing price competition. Those successful retailers who had initially enjoyed great profits exhibited additional traits; they diversified their business and functioned similarly to large corporations. Notably, convenience stores (also known as "konbini"), which are small businesses that are frequently open around-the-clock, have also been an exception to the 1990s retail industry's decline in profitability.

Discount retailing had gained economic clout as customers found low prices appealing. The rise in popularity of discount stores aligned well with the consumer sentiment that they could buy the same products—sometimes even better ones—at lower prices. Unlike the department stores that flourished in the late 1980s, whose sales fell after the boom years reached an end, discount stores bypassed traditional layers of suppliers and sometimes even government procedures. For instance, during the country's rice scarcity, Jonan Denki Co. offered local rice at a steep discount. The owner of the store, Toshio Miyaji, was seen as a folk hero during the rice crisis. He gained popularity via shows where he slashed the high prices of domestic and imported goods (Holley, 1994). He famously claimed that "Japanese people want to eat Japanese rice" and later appeared in reality shows such as *Asayan*, a popular variety program targeting subculture and youngsters. Daiei Inc., one of the largest supermarket chains in Japan, was another example of discount stores blossoming. The discount retailer cut its prices and operated a variety of subsidiaries. The company's structure resembled that of a conglomerate, or "keiretsu." The Daiei Group was considered a horizontal-connected group. They not only owned discount stores but

also had a variety of non-core retailing businesses, such as supermarket chains, restaurants, and radio stations.

The dense corporate networks offered the discount stores benefits as they could thus move their profits and losses within their groups. However, the freedom to do so also raised concerns, especially regarding indebted businesses. After the repeal of the Large-Scale Retail Store Law, store owners were more likely to expand their stores upon the lifting of the constraints. The strategies for increasing floor spaces adopted by retailers, including Daiei Inc., were fueled by banks' easy lending. When banks still had close relationships with the corporates, the banks would "provide the clients with a stable line of credit" (Vogel, 2006). From 1991 to 1995, the sales space for Daiei increased by 137.2% (Dawson, 2008). In the meantime, its level of debt skyrocketed, reaching \$17 billion (Takayama, 2010). The debt issue was masked by the banks' unwillingness to write them off due to the fear of negatively impacting the financial structure.

The heavily indebted retailers hadn't faced pressures in expanding strategies until the late 1990s. The liberalization in the financial system brought forth by the LDP-Socialist coalition government in 1996 put more banks at risk of failure. The regulation steered away from the traditional way of convoying failing businesses, while at the same time promoting competition. Under this new corporate environment, the banks were less inclined to enable long-term lending, especially for nonperforming loans. They began cutting off their relationships with their corporate clients (Rosenbluth & Thies, 2010). The lack of cushion from the banks led retailers such as Daiei to finally cut off their assets or file for bankruptcy. Daiei's operating profits plunged. It sold its Lawson subsidiary in 2000 and went on debt restructuring. Though the discount stores might have had their golden days, their strategies of intensive expansions at the

cost of accumulation of debts became ineffective towards the end of 20th century Japan. The low consumer confidence was more prolonged than the stores desired. With little signs of consumer spending materialized in the long run, the low-margin discount stores had insufficient funds to resolve their debt burden.

Lastly, convenience stores were among the other retailer types that either grew during or were minimally affected by the economic slump. The rapid development of convenience stores could be attributed to several factors, including a lack of regulatory constraints and their ability to innovate. According to the definition given by the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MITI), convenience stores are small stores with less than 300 square meters of floor space (Terasaka, 1998). Thanks to their small sizes, they were not subject to the regulatory framework of the Large-Scale Retail Store Law, unlike their large store counterparts or parent companies. Some larger convenience stores were originally affiliated with large retail chains. The retail chains sought to leverage their brand names to expand their business models. For example, Ito-Yokado, a department store chain, partnered with the Southland Corporation of the U.S. to open the first convenience store in 1974. The store later became the well-known 7-Eleven in Japan. Lawson, which was once a subsidiary of Daiei, had Mitsubishi as its major shareholder in 2001. The small chain stores ultimately achieved greater scale economies. The driving force behind this was that the convenience stores benefited from standardized management, often taking advantage of innovation. Terasaka (1998) listed several “equipment blocks” essential to the chain system. For example, the usage of Point-of-Sales (POS) and Electronic-Ordering-System (EOS) helped link electronic information from individual stores to the chain headquarters, as well as the middleman in the physical distribution system. The convenience store’s unique way of operating allowed them to take market share.

Opportunities after the reform

The reform of the retail sector has imposed challenges on retailers, as seen in the previous analysis. Strategies such as pure price competition, store expansion with debt financing, and those without innovation turned out to be ineffective in the long run. Nevertheless, there are still opportunities in retailing, even though scholars have deemed it as a “protected and uncompetitive” industry since the Japanese economy faltered in 1990s (Vogel, 2006; Chen, 2008). It was noteworthy that several unique cases of large-size domestic retailers still managed to achieve a significant amount of growth during the 1990s. More importantly, the opportunities for growth after the deregulation in the retailing market stemmed from the relative ease of entry of foreign retailers, and the technological advancement in the industry.

Dawson and Meyer-Ohle both discussed the successful cases of apparel companies, those that resorted to low prices and responded to changing customer needs for quality products (Dawson 2008; Meyer-Ohle, 2003). One example is Shimamura, a clothing company that aims for cheap prices and no-frills fashion. Fast Retailing, operating through its brand UNIQLO, is another example. A similar pattern was observed in those companies as in the general retail sector during the 1990s: store expansion. However, the strategies of expanding stores solely would not promote sustainable growth patterns. The differences lay in that the two companies were able to take advantage of their business models, especially focusing on technological aspects and management. For example, Shimamura stores were “connected in an information network as early as 1981” (Meyer-Ohle, 2003). Fast Retailing, meanwhile, focused on centralized store management. As in convenience stores, the retail chain kept a careful eye on its point-of-sale data and its stocks, raising the autonomy of outlets (Meyer-Ohle, 2003). Both companies utilized various degrees of innovation to aid their productivity in an era of stagnation.

The cases showed that the companies had their internal retail resilience—partly because the data collected from the company websites emphasized their individual stories. Nevertheless, extending the analysis to a broader sample, some external factors were still present.

One explanation is that companies attracted foreign investment, leading to foreign ownership in their stocks. Investors were drawn to companies with healthy financial outlooks and those not burdened by increasing debts. Foreign investment may have injected changes into the industry, as the investors would be less bound by the social norms and ties of Japanese partners. They would likely focus on profits rather than long-term business relationships (Vogel, 2006). However, the foreign presence in corporate Japan has also unraveled differently at the regulators' level. Japan was relatively unenthusiastic about relying on foreign investment to supply its capital needs (Anchordoguy, 2005). For instance, the state-supported high-tech industry mostly reverse-engineered the technology from foreign companies such as IBM. Only in the 1980s, under pressure from tightening intellectual property laws in the U.S., did the telecommunication industry begin to gradually adhere to international standards, opening its market to the world.

The retail industry's landscape was slightly different. It was not subjected to heavy industrial policies as the high-tech sector did. The regulations that protect small retailers in the early years of development, however, have kept the degree of competition low, making it a protected domestic sector. When most of the retailers tried to adapt their strategies to a more liberalized market, the move to a foreign-affiliated structure brought forth new challenges. The impact from the foreign shareholders was mainly prominent in restructuring, especially concerning labor relations. Vogel's (2006) regression analysis revealed a favorable correlation between aggressive restructuring and foreign ownership. Cross-sectoral comparisons were

conducted across retail, manufacturing, and banking industries. It showed that the retail industry restructured more than manufacturers and banks. One of the retailers that had foreign managerial control at around 50% is Seiyu, a supermarket chain. It partnered with U.S. retailer Wal-Mart in 2002, after the parent company of the Japanese retailer experienced liquidity problems in the 1990s and sold off several of its subsidiaries. The joint venture between the two promoted reforms. Starting from “integration” programs to train the employees in the Wal-Mart philosophy, to cutting the workforce, and finally the adoption of a “retail-link” system that connected suppliers and stores through the internet (Vogel, 2006). The drastic transitions have offered customers discounts, but Seiyu still experienced a deficit of 7 billion for the fiscal year of 2003 (Sato, 2005). In 2020, Walmart announced selling Seiyu to investment firm KKR due to its inability to gain profits after years of struggle. This case showed that the retailers, both the domestic and the foreign shareholders, encountered uncertainties in navigating through the market.

Surprisingly, neither Fast-Retailing nor Shimamura had international investors, though both companies expanded their markets outside Japan over the years. The former’s brand, UNIQLO, tapped into the global market in 2006, and soon, its international segments contributed greatly to its net profit. Another explanation for the success of the companies at the turn of the millennium is that they took advantage of China as a procurement market. Fast Retailing convinced their customers that the procured products from China were “low-priced” and of “high-quality,” and therefore played a major role in encouraging other retailers to procure merchandise from outside (Meyer-Ohle, 2003). The company also had established relationships with partner factories in countries including Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. No matter what strategies companies adopted, their level of importance shifted due to changes in the

environment. Geopolitical factors, such as trade wars between the U.S. and China in recent years, especially the rising tension in the Xinjiang cotton dilemma, would dampen the positive impacts of the rationale. Nevertheless, active procurement still played a major role in the retailer's success during the 2000s.

The other group that benefited from the liberalization in the retail sector was foreign retailers. The lowering of the regulatory barriers due to reforms in the Large-Scale Retail Store Law eased the transition of foreign firms that entered the Japanese market. Not every entrant had a satisfactory experience, however, as some of them faced hurdles. The tepid performance from the joint course of Wal-Mart and Seiyu illustrated above was one of them. Others like the French hypermarket Carrefour failed to play their best in their strength of low price and store space when they entered the market. It was mainly due to failure to live up to customers' expectations. The company finally learned its lessons by adapting to the local culture and appointing Japanese personnel to the management team.

Toys 'R' Us stood out as a successful case of the entry of foreign retailers into Japan. Toys 'R' Us, U.S., set up a joint venture with McDonald's Japan in 1989 (Meyer-Ohle, 2003). The distribution structure once perplexed the management level. To gain profits under the price competition between retailers, the company demanded the reduction of price during shipment to cut costs, as well as employing "direct dealings with manufacturers" (Sato, 2005; Meyer-Ohle, 2003). Even though Toy 'R' Us has gone through several stages of bankruptcy processes in recent decades, the operations in the Japanese market were less impacted.

As overseas partners adopted more digitalized approaches, the Japanese retail industry moves towards a new age of e-retailing in the early 21st century. Retailers are presented with opportunities to take advantage of innovation, whether it was realized in the form of TV

shopping, or internet-based retailing. Convenience stores were among the first to move towards the trend. They've not only launch online commerce ventures, but also established themselves as "payment points for online transactions" (Dawson, 2008). The trend toward digitalizing business models in the industry is approaching and may become inevitable as the country currently steps out of its decades-long deflation. A potential rise in consumption would be anticipated by both foreign and domestic investors, and if it materializes, employing digital solutions to draw in clients and stay relevant would be one way for retail businesses to profit.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed the changing landscapes of Japanese retailing from the 1980s from both the regulatory aspects and patterns of company strategies. The regulation in the retail sector has protected the industry, especially the small business owners, but hindered the performance of large stores. It fostered an inter-connected distribution system, which was inefficient if there was a rise in competition level. Moreover, strategies including price wars and expansion of store spaces posed limitations to the growth of retailers. Finally, the deregulation of the economy in the 1990s, along with the influx of foreign firms, provided new challenges and opportunities in the sector. Technological advances were one of the key factors that would contribute to the further development of the sector.

This paper's scope is limited to the examination of the Japanese retail industry from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Though some of the recent news in the industry was mentioned in the last section of the analysis, it's important to consider the whole trajectory of the retailers' strategies. The entrepreneurship environment is yet another aspect that would help provide additional insights into the topic. The retail industry in Japan might be a sunset industry, but with

the prevalent success of domestic firms setting an example for the industry and foreign retailers trying to establish themselves, it would take a new kind of innovation to operate in an economy that just existed an era of low interest rates.

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China's Evolving Presence in the Western Balkans: The Choice of Serbia or Montenegro

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Abstract:

In this paper, I analyze the differences in outcomes of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in securing political and economic influence in two Western Balkan countries: Serbia and Montenegro. In Montenegro, BRI has failed to secure this influence due to the lack of historical relations between the two countries and the failure of BRI projects like the Bar-Boljare Motorway. However, in Serbia, BRI has proven more successful in securing China's economic and political influence due to Serbia's openness to interacting with non-Western powers and its historical relations with China. Ultimately, I argue that Serbia has become China's central foothold in the Western Balkans.

Introduction:

In 2001, the Chinese Communist Party-led People's Republic of China decided to join the World Trade Organization. This move allowed China to expand its reach in the international market, leading to a dramatic increase in exports between 2004 and 2007, growing by more than 30% each year (Naughton 2019). Joining the WTO helped China to become a major global power, providing the economic strength required to support its growing international role. While foreign policy was vital for leadership in the preceding decades, it is evident that the CCP began

to focus more on entering the global system to raise the country's status as a dominant political and economic power in the early 2000s.

Therefore, under President and General Secretary Xi Jinping, we have seen a predictable shift toward prioritizing foreign policy to build greater power in the international system. China has now acquired the economic means to enforce its foreign policy initiatives backed by domestic reasons to propose such initiatives. One of the leading foreign initiatives that highlight Xi Jinping's approach to foreign policy is the Belt and Road Initiative—*Yidaiyilu* (Callahan 2016, 1). Xi Jinping announced the foreign policy initiative in 2013 at Nazarbayev University, proclaiming the country's "desire to jointly build an 'economic belt' along the Silk Road... to deepen cooperation and expand development" with various countries (Clarke 2017, 71). Subsequently, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road project was merged with BRI (Clarke 2017). As countries engage with the Belt and Road Initiative and Xi Jinping and the CCP's intentions shift, the initiative continues to grow and change throughout the years.

In analyzing the current state of the Belt and Road Initiative and its regional focuses, I set out to assess the reasoning for China to pursue the Belt and Road Initiative and why China has chosen Serbia as its main BRI foothold in the Western Balkan over countries like Montenegro that received BRI aid in the past. I contend that the lack of substantial historical relations and the execution of BRI projects in Montenegro has shown the limitations of BRI in its capability to secure continued economic and political influence in Montenegro. Furthermore, I argue that China has chosen Serbia as its central foothold in the Western Balkans in part due to the failures of BRI projects in Montenegro, but more significantly because of the Serbian government's historical ties with China and willingness to engage with non-Western powers.

The Belt and Road Initiative:

It is crucial to begin with a synopsis of the Chinese government's goals for the Belt and Road Initiative and how these goals influence the way BRI is executed in the Western Balkans. BRI has lacked an official structure for a great deal of time, with projects playing out vastly differently in each country. The project's large-scale nature has also resulted in uncertainty concerning the ultimate goals of the initiative. However, the economic and political characteristics of the initiative have particularly taken prominent roles in the reasoning for the initiative in official Chinese state and party narratives, as well as in academic literature.

Economic Goals:

According to official narratives such as Xi Jinping's speeches, the objective of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is to enhance the "influence of the Chinese economy [on] the global economy" (Damuri et al. 2019, 8). To achieve this, the BRI intends to establish "networks" on land and sea by constructing infrastructure such as roads, rail routes, oil pipelines, and ports to facilitate the movement of goods and capital (Callahan 2016). These networks are expected to stimulate trade by reducing barriers and malfunctions in sectors like the supply chain, leading to an increase in trade levels (Ghiasi 2018, 1). The rise in trade not only benefits the Chinese economy but also strengthens China's position in shaping "international economic rules" (deLisle and Goldstein 2019).

While the benefits of the BRI are manifold for China, they are intended to be mutually beneficial for participating countries as well. The argument linking infrastructure development to economic growth is central to the rationale presented to potential BRI participant countries. These countries have the option to consider "[reducing] tariffs" on Chinese goods, thereby benefiting the Chinese economy (Damuri et al. 2019). By 2014, the BRI had been formally

incorporated into the national economic development strategy, announced alongside three other development plans that further delineated its economic character (Cai 2017, 5).

Furthermore, the networks established by the BRI were designed to invigorate domestic industries in regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet. These autonomous regions (Xinjiang and Tibet) have relatively low levels of consumerism and have struggled to spur economic growth (Callahan 2016). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has consistently sought to stimulate infrastructure and economic development in Xinjiang and Tibet (Schneider 2021). Economic growth has been leveraged by the CCP to validate sovereignty claims over these regions, and the BRI has offered an official strategy for leadership to do so. Thus, the BRI encompasses not only international-based economic goals but also domestic-based economic objectives.

Political Goals:

Political motivations for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are sometimes overlooked in existing literature; however, politics are inherently intertwined with economics. The most apparent political objectives of the BRI include strengthening the political legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and promoting greater Chinese international influence (Damauri et al. 2019). The economic nature of the BRI aims to stimulate growth in the outer regions of China—namely regions that cannot compete economically with the prosperous coastal regions. By stimulating economic growth, the CCP's legitimacy is reinforced, as its political legitimacy is largely predicated on the state's ability to generate economic prosperity. Additionally, the inception of the BRI coincided with Xi Jinping's pursuit of a more assertive foreign policy aimed at achieving milestones for China (Cai 2017, 2; Callahan 2016, 2). Xi and the leadership believe that by achieving such milestones, the "Chinese nation... can be

rejuvenated" through foreign initiatives like the BRI, which gradually but decisively enhance economic and subsequently political influence internationally (Callahan 2016, 3).

The BRI's political nature became abundantly clear when the CCP implemented BRI into its constitution in 2017 (Mercator Institute for China Studies 2018). By constitutionalizing it, the BRI has become somewhat enmeshed with the state and its principles. Moreover, the political dimension of the BRI is increasingly scrutinized due to criticism stemming from the CCP's lack of "transparency" regarding the strategy and plan of the initiative (Damauri et al. 2019). Critics (US, EU, India, and Japan) often perceive the BRI as a "threat... to major global powers" due to the undisclosed or concealed intentions of the project (Ghiassy 2018). Despite official narratives downplaying political interests, political influence remains a driving force behind CCP's establishment of BRI.

Motivations in the Western Balkans:

China has obtained authorization to undertake Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in the Western Balkans, driven by the economic incentives advocated by the initiative. Through infrastructure projects and loans, China has established a strong presence in the region (Skala-Kuhmann 2019). The Western Balkans have remained open to the BRI due to their weak economies, especially in comparison to those of European Union (EU) member states (Holzner and Schwarzhappel 2018). The weak economies of the Western Balkan states partly stem from their recent establishment as nations and their relatively small size. Thus, the BRI is an excellently targeted initiative, addressing the pressing need for infrastructure development in the Western Balkan countries. Weak infrastructure in these nations ultimately hampers their economic progress (Holzner and Schwarzhappel 2018). Moreover, it's noteworthy that many Western Balkan countries have relatively unstable institutions, allowing for less restrictive

regulations in pursuing BRI projects (Vangeli 2017). The absence of strict regulations is incredibly appealing to China, resulting in the targeting of the Western Balkans by the BRI. As diplomatic and economic relations strengthen between Western Balkan countries and China, China can attempt to cultivate political backing that tolerates its vision for the international system and future (Vangeli 2017).

However, China is not the sole provider of loans or investments to the Western Balkans, as the European Union and its member states are also actively engaged in the region. The EU accounts for 70% of the total foreign direct investment in the Western Balkans (Stanicek and Tarpova 2022). Over the past 12 years, the South East Europe Transport Observatory has invested over €12.2 billion in the region to spur transportation infrastructure development (Holzner and Schwarzhappel 2018). The Western Balkans remains in a position where the countries will accept aid from other powers, as the countries have yet to be incorporated into the EU. For these countries to be considered and accepted into the EU, they need self-sustaining economies and moderately strong infrastructure and institutions. Some countries, such as Serbia and Montenegro, are on their way to creating stronger economies and infrastructure, yet still fall short of EU standards. Therefore, Western Balkan countries have yet to be entirely accepted by the Western world and are left in limbo between the EU and China.

Montenegro-China:

Montenegro's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) began similarly to other Western Balkan countries, such as Serbia. Montenegro, identified as a "semi-consolidated democracy," had a population of 619,211 as of 2021 (Conley et al. 2020, 6; Bandiera and

Vasileios 2019). The nation declared independence from Serbia in May 2006 and has struggled with issues of poor infrastructure and corruption since then (Conley et al. 2020). Nevertheless, the government has been striving to address these challenges to "maintain independence" (Shopov 2022). Following the announcement of the BRI in 2013, Chinese investment became an appealing option to solve these issues, without the same strict restrictions that EU investors impose (Conley et al. 2020). Additionally, EU institutions outright rejected funding for projects like the Bar-Boljare Highway due to their unfeasible nature (Zweers et al. 2020). Nonetheless, with the EU not providing investments and the Montenegrin government prioritizing infrastructure projects, attention turned to the BRI (Zweers et al. 2020).

The most notorious BRI project in Montenegro is the aforementioned Bar-Boljare Motorway (Аутопут Бар-Бољаре), which has resulted in massive amounts of debt for the young Montenegrin government. The project's primary contractor, the China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), has been granted various incentives from the Montenegrin government, including tax relief (Shopov 2022). While CRBC undertook the construction, EXIM Bank sponsored the project by granting loans. While the Bar-Boljare Motorway intended to connect the more developed parts of the nation to less developed areas, the project ended up facilitating a colossal amount of debt. Debt stemming from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has escalated to the extent that Montenegro now faces a "higher debt-to-GDP ratio," a trend expected to persist as the debt burden grows (Bandiera and Tsiropoulos 2019, 2). Starting from EXIM Bank's initial loan of €687 million in 2014, the debt has accrued to over €1 billion (Paszak 2021). Given

Montenegro's relatively low GDP and small economy, the impact of this debt is magnified. In the eyes of Montenegrin society and the international community, the Bar-Boljare Motorway project was deemed a failure.

In response to the substantial debt incurred from BRI projects, Montenegro has begun to pivot back toward EU and US investors. Firstly, the China Road and Bridge Corporation will not complete the Bar-Boljare Motorway due to the debt problem (Conley et al. 2020). Additionally, both the government and civil society in Montenegro have become aware that the mounting debt to China could potentially lead to China seizing control of the port of Bar as part of repayment obligations (Shopov 2022). This possibility has been brought to light by the situation in Sri Lanka, where China gained control of a port project as a result of Sri Lanka's struggles with debt burdens (deLisle and Goldstein 2019). Therefore, Montenegro has begun to explore alternative investors. In the case of the Bar-Boljare Motorway, "two American banks and one French bank" have been entrusted with overseeing the project (Shopov 2022). These banks, in agreement with the Montenegrin government, have negotiated a reduction in the interest rate imposed by EXIM Bank on its loans, lowering it from "2% to 0.8%" (Shopov 2022). In addition, the European Commission has proposed funding for other infrastructure projects through its Economic and

Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, aiming to allocate €9 billion to the region through this initiative (Paszak 2021). While the Bar-Boljare Motorway remains a heavy burden on the Montenegrin economy and government, investment in infrastructure has not ceased but has led to increased involvement from the EU in Montenegro.

BRI projects in Montenegro were limitations in their ability to secure political influence for China, primarily due to the failure of the Bar-Boljare Motorway project, which exacerbated negative sentiments toward China among Montenegrins. Political cooperation between China and Montenegro occurred as a result of the Bar-Boljare Motorway (Zweer et al. 2020). However, with the project accumulating significant debt, breaches of regulations by China, and environmental harm from construction, Montenegrins' perception of China has soured. Montenegro sought out infrastructure projects to stimulate economic growth and preserve its independence; instead, these endeavors have resulted in further economic damage. Therefore, a considerable portion of the blame gets placed on China for the management of these projects in the eyes of Montenegrin civil society and media (Shopov 2022). It's noteworthy that despite the increasingly negative public opinion toward China in Montenegro, there is still a general acceptance of China as an economic force in the country. It is more so significant that the escalation of negative sentiments toward China has not been observed in other BRI Western Balkan countries on the same scale it has been seen in Montenegro. Furthermore, there has been a growing perspective that China's involvement in the nation impedes further progress in EU integration, a process under consideration since 2012 (Conley et al. 2020). Both the government and voters in Montenegro traditionally and presently lean toward the EU (Shopov 2022). As Montenegro remains committed to EU integration, China has gradually been portrayed as a threatening actor, contrary to the objectives of the BRI.

The absence of a defined historical diplomatic relationship between Montenegro and China also contributed to the limited success of the BRI in enhancing political influence. During Montenegro's tenure under the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the nation possessed close ties with Russia and initiated diplomatic relations with

China through Serbian President Milošević. However, this dynamic shifted when Montenegro declared independence in 2006 and received international recognition. China officially established diplomatic ties with Montenegro in 2006, but their more active and cooperative relationship didn't unfold until 2013 under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014). As a newly independent nation, Montenegro had the freedom to pursue its own diplomatic and political course, unencumbered by historical diplomatic traditions. Moreover, the significant social and cultural disparities between Montenegro and China hindered the development of genuine cultural and political ties (Paszak 2021). While the BRI can attempt to encourage political collaboration, Montenegro's lack of historical political relations with China leads it to perceive China primarily through an economic lens.

In addition to the absence of a tradition of political relations with China, Montenegrins exhibit a devotion to democracy, as evidenced by the National Democratic Institutions public opinion poll in 2020. According to the poll, 85% of respondents considered "Montenegro's development as a functional democracy" to be essential for the nation's well-being (National Democratic Institute 2020). Robert Benjamin, the NDI's director of Central and Eastern Europe, emphasized the Montenegrin populace's "genuine" desire for safe and fair elections (National Democratic Institute 2020). On a political basis, Montenegrins' devotion to democracy clashes with the authoritarian tendencies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While the ruling government of Montenegro, the Democratic Party of Socialists, cultivated relations with China, these relations were primarily driven by economic considerations (Shopov 2022). Montenegro, in turn, pursued closer political relations with the EU and embarked on its journey toward EU integration. Additionally, Montenegro's accession to NATO in 2017 further underscored its

alignment with the Western world. The nation's deepening ties with the EU highlight the limitations of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in fostering closer political relations with Montenegro, which is increasingly intertwined with the Western world.

Serbia-China:

Serbia, on the other hand, shares a unique relationship with China as a by-product of historical contexts and similar claims on distinct regions. Historically, Serbia has remained open to engaging with various political actors in alliances (Hartwell 2017). With a willingness to engage with many nations, Serbia has attracted the attention of various powers, including EU member states, the US, Russia, and China, all vying for influence in the region (Hartwell 2017). Serbia has yet to align entirely with the West or the East, finding allies in both spheres. However, the nation is notorious for its close ties to Russia, rooted in the perception of Russia as the "defender of all Slavs" (Hartwell 2017, 9). In recent years, Serbia has shown increasing willingness to engage with China on political fronts. This budding relationship began in the 1990s when Serbian President Milošević initiated efforts to establish diplomatic relations during his visit to China in 1997 (Rrustemi et al. 2019). Since then, Serbia and China have steadily strengthened their ties, fueled in part by their respective stances on Kosovo, which declared independence, and Taiwan, which maintains de facto independence. In 2008, China publicly supported Serbia's stance of non-recognition toward Kosovo's independence and refrained from recognizing Kosovo's independence (Rrustemi et al. 2019). While China's motivations for supporting Serbia have not been explicitly stated, it is clearly correlated to independence movements in regions like Tibet and Xinjiang (Le Corre 2018).

The history of cooperation and agreement only makes increasing economic activity between the two nations easier. Moreover, compared to neighboring countries lacking such relations with China, like Montenegro, it is evident why China would prioritize a nation with a history of allegiance as a foothold for its vital foreign policy initiative. Serbia's historical ties with China, resulting from its willingness to interact with non-Western actors, have paved the way for a more accepting approach toward Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects and Chinese involvement in Serbian society.

The unique relationship between Serbia and China has encouraged Serbia's acceptance of Chinese economic and political influence through BRI projects. Chinese economic influence in Serbia is notably prevalent, with trade between the two nations tripling to \$1.6 billion between 2005 and 2016 (Le Corre 2018). In addition, among Western Balkan countries, Serbia has acquired the most investment from China between 2009 and 2021 (Stanicek and Tarpova 2022). As of 2021, Serbia has received over €10.3 billion from BRI (Stanicek and Tarpova 2022).

In the realm of politics, President Aleksandar Vučić leads Serbia toward deeper political cooperation with China. As of 2023, the current Serbian government has actively encouraged China's involvement and consistently made decisions to facilitate accelerated cooperation, despite some dissatisfaction among the population regarding China's role (Shopov 2022). For instance, in 2017, under the leadership of Vučić and Xi, Serbia and China agreed to eliminate visa requirements for entry into countries (Le Corre 2022). In addition, Serbia stands as the sole nation in the Western Balkans equipped with military drones and missile defense systems from China, initially framed as an economic agreement but intertwined with security and political considerations (Rrustemi et al. 2019). Cooperation between the two nations is only growing as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) continues, reflecting positively on China's strategic outlook on

BRI implementation across various Western Balkan countries. This optimistic outlook undoubtedly influences China's decision to prioritize Serbia as a key foothold in the region.

Regarding the execution of BRI projects in Serbia, the initiatives have proceeded relatively smoothly, particularly when compared to BRI endeavors in Montenegro. Among these projects, the Budapest-Belgrade railway (пруга Будимпешта-Београд) stands out as the most significant, with the Serbian portion alone costing approximately \$1.1 billion (Vujošević and Gazdic 2022). Unlike the BarBoljare Motorway in Montenegro, which incurred substantial debt for the Montenegrin government, the railway project in Serbia has not led to a similar level of financial burden. Serbia's current debt level stands at 54% of the national GDP, approximately 15% lower than Montenegro's debt level (Zweers et al. 2020). Another noteworthy project aligned with BRI is the Safe City Project, a collaboration between the Serbian government and Huawei aimed at implementing mass video surveillance that has raised fears among various groups in Serbia concerning potential privacy violations (Zweers et al. 2020, 40). As the Serbian government demonstrates an increasing willingness to engage in successful BRI projects, Serbia becomes an increasingly attractive prospect for China as a foothold in the Western Balkans.

Conclusion:

When assessing the economic and political objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative, it appears as if Xi Jinping is attempting to create a Global China. According to Ching Lee, China's turn towards going global is a strategy to “overcome interlinked challenges of growth and governance” (Lee 2022, 314). Lee, perhaps unknowingly, uses the term Global China to define the shift in foreign policy under Xi Jinping. To create a Global China, CCP leadership has encouraged the implementation of “economic statecraft” through FDI and loans for infrastructure (Lee 2022). Therefore, economic statecraft takes form in initiatives like BRI. It is important to

note that BRI and Chinese economic statecraft range dramatically in different countries and regions. However, in the case of the Western Balkans, the performance of BRI and historical political relations play an essential role in accomplishing economic statecraft.

The Belt and Road Initiative in Montenegro has not been successful, highlighting the limitations of BRI in securing a Global China. Not only did the Bar-Boljare Motorway fail in terms of completion and obstruction of economic growth, but also in securing pro-Chinese attitudes in Montenegro, as the nation has increasingly turned back toward pro-EU outlooks. The new status of the nation, commitment to democracy, and lack of historical relations also significantly influenced why Montenegrins have been increasingly more willing to abandon China and look toward the EU.

In contrast, BRI has been successful in Serbia so far, giving China more economic and political influence in the Western Balkans. China has been successful in growing more global, as Lee would say, due to countries like Serbia. With the Serbian government remaining more accepting and willing of Chinese influence and involvement, Chinese leadership in institutions and businesses would seek out Serbia as a foothold in the Western Balkans. Despite Serbia's commitment to incorporation into the EU, the government has not shown any intention of turning back to EU involvement. Therefore, China's leadership in institutions and businesses will continue to seek out Serbia as the central foothold in the Western Balkans. Serbia will remain a key player in China's efforts to grow more globally.

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Should we be aware of China on the ocean? Chinese nationalism and maritime expansion

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Introduction

On September 18, 2024, on the 93rd anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, a man, spurred by nationalistic, anti-Japanese sentiments, stabbed and killed a 10-year-old school child in the Shenzhen Japanese School in Shenzhen, China. This has not been the sole anti-Japanese incident in China. In June, a man killed a mother and her child at the Suzhou Japanese

School, creating social outcry and debates. Some criticized the attacker; however, larger responses by the public praised the attacker and led the Internet to side with the killer.

This reaction calls for broader discussions regarding the governing body. The tolerance from the Chinese government and the one-sided public opinion reflected the notion for the Communist Party, though not explicitly, to promote anti-foreign sentiments through nationalistic ideals embedded in everyday aspects of its citizens' lives. I claim these set of sentiments and ideologies are the foundation and main drivers of China's contemporary foreign policies.

Undoubtedly, China's unique history and geographical location granted the CCP the ability to develop and maintain its control over citizens' beliefs from its thousand-years-long tradition of monarchy and authoritarian-style governance. China remains in a unique position in the world's political spectrum. With its enormous population base and technological advancement, China emerged as a superpower in the millennium to challenge the United States hegemony after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the Asia Pacific, China maintains its status as the dominant power with its military and economic influence. However, nations such as Japan and Vietnam sought to challenge the political balance with rapid economic development, forcing China to maintain its relative political hegemony through territorial gains and social influences. As a result, aiming to strengthen its position in the global political order, China strived to promote its nationalistic ideals in the everyday lives of its citizens and utilized this shared notion as a weapon in its foreign policies.

China's internal and foreign policies are driven by realist ideas. China prioritizes maintaining absolute control over its sovereignty and wishes to countervail with other state actors, such as the United States and Japan. This idea often prompts security dilemmas, in which China hopes to achieve stability in an anarchic international system through ideological and

material expansion. Therefore, instead of being solely constraint by nationalistic sentiments, I argue that China's territorial ambitions in its surrounding waters are a combination of factors entangling between its internal nationalistic ideas and the external global geopolitical environment.

The argument will unfold in three steps in this research paper. I will first discuss a brief history of the development of Chinese culture and nationalism to provide the background for Chinese nationalism today. Second, I will examine Chinese nationalism today and its subsequent effects. In the third section, I will highlight the effect of Chinese nationalism on its approach to foreign policies with a closer examination on China's territorial conflict with Japan in the Senkaku Islands.

Brief History of Chinese nationalism and anti-west sentiments

Guantao Jin, an influential figure in China during the New Enlightenment movement in the 1980s, claims Chinese nationalism is characterized by morals and culture rather than race and nations. Chinese "nationalism," unlike the conventional belief of Western nationalism that dated back to the Enlightenment, could be traced back to the Qin dynasty and the principles of Confucius. Because of its relatively stable sovereignty and territories, China approached its cultural and social development differently from other states. China considered itself superior for the most of its history, demonstrated by its isolationist policies, which reached their peak under the Ming and Qing dynasties. Ultimately, this extended period of isolationism and notion of superiority led to the development of Sinocentrism, claiming that China is the cultural, political, and economic center of the world. Today, Sinocentrism plays a significant role in constructing the framework of modern Chinese nationalism, as many believers find "pride in stories about the superiority of China's '5000 years' of 'glorious civilization.'"

Despite being the superior ideology in China, Sinocentrism experienced tremendous obstacles during the Opium wars. When Great Britain destroyed China in 1842 during the First Opium War—in which China had to pay enormous reparations and ceded Hong Kong Island to the British—it caused a wave of invasion among the emerging global actors to plunder China's prosperous resources. By the 1930s, foreign settlements emerged within China – for example, Japanese and French concessions in Shanghai – making the Chinese empire vulnerable to disturbance.

According to scholars like Alison A. Kaufman, the Century of Humiliation exploited China and inspired scholars to re-identify the governing policies. Some scholars acknowledged that industrialization inspired growth and sought to reform the nation, exemplified by the Hundred Days' Reform. However, the long-lasting monarchic system prevented changes because of isolationist and Sinocentrist ideals.

The first surge of Chinese nationalism was seen in 1919 in the May 4th Movement when students demonstrated against the Treaty of Versailles' transfer of Chinese territory to Japan. Liang Qichao, a reformer during the late Qing dynasty and a leader of the May Fourth Movement, first introduced “Nation of China(中国民族)” and Western nationalism to the Chinese population. In his article, “*On the General trend of the Change of Chinese Academic Thought*”, Liang used poetic language to explain the connotations of the word “Chinese(中华)” for the first time and established its connection to the Chinese nation, creating a narrative regarding Chinese nationalism. Subsequently, the

establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 from Marxism and Leninism ultimately guided China to develop an authoritarian approach to governance, and the emergence of the internet allowed the massive flow of information.

Based on modern Chinese nationalism and antagonistic sentiments among the general public, many Chinese today disgrace the Century of Humiliation and blame the Western power of the legacies—poverty, destruction, and instability—generated by Western imperialism.

The Communist Party of China (CCP) endeavored to consolidate its hegemony by creating a shared anti-foreign sentiment among the public through propaganda and education. By educating the youth and guiding the public consensus through media and newspapers, the CCP incentivized anti-foreign sentiments that eventually shaped internal and external policies.



Chen Yongzhi, *Down with the Yankee*, October 1965, Heilongjiang meishu chubanshe, <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1965-011>

Chinese nationalism today and its connection to realism

When China hosted its first-ever Olympics in Beijing in 2008, the country experienced a surge of national pride. At the same time, the Western actors – the United States, Great Britain, and France – questioned China’s human rights status. Earlier in 2008, anti-government protests in Tibet followed by human rights demonstrations during the international leg of the Olympic torch relay sparked disputes between the Western, democratic nations and the Chinese nationalists.

This event demonstrated the rising importance of China in the global political order and generated greater recognition by the international community. Compared to the Mao era, the Chinese economic reform led by Deng Xiaoping generate economic growth in China and elevated China’s global importance as a global manufacturer, allowing China to have a greater influence in political order and affecting Western foreign policies.

This led to the rise of modern Chinese nationalism, which can be broadly broken down into two categories: patriotic nationalism and cyber nationalism.

Patriotic nationalism

As China gained economic independence and joined the WTO in 2001, it quickly became a global powerhouse. China saw an era of economic prosperity characterized by increasing opportunities, rising wages, and overall rising living standards. Chinese citizens began owning electronics and cars in their households, cultivating a sense of pride in their nation. Furthermore, the advancement in technologies and infrastructure in the post-modern era, such as generative AI and high-speed railways, promoted a sense of national strength that resulted in collective pride.

In the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Chinese athletes won the medal count, the first time they were ahead of the United States. Their performance spurred national and collective pride and boosted modern Chinese nationalism.

The most important driving force for Chinese patriotic nationalism comes from the Communist government. After the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the CCP experienced changes in its leadership, sacking the liberal, pro-western leaders such as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang and replacing them with more conservative leaders like Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin. These conservative leaders believed that the pro-Western ideologies in the 1980s harmed their absolute control in China. Hence, the CCP carried out special education programs and propaganda to promote Chinese nationalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In March 1991, General Secretary Jiang Zemin instructed the Education Commission to initiate a nationwide program to improve education. An idea of socialist patriotism was waved into existing curricula. Chinese history became divided into different periods. Pre-modern history is romanticized as “Five thousand years of Splendid Chinese history.” The period from the Opium War to liberation (1840–1949) was titled “The Humiliation of More than a Century of Invasion and the Struggle to Save the Country from Destruction.”

Chinese nationalists questioned Western modes of democratization and theories of development. They believed Westernization was the cause of China’s national and cultural identity crisis by, for example, refusing and delaying China’s progress to join the WTO, and argued that China’s modernization should be separated from Westernization, in which the future development of China should rely on “Chinesenization.”

The policies, combined with intellectual criticisms of Western democracy ideals, challenged the existing global order by creating an anti-foreign, patriotic Chinese nationalism, shifting China’s public and foreign policy.

Cyber-nationalism

On the other hand, the rise of the internet and the rapid adoption of smart devices generated a wave of Chinese cyber-nationalism. To impose tighter control over the media, the Communist government restricted foreign social media, such as Google and Facebook. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, China's constitution affords its citizens freedom of speech and press, "[b]ut the opacity of Chinese media regulations allows authorities to crack down on news stories by claiming that they expose state secrets and endanger the country". Everything has its tradeoffs, and China's policies are no exceptions. Although restricting information granted greater control and facilitated the spread of nationalism, it limited the freedom of the press—according to Reporters Without Borders, China ranked 172 out of 180 on the worldwide index of press freedom.

However, the habits of the 1980s-born Y-generation allowed the CCP to disregard this effect. Ying Jiang described the Y-generation as driven by consumerism, and "the current levels of reform and opening up have satisfied many of their curiosities about the world. Their everyday lives contain Western elements—Coca-Cola, Hollywood movies, iPods—and they appear to have little interest in participating in political changes. They form a generation for whom, since prosperity and personal freedom are achievable, democracy is not required." These new trends granted the CCP rights to place media bans because the Y-generation and their offspring do not prioritize democracy, making the spread of authoritarian nationalism possible on the internet.

Most importantly, the emergence of extreme groups, "Fen Qing" and "Little Pink," on the internet further pushed the spread of Chinese nationalism. "Fen Qing" are the youths born after the 1980s who possess both a cynical and critical view of the world and express them freely on the internet. "Little Pink" is the new generation of hypersensitive, hyper-nationalist keyboard

commandos. These two waves of nationalistic movements on the internet guided public opinion towards nationalistic sentiments and advocacy for Sinocentrist ideals. For example, during the controversial debate regarding how the usage of Xinjiang cotton dismantled the human rights of Uyghurs, “Little Pink” stood strong behind the CCP with progressive language on international platforms, once again demonstrating Chinese nationalism on the world stage.

By monitoring the media outlets and unintentionally or intentionally promoting speeches from Fen Qing and Little Pinks, the Communist government further pushed the general public into a blind belief in Chinese superiority and anti-foreign sentiments. Today, thanks to the government and the internet, the majority of the Chinese population shares a common notion against foreign actors and returned to their ancient belief of Sinocentrism.

China v.s. Japan in East China Sea: Implementation of Modern Chinese Nationalism to Foreign Policies

The Senkaku Islands, located in the East China Sea between Mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan, have been a battleground for military strategists for their location as critical shipping lanes, rich fishing grounds, and potential oil deposits. Thus, China, Taiwan, and Japan claimed sovereignty over the islands, causing disputes in the international community.

The disputes over the Senkaku Islands traced back to 1895. After conquering the Ryukyu Islands, the Meiji Japanese government claimed the Senkaku Islands based on Terra Nullius (lit. nobody’s land). In 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki allowed Japan to annex Taiwan and its surrounding Islands. However, Japan claimed that they already occupied the Senkaku Islands before the Treaty of Shimonoseki, making them invalid in the treaty. Therefore, the Treaty of San Francisco that forced Japan to forfeit its territories in Taiwan did not include the Senkaku islands. Instead, it placed the “Senkaku Islands under the administration of the United States as

part of Okinawa ...the 1972 Okinawa Reversion Agreement between the United States and Japan as part of the area over which the administrative rights were returned to Japan.”

On the other hand, China did not claim the islands’ sovereignty until recently. After the Treaty of San Francisco and the recognition by the United States that the Senkaku Islands are Japanese territories, the CCP did not respond until more recently. Rather, they recognized the Senkaku Islands as Japanese territories in their publications.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *World Atlas Collection*, 1958, https://www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/c_ml/senkaku/page1we_000010.html

However, after China discovered the potential oil reserves in the Senkaku Islands, they began claiming the Senkaku Islands as Chinese territories. According to the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, “Diaoyudao (Senkaku Islands) has always been China’s inherent territories” because China first discovered the islands, has long intervention on the islands, and historical publication indicating the islands belong to China. Furthermore, the Chinese government claimed that Japan “illegally” stole the island and had no evidence of its sovereignty.

Military action followed with China’s claim on the islands, in which conflicts peaked in 2012. Maritime surveillance vessels, fishery administration vessels, and other official vessels

patrol within the 12 nautical miles of territorial waters extending from the territorial sea baseline of Diaoyudao and its affiliated islands as “Instances of Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) patrols in the contiguous waters around the islands reached an all-time high in 2023 with 1,287 incursions, including a 134-day uninterrupted presence.”

Public outcry against the Japanese spurred across the country during the early 2010s. The “Fen Qings” and “Little Pinks” continue to rage on the internet, guiding public opinion against the Japanese and creating patriotic tensions between the two groups. A 2023 Genron NPO survey demonstrated deepening nationalist sentiment in Japan and China regarding the dispute. It revealed that 92.2% of Japanese participants (up from 87.3%) and 62.9% of Chinese participants (up from 62.6%) have unfavorable opinions of the other country.

The dispute over the Senkaku Islands also calls for broader discussions on the sovereignty of Taiwan. The Senkaku Islands promoted tensions among China, Taiwan, and Japan, but the CCP claims Taiwan to be a part of its territory. According to the Chinese government, the Senkaku Islands dispute is between China and Japan. By using nationalistic phrases, the CCP government created cohesion among the Chinese citizens to believe that Taiwan belongs to China, raising not only anti-Japanese sentiments but also anti-Taiwanese independence sentiments.

The response to the Senkaku Islands disputes reflects the nationalistic motives of the Chinese government. Driven by national interest in economic development, the Chinese government altered its long-standing claim on the Senkaku Islands and argued for the territories. By imposing militaries in the surrounding seas and demonstrating its material powers, the CCP created a strong stance on the issues and showed the international community its anti-Japanese sentiments. The CCP’s action also cultivated a symbol of patriotism. The CCP leverages

nationalism to maintain its legitimacy, and their assertive actions regarding the Senkaku Islands are framed as defending the nation's sovereignty, appealing to nationalist pride.

Public opinion plays an essential role in China's foreign policies. The rising access to the internet granted easier spread of information. The Chinese government often faces pressure from its population, who are highly sensitive to territorial issues due to strong nationalist education and propaganda. This means Beijing cannot appear "weak" on territorial disputes without risking domestic backlash. The comments by the "Fen Qings" and "Little Pinks" are a double-edged sword. Some comments might cause backlash and criticism from the international community, but more often, their comments created positive patriotic waves from the roots up. The citizens in China have limited information on overseas conflicts due to censored media. Thus, by increasing education awareness and limiting outside sources, the CCP cultivated a shared sense of patriotism against the Japanese, making policy-making actions facile.

Conclusion

This research examined the effect of nationalism in China and its further application in China's foreign policies, especially surrounding China's territorial ambitions in the South and East China Sea. Throughout the passage, I examined the historical evolution and events that contributed to the rise of nationalistic and anti-foreign sentiments in China, and came to the conclusion that the CCP's promotion and restriction of specific ideals are the main driver to its antagonistic sentiments from the grassroots. As both top-down and bottom-up approaches intersect at a harmonic ideology, it became facile for policymakers to implement policies that fulfill its geopolitical ambitions. This is strongly evident in the Senkaku Island dispute, for which Chinese nationalism became the driving force for anti-foreign sentiments and material expansion. The world today needs peace, and excessive nationalism will disturb such practices.

Nevertheless, recognizing the large population base and its authoritarian government in China, anti-foreign sentiments will continue to exist as Sinocentrism remains the most prominent and only ideology in China.

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The Chinatowns in Manhattan and Flushing through the Lens of the Planetary Urbanization Framework

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Introduction

Historical Background

In order to analyze the urbanization of Chinatowns in Manhattan and Flushing, it is important to consider the historical context of immigration to both regions. Before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese laborers immigrated to New York from 1860 to 1880 (Zhou 2001: 143). Many were uneducated, spoke little English, and came to America for the hopes of economic establishment (Zhou 2001: 145). After the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 re-expanded immigration of Chinese people to New York City (Zhou 2001: 145). Old Chinatown, a name for Manhattan's Chinatown on the Lower East Side since 1860, consisted of a mostly low-income population that lived in crowded spaces (Zhou 2001: 154). Over time, there have been more Chinatowns established in New York City, such as those in Flushing, Queens, and Sunset Park, Brooklyn (Zhou 2001: 152).

In Flushing, Chinese immigrants were, after 1990, generally wealthier than those living in Manhattan (Zhou 2001: 159). By 1990, downtown Flushing did not have a dominant Chinese

population and encompassed notable Chinese, Korean, and Indian representation (Zhou 2001: 159). In contrast to Manhattan's Chinatown, most of Flushing's immigrant population after 1975 were skilled workers from Taiwan who took part in commercial development (Zhou 2001: 159). An influx of workers with low levels of skills have migrated to Flushing in later years, causing greater class diversity (Zhou 2001: 161).

Thesis Statement

Understanding this immigration history reveals how Manhattan's Old Chinatown laid the foundation for the emergence of new communities such as Flushing. The connection between these two locations is clear; Flushing as a community could not exist without Chinese immigration to Old Chinatown first. This suggests that the development of different ethnic communities, living spaces, and urbanization in both Chinatowns should be understood within the broader context of Chinese immigration and each neighborhood's cultural ties to China. This interpretation is representative of Yuzo Mizoguchi's approach of "China as method," an essay in which he discusses that an evaluation of Chinese history should be considered as an element of the larger world (Mizoguchi 2016: 516). Furthermore, he argues that China is not a separate entity isolated from global contexts, but rather a country that helps one understand how various historical transformations have shaped the world. These include a shift away from Eurocentric narratives and the growing influence of Asia in international affairs, which helps position China as central in new interpretations of world history (Mizoguchi 2016: 518). Similarly, this essay will explore how prior frameworks applied to urbanization in China can be used to analyze and interpret urban processes in the Chinatowns of Manhattan and Flushing, while employing field notes observations from both neighborhoods as a primary source.

Utilizing Chinese urbanization as a lens to understand the implications of urban processes in both Chinatowns, this paper will discuss urbanization in the context of a framework applied to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, initiated in 2013, is an ongoing investment by the Chinese government that seeks to connect countries within Africa, Asia, and more to less urbanized regions in China, fostering mutual economic growth (Williams et al. 2020: 128). Joe Williams, Caitlin Robinson, and Stefan Bouzarovski draw on the planetary urbanization thesis to argue that urbanization is driven by global capitalism. For larger projects such as those in the BRI, the implications of infrastructure projects affect how people and resources connect on a global scale (Williams et al. 2020: 136).

A key complication arises when connecting the international scale of the planetary urbanization framework to the Chinatowns in New York City. How can the planetary urbanization framework help one understand the implications of infrastructure projects and capitalist development in Flushing and Chinatown, which are only small neighborhoods in comparison to the BRI? This paper argues that like the planetary urbanization framework, infrastructure developments in these Chinatowns, such as commercialization and modernization, showcase the benefits of capitalist-driven urbanization. However, these developments also acknowledge a limitation in the framework by illustrating how capitalist growth can disregard lived experiences in these neighborhoods through large-scale projects, often displacing residents in the process.

Manhattan's Chinatown

The Mega Jail: Benefits and Limitations of Infrastructure

In Manhattan's Chinatown, urbanization is complex, highlighting both the benefits and drawbacks of capitalist-driven development. Large-scale infrastructure, such as the new

Manhattan Detention Center (the mega jail), could be seen as a project of infringement that displaces residents, yet leads to economic benefits. The jail is being built on White Street, which is located very close to Canal Street, a major commercial district of the neighborhood (Qiang 2024). This construction has inspired multiple protests and petitions by Chinatown residents, as it will displace many people and businesses located within the area. This acknowledges a limitation of the planetary urbanization framework, as while the mega jail could be seen as an economically beneficial investment for the government, it also disregards the local residential and commercial life around it. The New York City government could argue that building the jail is both mutually beneficial to the government and Chinatown's economy—the jail could stimulate economic activity through construction, as well as employ staff, such as corrections officers, that are needed to operate the building. The importance of employment and infrastructure in Chinatown can relate to the BRI and its projects. Just as the BRI seeks to reduce unemployment in China by employing workers on infrastructure projects, the New York City government could similarly employ more laborers through their construction of the mega jail (Smith 2024).

Furthermore, there is an interplay between power and space within the mega jail project, contributing to how capitalist growth can negatively affect a community (Mei 2024). Viewing the mega jail as a process of urbanization, it makes sense that the jail, along with the economic benefits it provides, could lead to urban development. However, a key concern arises from whether this development would be mutually beneficial to both residents and the government. Within the context of the planetary urbanization framework, in the BRI, China seeks to gain profits from investments in other countries, while the countries they invest in economically prosper; this marks the transaction as mutually beneficial (Williams et al. 2020: 128). However,

the BRI's vast vision complicates the claim that the initiative is solely co-beneficial, instead reinforcing beliefs that it primarily serves to increase political power for China (Williams et al. 2020: 129). Similarly, one could argue that the New York City government does not have Chinatown's economic interests in mind when constructing the jail, rather seeking to solidify their authority. Although the construction of the mega jail could be interpreted as a project that contributes to employment opportunities and economic benefits, it also negatively affects residents around that area, including those who must find new homes and locations to establish their businesses.

Small Businesses and Urban Development

On the other hand, smaller-scale capitalism through local businesses in Manhattan's Chinatown drives urbanization and leads to benefits in commercialization. The Business Improvement District in Chinatown (BID), an organization that employs local stakeholders to host community events and improve local business and capital, is a key example (City of New York Government n.d.). When viewed through the lens of the planetary urbanization framework, the BID portrays urbanization as being implemented by broader economic forces such as the government, yet driven by community-oriented capitalism. While this supports the argument that Manhattan's Chinatown stimulates urbanization in favor of prompting capitalist development, arguably, small businesses such as street vendors defy the concept of large-scale capitalism. This is because such businesses limit sales of niche products and crops to local consumers.

Being that the BID is mostly made up of local stakeholders, there is a parallel to the developmentalist attitudes in the BRI. Both in the BID and in the BRI, local actors play a key role in organizing broader developmental agendas. Logistics centers, as well as specialized zones designed to accommodate global trade among countries participating in the BRI, were mostly

created by local governments (Rippa 2018: 16). This demonstrates that in the context of stimulating growth through capitalism, local commercialization is crucial in small neighborhoods such as Chinatown.

Interestingly, the BID seems to be a combination of both government and local initiatives; although it was created by the New York City government, it is up to locals to establish specific goals and raise funds (City of New York Government n.d.). This contrasts with the mega jail project, which is a government initiative that did not involve key decisions by residents in the construction process. This elucidates that when applying the planetary urbanization framework to Manhattan's Chinatown, it is crucial to examine how commercialization affects lived experiences and the willingness of citizens to participate.

Urbanization through Food Systems

When considering lived experiences, Chinatown's marketplaces and food systems portray benefits of local-driven capitalism, contributing to urbanization on a local and Manhattan-wide scale. In the intersection between Canal Street and Mulberry Street, there is a multi-vendor business. Throughout some shops on Canal Street and Grand Street, horizontal integration, shown through the merging of similar businesses, is present (Qiang 2024). According to Valerie Imbruce in *From Farm to Canal Street*, Chinatown contains both marketplaces geared towards residents, and those marketed towards tourists (Imbruce 2015: 152). The functioning of marketplaces towards the overall economy is important, as in urban areas such as New York City, both local and global trade contributes to the operation of marketplaces and its ability to serve a community (Imbruce 2015: 152). In Manhattan's Chinatown, it seems that both local and large-scale productions contribute to the thriving of the neighborhood, showcasing the benefits of local-driven capitalism. Although these systems do not contribute to a globalized economy in

a macro-sense, the interplay of local economies and established systems that serve both locals and tourists serve to contribute to the city's urbanization. Like the BRI's emphasis on connecting local infrastructure to global processes of commerce, the systems within Manhattan's Chinatown highlight how global capitalism operates through both large-scale investment and small-scale urban processes. These patterns are not unique to Manhattan's Chinatown; similar forms of commercialization are additionally crucial to the urban development of Flushing.

Flushing's Chinatown

Flushing and Modernization

Infrastructure-led growth as reflected in Manhattan's Chinatown also applies to Flushing, where there are various infrastructure developments that drive urbanization. Main Street, for example, possesses many chain restaurants such as Popeyes and McDonalds. Furthermore, the 7 Train Line connecting Queens to Manhattan has multiple entry points on this street. On the other hand, Roosevelt Avenue contains more local businesses with noticeable Chinese language signs, as well as cash-only businesses, such as White Bear (Qiang 2024). Like the modernized franchises on Main Street, when acknowledging the infrastructure built between Laos and Thailand under the BRI, new projects can sometimes cause uneven urban development in nations (Williams et al. 2020: 136). This relates to urbanization in Flushing, as the connection between audiences and infrastructures also exhibited signs of uneven urban development. With Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue located only streets apart, their differences constitute a contrast between economic development and broader capitalist motives, raising a question of whether certain streets were designed to appeal to local or outside audiences.

Unlike Manhattan's Chinatown, Flushing seems to have more distinctive infrastructures and stores in place that separate commercialized areas from the established local community. For

example, the Shops at Skyview, located on College Point Boulevard near the outskirts of Flushing, contains established Western brands such as Adidas and Target, as well as Chinese businesses such as Grandma's Dim Sum (Qiang 2024). In Flushing, the combination of local marketplaces such as the Chang Jiang Market and large shopping centers such as Skyview represent how different types of infrastructure can lead to capitalist growth (Qiang 2024). One could argue that, like Chinatown's mega jail, the Shops at Skyview could have possibly replaced an area which residents could have settled down and established their livelihoods in. Thus, forms of modernization in Flushing not only support the idea that capitalist development leads to urbanization, but also that it can disregard lived experiences.

Structural Gaps in Urban Development

These various interpretations discussing modernity and infrastructure in Flushing expose certain gaps that could complicate the concept of urbanization being driven by capitalism, especially in terms of transportation. According to Shaolu Yu, recent immigrants from China have applied a connection between economic prowess and infrastructure. Because they have immigrated during a time of modernization in Chinese infrastructure, their expectations of Flushing changed, as it was not as modernized as originally thought (Yu 2018: 240-241). Flushing was a rather distant community, and aspects of transportation, such as carpooling and travel agencies, connected immigrants to the world around them, while also shielding them from an outside perspective (Yu 2018: 240). This highlights a gap of urban development between seemingly modern parts of Flushing, such as Main Street, and the community as a whole. While some parts of the neighborhood are modernized, other aspects of the community prevent residents from achieving a full global outlook about the broader urban space around them. One could make a similar argument about some stores within Manhattan Chinatown's Mott Street,

where there are only Chinese-language resources, accommodating for the community (Qiang 2024). This hints at potential limitations of capitalist urbanization, as the lived experiences of the residents and the actual realities as seen through infrastructure development contrast greatly.

Conclusion

Viewing the Chinatowns of Manhattan and Flushing through the lens of the planetary urbanization framework, one can notice that there are benefits and drawbacks of capitalist-driven infrastructure, affecting urbanization. In Manhattan, there were multiple instances of smaller-scale capitalism—open marketplaces or street vendors—and controversial larger-scale projects, such as the Chinatown-mega jail. In Flushing, there are instances of uneven development when examining urbanization in Main Street versus Roosevelt Avenue, considering the broader implications of infrastructure in the role of urbanization. By utilizing “China as method,” urbanization in Flushing and Manhattan is not to be taken alone, but to be considered in a conversation about how capitalist development both limits and benefits neighborhoods in New York City. These interpretations are significant when evaluating the enduring effect of capitalism and urban development in the 21st century.

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Learning the Unfamiliar: The Role of Language in Han Kang's "The Middle Voice"

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Told from a third-person perspective, Han Kang's short story "The Middle Voice," drawn from the novel *Greek Lessons*, follows an unnamed female protagonist in her mid-thirties who loses her ability to speak, as she seeks possible remedy from a Greek class where she develops nuanced feelings towards the lecturer. The narration alternates between the Greek lessons and the protagonist's personal life, connecting her loss of speech to the death of her mother and the lost custody of her eight-year-old son. In the end, the protagonist leaves the classroom after a misunderstanding with the lecturer and walks on the street, reminiscing about the time when she possesses the faculty of speech. The title of the story refers to a third voice in ancient Greek other than the active and the passive voice. "This voice [called] middle voice can express an

action that relates to the subject reflexively (53).” How does the already dead language, totally different from the protagonist’s mother tongue Korean, reflect her struggle in an irreconcilable world? On the one hand, the language mirrors her alienation in the time of great loss. On the other hand, her voluntary effort to pick up an unfamiliar language demonstrates a spirit of self-help and resistance against an overpowering reality.

The repetitive description of the Greek language as something cold and hard reflects the protagonist’s alienated mental state. The narrative characterizes the language as a “crystallized mass,” “an ice-cold explosive,” and “a pillar of ice,” indicating the quality of being compressed and isolated (53). Given the middle voice, “there is no need to specify the subject, or even to keep to a strict word order.” The sophisticated grammatical rules ensure that the speaker can communicate without the need to waste an extra word. The dense and compact language gives a sense of coldness and aloofness that parallels with the protagonist. Portrayed as “a shadow, riding on the cold hard surface [...] an outside observer of a life contained in an enormous water tank,” the protagonist is estranged from her life as she suffers from three sources of loss. First, the protagonist almost loses her chance of being born as her mother wants to have an abortion when she is pregnant with the protagonist. The protagonist grows up listening to this anecdote of her coming to this world “within an inch of not being born,” a sentence of “horrifying coldness (54).” On the verge of being abandoned, the protagonist questions to what extent she can control her own life and whether she belongs to the world, leading to the feeling of alienation. Her mother’s death also strikes the protagonist with an existential crisis. The narrative describes the protagonist’s mother breathing in a coma as “the shudderingly cold silence [shrieking],” which indicates the disempowerment an individual experiences when confronting mortality (55). Life, regardless of how marvelous it could be, eventually turns into a mere state of breathing,

reminding the protagonist that she can hardly control anything, not even her own life and body. This moves to the third source of her alienation: her child, “the only [thing] that she sees as worth reclaiming from the icy silence.” However, her child, who she believes is the only thing that belongs to her, is about to leave for America with his father. Losing her speech, the protagonist cannot even negotiate with her ex-husband even though her child pleads with her to talk to his father. While the protagonist calls her ex-husband, she is unable to speak a word, except that she writes in her Greek notebook, “snow in throat (57).” The recurring idea of coldness indicates the protagonist’s struggle to reclaim her agency as she loses the faculty of speech and thus the power to pursue what she wants in a brutal and unforgiving world.

But what does it mean for a woman, alienated by her intimate circle and the world, to learn a similarly aloof language? First, it demonstrates a sense of rebellion as the protagonist withdraws herself from a world that tries to define her. Second, the protagonist strives for self-help as she witnesses an unfamiliar, yet self-sufficient language gives birth to meaning and beauty in its purest form.

The exchanges between the protagonist and her psychotherapists demonstrate the protagonist’s rejection of a world that fails to understand her. The protagonist loses her speech for the first time when she is a teenager. While her mother takes her to see the psychiatrist, the protagonist is unwilling to take the medicine, hiding the tablets “under her tongue and later [burying] in the flower bed (51).” By pushing away the remedy, the teenage protagonist also rejects the language and the society that is based upon speech. She views the language as “clothing made from a thousand needles” that pricks and confines her. While she loses her ability to speak, she feels liberated from a world that wounds her. Yet this act of resistance does not turn down the social value but serves as a form of nourishment for life. In the flower bed, “dark-red

stamens [begin] to sprout from the salvia, nourished by her buried medicine,” which indicates a tender and loving way the female protagonist claims her agency in an unjust world as opposed to harm and destruction. When she grows up, the protagonist loses her speech for the second time. The male psychotherapist believes that it is the loss of the mother and custody of the son that result in the loss of speech, but the protagonist denies this conclusion and writes, “It isn’t as simple as that (52).” In a position of power, the psychotherapist tries to define the protagonist’s misfortune without empathizing with her, which reflects both gendered and doctor-patient power dynamics. As a woman bereft of her voice, the protagonist is forced to accept what the others say about her. As she reveals her childhood trauma to the psychotherapist, she finds it “intolerable” that the psychotherapist claims that he understands her (54). Once again, she writes, “It isn’t that simple.” The repeated rejection of the psychotherapist demonstrates the protagonist’s resistance against a world that overpowers her. Instead of submitting to the diagnosis, the protagonist turns down “the psychotherapist’s proposal to introduce her to a speech-and-language specialist” that might help her regain her mother tongue (52). On the contrary, she decides to learn ancient Greek, which “she is almost entirely uninterested in” but is caught by its unfamiliarity (53). She is less interested in being reintegrated into a world that fails to acknowledge her than approaching something that also bears a sense of estrangement from the world.

However, by rejecting the reality, the protagonist does not escape from it but reclaims her power over it. “She has chosen to learn ancient Greek at this private academy because she wants to reclaim language of her own volition (53).” The protagonist wants to speak a language that she can decide on her own instead of a language forced onto her since birth or valued by the mainstream society. By doing so, the protagonist wishes to claim a voice of her own that is free from the manipulation of the outside world. The lecturer writes “ἀπήγξατο” as an example to

explain that with the middle voice, “Greek doesn’t need to say ‘himself’ in the sentence ‘He hanged himself.’” For the first time in the narrative, the protagonist writes down the Greek word in her notebook, which indicates the growing bond between the protagonist and the language. The middle voice makes the language “self-sufficient” in that it does not have to be combined with an object to express meaning. The example offered by the lecturer and the idea of self-sufficiency indicate the author’s nuanced response to the gender dynamics and her criticism of gender inequality. As the middle voice resonates with the protagonist, it also implies her desire for independent agency free from male dominance. Learning about Plato’s belief in “absolute beauty,” the protagonist writes a three-line poem in her notebook, “perseveres through noun declensions and complicated usages of tense and voice to form simple, incomplete sentences, and waits for her lips and tongue to stir into motion (57).” Three lines—one simple sentence and two noun phrases—constitute a poem that reflects beauty in its rawest and purest form. Even though the protagonist has yet to speak, the poetry she creates in a foreign language implies that she has claimed a unique voice that she fails to achieve in her mother tongue, successfully asserting a new authority over her life.

While the cold and compact nature of the Greek language mirrors the alienation that the protagonist experiences as she grieves over the loss of her mother, her child, and the control over her life, the story unites the two reflective elements by having the protagonist seek rebellion and self-help from the language. Despite the series of emotional traumas, the brave protagonist does not aim to withdraw herself from the world but demonstrates a tender yet powerful reclaim of this imperfect world.

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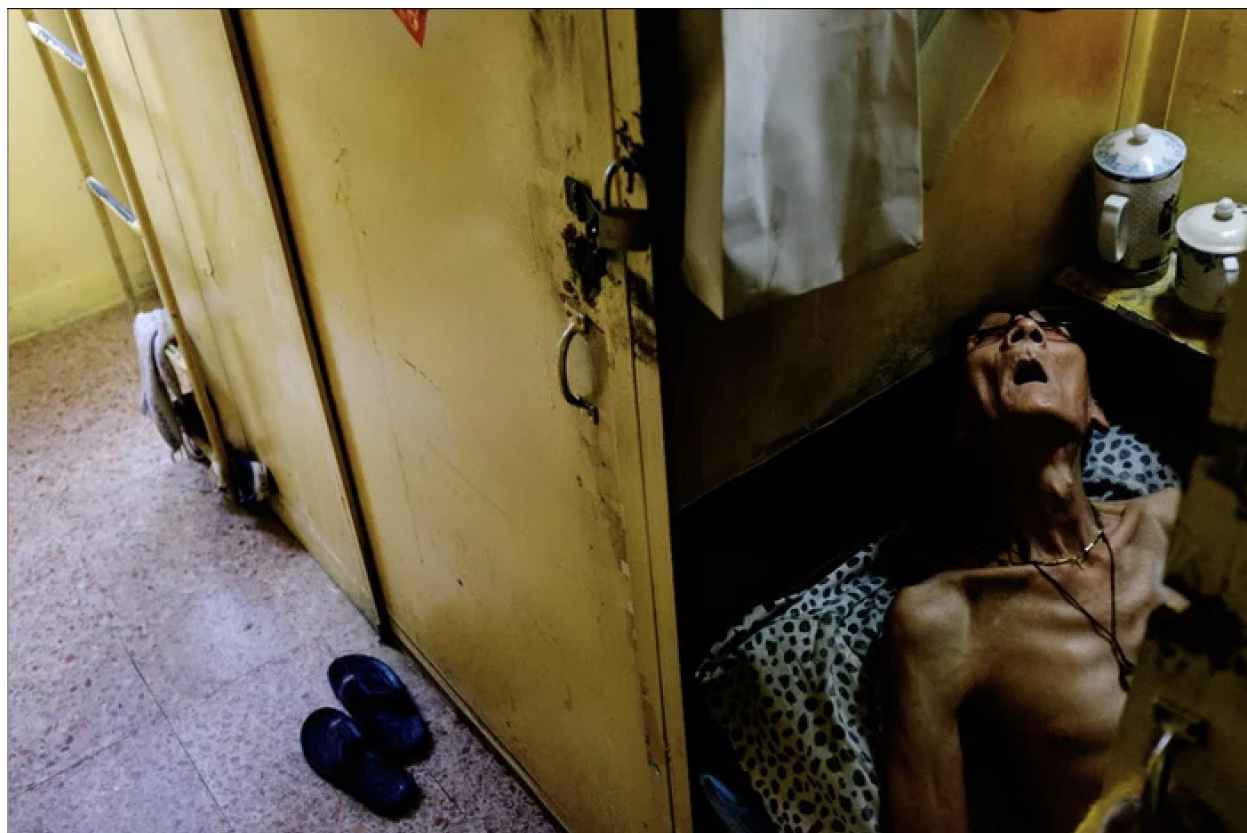


Figure 1 A man resting in his coffin cubicle, photographed by Benjamin Haas

Colonial Segregation to Urban Inequality: Coffin Homes and the Price of Progress in Hong Kong

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. Introduction

Known globally as a prosperous financial hub and modern metropolis, Hong Kong is often associated with wealth and opportunity. Yet, behind the gleaming skyscrapers and bustling cityscape lies a deepening crisis of housing affordability and quality of life. As the wealthy get wealthier, low-income individuals are bearing the brunt of soaring housing costs, despite experiencing stagnating wages. As a result, many low-income workers are financially constrained to living in “coffin homes”. Coffin homes, also known as “coffin cubicles” or “cage homes,” are illegally subdivided housing units measuring as little as 15 square feet—confining residents to spaces so small that one cannot fully lie down. The environment of a coffin home is nothing short of inhumane: no AC, bed bugs, dirty water, and barely functioning toilets, among many more perils.

The phenomenon of coffin homes showcases the real Hong Kong, one of extreme sacrifices, which are rendered invisible by the desire of the high class to paint Hong Kong as perfect. Despite the attempts to conceal coffin homes and their inhabitants from the public eye, these residencies have remained the backbone of Hong Kong’s success since its inception. This very tension resides in the peculiar term Hong Kongers have lent to these spaces. “Coffin homes” presents an unfamiliar oxymoron of a home – where one lives, sleeps, and thrives in – as taking the shape of a coffin, a symbol of lifelessness and stagnancy. The dueling meaning of coffin homes as both vital yet dead begs the question: To what extent do coffin homes facilitate

and hinder Hong Kong's development? As such a taboo subject, many look at the squalor of these living spaces and conclude that coffin homes simply should not exist. Yet beyond the surface level perception of these homes, these spaces have historically acted as a doorway to opportunity and the origin of Hong Kong's success today. As such, their story and existence should not be cleansed or whitewashed once again. Despite the inhumane conditions of coffin homes, the ideas of freedom and sacrifice they represent lend them a significant role in Hong Kong and their inhabitants should be given an equal voice to their high-class counterparts so as to uplift Hong Kong as a whole.

To explore the role that coffin homes play in Hong Kong's development, this essay will conduct a historical analysis of coffin homes from their inception under British colonial rule up to the modern day. The first section highlights the evolution of coffin homes rooted in colonial-era racial segregation and land shortages. As Hong Kong experiences rapid population growth and government monopolization over housing development projects, it falls into a cycle of systemic inefficiencies. These issues spark bottom-up resistance movements, leaving low-income residents trapped in substandard living conditions. Despite this, Hong Kong continues to maintain its reputation as a beacon of opportunity. Building on the colonial roots of hyperdensity in Hong Kong, the second passage underscores how post-1997 Hong Kong remains trapped in systemic housing inequality due to persisting social factors. This highlights the ways in which residents adapt to limited space, reconcile the psychological toll of "crowdedness", and sacrifice their comfort for the promise of liberty where rising housing costs are increasingly at odds with Hong Kong's allure. The final section aims at reframing coffin homes as not mere incubators of everything wrong with society; but to identify and harness the strengths and resilience endemic

to coffin homes coupled with innovative solutions from around the world to step towards meaningful reform.

II. A Colonial Legacy: Housing Crisis and Segregation in Hong Kong

During the first Opium War, spanning from 1839 to 1842, the British empire colonized Hong Kong island. The British themselves settled a base on Victoria Harbor, effectively segregating themselves from the Chinese who were delegated a spot to settle on the Kowloon peninsula. While the British maintained high standards of life and well-regulated buildings, Kowloon adhered to no central rules. Situations arose across Kowloon similar to that of the Walled City in Kowloon, “which housed over 1,255,000 people per square kilometer”. An influx of Mainland Chinese immigrants seeking asylum in the promising Hong Kong further contributed to this density on the Kowloon peninsula. From the start, Hong Kong faced a land availability shortage. With the racial segregation between Hong Kong island and Kowloon already problematic, the disproportionately large influx of Chinese immigrants over British immigrants made the housing shortage ever more dire. Despite this, people continued coming to Hong Kong with a dream to escape the perils of their previous home, setting up Hong Kong as a desirable place even despite its inevitably lower housing quality.

Over the course of a century, Hong Kong saw its population grow massively. Coupled with a shortage of land and technological advancement, mass high rise projects sprouted up across the city. After WWII, the development of residential high rises moved from the hands of the residents to the “government and public sector”, assuming power over initially private matters like “health, safety, welfare, and property values of the individuals. The new social attitude, as a result, introduced centralization into the housing process”. Government control over housing seems reasonable, especially given Hong Kong’s history of sanitation and health issues,

yet the public monopoly over private housing developments acted as a bottleneck effect, cramming a vast quantity of immediately needed housing into few annual public housing projects.

Soon after the implementation of “top-down” intervention, the government assumed an almost totalitarian grip on residential sectors, including the “elimination of occupant participation, loss of individual freedom, coarsening of the urban fabric, and obsolescence of housing stock”. Despite this, Mass Housing (MH) projects continued to dominate the residential sphere even up to the modern day, leaving those in need of immediate low-income housing in a sort of choke hold, forcing them to wait unreasonably extended periods for government-issued housing.

“Top-down” intervention proved ineffective for keeping up with the immense increase in housing demands year after year. In response, people took housing back into their own hands with a “bottom-up” resistance movement. Landlords began buying up buildings and subdividing them “into ever smaller partitions, housing dozens of people together in squalid, dark, unventilated rooms”. Conditions were subpar, to say the least, being strikingly similar to Danish-American journalist Jacob Riis’ account of the “horrid and inhumane living conditions of the lower-class” in 19th century New York City. Hong Kong saw itself following in the footsteps of many contemporary societies facing housing shortages. As a booming and vibrant metropolis surrounded by a world of hostility, Hong Kong provided so much hope for low-income individuals from Mainland and other areas that living in subdivided units was a commitment

worth the risk.



Figure 2 “Kwok Kwai, 65,” as viewed from above, sitting in his subdivided unit

III. Post-Colonial Hong Kong: Hyperdensity, Housing Inequality, and Struggle for Freedom

The tendency towards hyperdense living conditions was initially induced by urban planning from the British colonial age, yet since the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, this style of living has persisted. Since the handover, “more Mainland Chinese have migrated to Hong Kong which only increased the burden on the housing crisis further”. Today, Hong Kong stands as a symbol of the only free government within the domain of communist China. It serves as a beacon of hope for the millions of Chinese on the mainland who feel suppressed and unable to voice their complaints. While Hong Kong gladly accepted Chinese immigrants seeking a life of guaranteed human rights, the innately crowded urban layout Britain handed to China after its over 100-year reign did not set Hong Kong up to handle such a dramatic change. Where once

Britain forced Chinese and other non-white communities into cramped quarters, post-colonial Hong Kong still finds itself confined by its own urban landscape and housing policies.

Thus, a culture of tight living persists even to this day. Many residents of coffin homes and inhumane small apartments find this state of life their norm. Many people prefer living in a place that is convenient, with “markets, shops, schools, and other services [...] within a 5-to-10-minute walk” and easy access to public services and facilities. To this degree, the size of one’s home is put on the back burner, as basic necessities and the space outside one’s home take precedence. In a city where small-space living is so normalized, people are willing to compromise the quality of life in their private space for public convenience.

Despite the normalization of confined living, this way of life still has drastic effects on the psyche of its residents. In subpar residencies, many basic human necessities are stripped away since they are architecturally and financially infeasible. One family who owns an extra small apartment is crammed into such a dense high rise that they don’t have access to natural lighting. The second best option is “artificial lighting”, which “has to be on throughout the day”. While they opt for this area due to convenient facilities outside of their home, the spatial limitations strip them of features many take for granted. Without natural lighting, one is forced to perceive the density around them; being surrounded by residents on all sides serves as a constant reminder of the unnaturally dense lifestyle of Hong Kong.

This way of life forces residents to optimize every square inch of their home. Many people finding themselves in hyperdense living arrangements adapt to this by selecting lightweight and easily transportable furniture. Need a chair? Hong Kongers of the hyperdense lifestyle may opt for a low-quality chair that can function as a study table, cutting board, and many more. As such, this lifestyle necessitates widely followed habits to maximize the use of

everything within their private space. Three case studies of the habits of these residents suggest similarities in responding to the built environment around them: “1) program organization is hybrid; 2) storage associates with most functions; 3) furniture's portability, accessibility, multi-function, and usefulness are primary concerns”.

Further contributing to the housing crisis for low-income individuals, the upper class have begun utilizing real estate as an investment. The upper class in Hong Kong “park their assets in [...] real estate as part of an asset-safe guard strategy” to “diversify their investment portfolio”. This real estate demand fueled by the upper classes inflates the residential market for those who can barely afford it to begin with. As the poor cannot catch up with the increasing housing prices, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”. Similar to the wealthy investments of real estate on billionaire’s row, the high class in Hong Kong buyout real estate as physical investments, further contributing to hyperdensity issues by gatekeeping residential units for personal financial gain in an already cramped city.

The real estate industry is a highly effective way to make quick money for those who can rise on top, but this gain for the few wealthy individuals at the top simply takes away from the quality of life for all those below them. Just since 2010, “the average real estate price of residential property has jumped 19.5 percent”. For the millions of blue-collar workers, a vital community to the manufacturing industry of Hong Kong, the gain of the wealthy simply manifests as inaccessibility to basic freedoms. What then becomes of the Hong Kong dream, where any immigrant can come in from the oppressive world they fled from and work for a city that provides so much hope and freedom? The wealthy are gatekeeping freedom in a region of the world that has so little.

For a city where “over a million people make the bare minimum salary and desperately seek methods to live above the poverty line,” the portrayal of Hong Kong as a glamorous metropolis hides the stories of those who are struggling to make ends meet. The worsening housing crisis and the inhumane conditions of coffin homes threatens to shatter this carefully cultivated image, exposing systemic failures. Unless Hong Kong emerges from its self-destructive trends, the inhumane conditions of coffin homes and omnipresent slums will give way to the stark truth of deepening inequality and human suffering.

A melting pot of different issues, which fostered the prime environment to cultivate coffin homes and hyperdensity, shine a light on the psychological effects when one does not have space to themselves. This way of life is actually coined by locals as “mo wei, meaning the lack of space” since they have no privacy. It is this exceptional way of living that necessitates the difference between “density” and “crowdedness”. Density is “a quantitative measurement, while ‘crowdedness’ is a psychological one”. In post-colonial Hong Kong, the reality for many millions of people is that they must give up their freedom of space for freedom of self. In a world where the latter is infringed upon so harshly, Hong Kong sees coffin homes serving as a space of complacency, showing that people are here for more than the living arrangement. They are here for freedom and opportunity, concepts people seldom come by in China. As Hong Kong becomes more and more unaffordable, and coffin homes inhabit smaller and smaller spaces per person, how long can the city raise prices and limit space before people start considering leaving their freedom behind?

IV. Redefining Coffin Homes: Modern Problems and Solutions

Despite the immense sacrifices needed to live in coffin homes, many low-income residents persist for the sake of their own freedoms. Nevertheless, health and sanitary issues make it exponentially more difficult to even exist in their home without enduring sickness. When landlords illegally subdivide spaces into a maze of coffin homes, the unregulated configurations lead to many health risks. One of the most pressing health risks is a “lack of ventilation” as a result of blocking off windows for cage cubicles. The absence of proper ventilation, combined with Hong Kong’s infamous heat and humidity, “often causes residents to get heat strokes, and on a few occasions even cause death”. Similarly, “natural lighting does not reach most of the subdivided units”, forcing people to resort to the sterile shine of artificial lighting to light up their space. With no windows to look outside, residents are sheltered from the real world, without the simple ability to tell day from night. Likewise, as there aren’t any windows allowing people to look in, residents of subdivided units occupy fully contained spaces absent from the public eye. The sinister combination of poor ventilation, no light, and extreme humidity is a breeding ground for mold to grow “and for various infestations such as cockroaches, rats, fleas, etc”. The unsanitary conditions present in coffin homes are nothing short of inhumane, as they strip residents of all basic necessities for living and hide their struggles from the public.

Further adding to the health risks of the room itself, landlords provide meager or no facilities and amenities to their residents. During site visitations of these coffin apartments by researchers, they observed that “not one had designated kitchen and toilet areas with adequate segregation, thereby increasing the risk of food contamination”. Not only does one’s “private” (if we can even call it private) quarters house diseases, bacteria, and a plethora of safety violations, but communal amenities are not spared from unsanitary conditions. One’s designated place of rest and leisure is anything but restful or leisurely, placing it in far worse conditions than even

living out on the street. Despite the inhumane conditions in coffin homes, those on the brink of homelessness pose an issue to the face of Hong Kong. For Hong Kong authorities, its mission to set an example for high society has no space for vast homeless populations to swarm. Forcing low-income residents into these homes is a way of masking the struggles of these people so that Hong Kong's global image retains its unrealistically glamorous and desirable appearance.



Figure 3 “Wong Chi-kong, 76,” sitting in his subdivided unit in Hong Kong

While Hong Kong may be able to conceal the struggles of its low-income population under normal conditions, plagues and epidemics act like flare outs, exposing the health risks and realities Hong Kong incubates. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many nations were observing the “zero-COVID policy,” a scientifically proven method to effectively mitigate the spread of COVID through strict community-wide containment and prevention measures. Despite the observed success of this measure, the Hong Kong “local government and health officials have

repeatedly dismissed the notion of adopting rigorous zero-COVID procedures to tame the outbreaks”. Hong Kong effectively rejected a method proven to prevent as many deaths as possible. For a city so dense, why would this policy not be put in place? One can attribute it to many political and logistical reasons, but nonetheless, to the low-income residents crammed in homes with worrying proximities, COVID took its toll. This culminated In March of 2022 when Hong Kong took the record for having “the world’s highest COVID-19 infection rates”. For a community struggling with close public proximity throughout its history, the issue of plagues has grown increasingly unmanageable. To some this would be a wakeup call for systemic change in housing for low-income individuals, but to Hong Kong this was just another average day.

The perils of the COVID pandemic has striking parallels to Hong Kong’s colonial legacy. During the plague of 1894, the British neighborhoods atop the peaks of Victoria City were nearly disease free, but the largely Chinese neighborhood of Kowloon saw countless cases as a result of its hyper density and poor sanitation issues. In response to this health crisis, the British then sent a team called the “Whitewash Brigade”, a draft of officers whose duty was to “disinfect and then whitewash the slum houses”. Under the impression Kowloon had been sanitized, members of the Whitewash Brigade received medals for their supposedly valiant bravery. Yet, Hong Kong continued to grapple with yearly plague outbreaks for many decades following. With the catastrophic death rates during the COVID pandemic, one can still see the ways in which the urban layout of Hong Kong places the underprivileged in harm’s way. While the Whitewash Brigade was one of many efforts throughout Hong Kong’s history to treat its housing crisis on a surface level, Hong Kong’s core issues remained untouched. Rather, the whitewash has acted as a means to conceal the city’s faults to maintain the status quo, effectively passing the blame onto its residents. As such, Hong Kong’s long legacy of whitewashing its core issues will continue,

further letting down its low-income residents and placing an obligation on disadvantaged communities to deal with the systemic issues of the city on their own.

As Hong Kong grapples with its systemic issues in an increasingly unaffordable world, the city has reached a point where whitewashing its issues and delaying reform and innovation is no longer sustainable. But what would systemic change to solve the housing crisis look like? Some currently developing ideas focus on creative architectural solutions. James Law Cybertecture, a design studio based in Hong Kong, proposes using 2.5-meter water pipes to create “stackable micro homes [...] which could slot into gaps between city buildings”. Innovative architecture like capsule homes is one of the important ways in which Hong Kong is rethinking its low-income housing. Instead of funneling lots of money to make large apartment complexes extremely far from the city center, architects are reimagining the fabric of spaces within the core city itself, using cheap materials to make regulated houses similar in space to coffin homes. As such, this imposes a sense of familiarity for former coffin home residents while attempting to maintain affordability and safety.

But for many low-income residents in coffin homes, they don't have the resources to get up and move to a whole new residence. This includes elderly residents, who barely have the physical abilities to get out of their bed, let alone move all of their stuff and travel to a new space. By focusing on improving existing coffin home spaces, many architects are trying to maintain residents' way of life while elevating the housing quality already existing around them.

A proposed thesis design called “XXS (extra Extra SMALL)”, is suggesting different ways in which one can improve the living space of already existing subdivided units. This includes rethinking the simple frame structures used to partition apartment flats, instead opting for “furniture-integrated modular systems (FIMS)”, a series of modular and dynamic components

designed to interlock into one another and change shape according to the residents' habits and needs. This design allows for a subdivided unit to recognize the humanity of each of its residents. A dynamic modular system means that accommodation is possible for the unique needs of every resident. Furthermore, ventilation designs propose window systems able to direct air through a subdivided unit, relieving it of a stagnant and humid environment dangerous to the lives of many. A proposed design envisions windows that can "swing open vertically and horizontally" where the "bottom and top openings allow cooler air to flow into the interior from under the unit, and hot air to rise and escape at the top". By helping to improve the physical space of subdivided units, architects are forming their own bottom-up initiatives to increase the public visibility of coffin home residents as a city-wide symbol and recognize their humanity. Doing so elevates their lives and the standard of living in Hong Kong as a whole.

V. Conclusion

All in all, coffin homes embody both the promise and peril of Hong Kong: they symbolize the resilience of those striving for opportunity while starkly exposing the failures of systemic inequality and neglect. Behind the facade of a prosperous metropolis lies a reality where the most vulnerable are relegated to inhumane conditions, their existence rendered invisible to uphold a narrative of glamor and success. Yet, through the perseverance of its residents and the creative reimagining of architects and policymakers, there is a path forward. By embracing innovative architectural solutions like modular systems and improving ventilation, while acknowledging the humanity and contributions of coffin home dwellers, Hong Kong can reconcile its legacy of inequality with its aspirations for inclusivity and progress. This transformation will not only uplift the lives of its most marginalized citizens but also redefine Hong Kong's identity as a beacon of resilience and opportunity for all.

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Book Review: Huang, Philip C. *Code, Custom, and Legal Practice in China: The Qing and the Republic Compared*. 1st ed., Stanford University Press, 2001.

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Analysis of the legal code, customs, and practice of a given civilization is an important aspect of historical analysis. It provides insights and practical understandings of the social contexts, cultural understandings, and political ideologies that underpin societies. Alfred L. Brophy explains that studying legal history helps to resolve “central questions of how we organize our society,” and serves as a guide “to all sorts of questions of morality and duty.”¹¹ However, understanding the function and impact of a given civilization's legal structure can be complicated, especially during times of political transition. As such, Phillip C. C. Huang, a renowned historian of Chinese legal and economic history in his book *Code, Custom, and Legal Practice in China* challenges the mainstream historical view of the transition of the legal code, custom, and practice from Qing to Guomindang law. In the book, Huang argues that the transition from Qing law to Guomindang law is often mischaracterized as an abrupt transition that saw major changes in the judicial application of laws and codes. Huang posits that the legal transition that occurred during the end of the Great Qing dynasty toward the new Republic was an organic and relatively continuous transformation wherein judges, during the Early Republic, adopted the Guomindang legal code to align with traditional legal practices from the Qing dynasty. Through analysis of 875 court records, Huang maintains that civil justice during the

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Republic of China before Communist Rule merged the Western ideals of individuality and autonomous contracts with the previous social customs of the Qing dynasty resulting in a court system that adapted laws to fit social realities, as opposed to strictly following what was codified in the newly created Guomindang law.

Huang, through the use of extensive court records, presents a convincing argument that challenges the traditional notion of an abrupt transition from Qing to Guomindang jurisprudence. However, I will also argue that his overt reliance on court records to demonstrate the persistence of legal customs and the role of courts in adapting laws to social realities limits his analysis of legal norms beyond formal legislation. This limitation results in an underemphasis of the political and everyday social influences of legal reforms, most notably those influences that could not be shown through legal cases.

Huang begins his analysis by explaining that he would use a “topic-by-topic” approach to address several key aspects of civil law in Chinese society during the Qing dynasty and early Republic.² He notes that his primary evidence throughout the book was case studies on land transactions and ownership (dian and topsoil) rights, debt and financial obligations, elder generation support (filial obligations), marriage and divorce, and women’s rights.

By exploring various legal cases encompassing different categories of law, Huang’s case studies showed that the Guomindang legal code was not an abandonment of Qing customs, but rather “a multilayered document” that selectively retained “aspects of custom and of old Qing law.” His approach of citing several different areas of law that bent towards

²Huang, Philip C. *Code, Custom, and Legal Practice in China: The Qing and the Republic Compared*. 1st ed., Stanford University Press, 2001, 3.

Qing customs was particularly effective in underscoring his argument as judicial court records unequivocally show how courts' rulings deviated from the Guomintang legal code. For example, Huang used land transactions to demonstrate that despite a clear change in the legal code, judges sometimes prioritized custom rather than the new code. This is exemplified in Huang's articulation of the case *Tian Shuzhuang vs. Lin Fengru* (1931) which provided a specific instance of how judges deviated from the established Guomintang code. The case involved a land ownership dispute in which the transaction was mischaracterized by the parties. According to Article 873 of the Guomintang legal code, "the contract and the complaints and counter-complaints all called the transaction a *dian*"³³ even though custom during the Qing dynasty would identify the transaction as a "*diya*."⁴⁴ Huang further explains that despite the Article 873 characterization, the judge in his ruling "followed in this instance custom rather than the letter of the law," resulting in the case being resolved through Qing customs rather than the new codified Guomintang code.⁵⁵ This case is especially effective in demonstrating how the transition from Qing jurisprudence to the Guomintang code was not abrupt, as the judge expressly deviated from the code in favor of custom—clear evidence that custom from the Qing period was still followed well after the codification of Guomintang code.

Another example of Huang's use of case studies to demonstrate examples of the influence of Qing custom on the Guomintang code occurs when Huang discusses old age and filial law. He uses a series of cases to demonstrate that custom often prevailed over code, resulting in the continuation of Qing familial identities into the early Republic, a time when the Guomintang code dominated. He notes, "in short, despite their radically different ideologies and

³ Huang, 4

⁴ Huang 96

⁵ Huang, 96

property regimes, Qing law and Guomindang law remained basically congruent in requiring sons to provide old-age support for their parents.”⁶ Huang’s evidentiary approach is difficult to contest, due to the nature of court cases which provide explicit recollection of which decisions were made, and the rationale behind the rulings.

While Huang’s focus on the cases was effective in demonstrating his main argument, his analysis may overlook broader cultural and political influences that impact judicial decisions. There are two main reasons why court cases should not be viewed in a vacuum to understand the application of the law during a certain historical time period.

First, as noted by Jennifer Reynolds from the Oregon School of Law, “courts are limited in the kinds of disputes they can hear and the sorts of relief they can provide.”⁷ Because not all disputes can be brought to court, the influence of Qing customs in the early Republican period needs to be examined outside of the court system in which a judge does not play the role of mediator. Huang’s emphasis on court cases, though insightful for his main argument, may very well have been supplemented by additional discussion on disputes that were not taken to court. Omitting these disputes dilutes the strength of his argument. Indeed, focusing on these sorts of disputes would have provided a more comprehensive illustration of the cultural and political atmosphere of the transition from the Qing dynasty to the early Republic.

Second, it is well established that the decisions made by judges regarding court cases are prone to biases influenced by political priorities or state interests, which needs to be factored

⁶ Huang 150

⁷ Reynolds, Jennifer. “Verdicts Make History, but Courts Alone Don’t Transform Society.” *Oregon News*, University of Oregon, 21 July 2021.

into Huang's analysis. According to Chi Wang, a Chinese history scholar, "the 1912-1949 Republic of China was also beset by corruption," which underscores the fact that there was the potential for biases underlying judge's motives and decisions.⁸⁸ Huang acknowledges the fact that administration may have influenced judges: "even in those counties with new courts, judicial authority remained vulnerable to administrative interference."⁹⁹ Despite this acknowledgment, Huang still relied heavily on the court cases, without spending much time analyzing the potential influence of political incentives on court outcomes. As a result of this, his analysis did not thoroughly engage with the political and social context surrounding the court case, resulting in a not entirely comprehensive historical analysis, leaving room for error regarding potential ulterior motives of court decisions.

It is important to note that Huang did provide some historical political context regarding the period of the court cases and that an analysis beyond the court cases would require access to additional documents and historical pieces of evidence. Notwithstanding this, I posit that Huang's position would have been further strengthened by including more references to the political and social contexts of the time he studied. Overall, *Code, Custom, and Legal Practice in China* presented a strong challenge to the traditional notion that the transition from the Qing code to the Guomindang legal code during the shift from the Qing Dynasty to the early Republic was abrupt. His use of court cases provides specific instances that indisputably support his

⁸⁸ Wang, Chi. "Can Xi Jinping's Corruption Battle in China Place the People above the Communist Party?" *South China Morning Post*, 23 Dec. 2017.

⁹⁹ Huang, 43

argument. However, his analysis could have been further enhanced by providing more political and social context surrounding the cases to address how disputes were handled outside of the courtroom and explain how political influences may have skewed the decisions made in the court cases.

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Dying in Darkness: The Consequential Downfall of Hong Kong's Democratic Press

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Introduction:

A free and fair press is a cornerstone of independence and democracy. It provides a bulwark against tyranny, a voice for the people, and accountability for injustices. As a result, the media can impact international policy, trade, and business opportunities. While, like other places globally, Hong Kong is suffering from the decline of its local media, its challenges are also unique. Through revisions and additions in law and policy, hastened by private sector developments and other geopolitical factors, the city has witnessed a hostile takeover of its democratic press as part of its forced integration with mainland China. This evolving situation transcends even the bounds of Hong Kong's independence and affairs, carrying significant repercussions for international politics.

This paper analyzes the recent legal, political, and economic history of Hong Kong's press freedom to illustrate how the media industry's authoritarian takeover has exacerbated the downturn of U.S.-China relations as a whole. The United States should actively promote press freedom by publicly advocating for Hong Kong's return to democracy and privately emphasizing its importance in diplomatic negotiations with China. By consistently highlighting Hong Kong's democratic status as vital to U.S.-China relations and private commerce, the U.S. can work

towards reinstating the city as a connector between both nations without unnecessarily escalating tensions.

Early Historical Context

The crucial antecedents of Hong Kong's media history were set during the city's complicated time as part of the British Empire. In 1842, China officially ceded Hong Kong Island—at that time a barren rock—to the British Empire, as part of the “Unequal Treaties” which ended the First Opium War. The British then claimed the Kowloon Peninsula after the Second Opium War in 1860, and signed a 99-year lease for the surrounding mainland area (also known as the New Territories) in 1898, thus uniting its control over Hong Kong. Over the 20th century, the city saw enormous population and economic growth. After the costly civil war and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Hong Kong leveraged its ideal location and comparative political autonomy to overtake Shanghai as the primary international hub of the Chinese region. Consequently, the city began to attract American business investment and political interest, yet an uncertain future loomed ahead.

Legal Precedent of A Free Press in Hong Kong

Hong Kong was a British colony with a thriving free press, headlined by a booming newspaper industry. However, as the lease neared its end and China consolidated power, Britain sought legal safeguards to prevent Hong Kong's absorption into the CCP's authoritarian order. Thus, the UK introduced two key legal ordinances to uphold Hong Kong's democratic status per international standards. Reluctantly accepted by the PRC, the Basic Law and the Hong Kong Bill of Rights safeguarded Hong Kong's media freedom for decades. Moreover, these legal frameworks bolstered the city's democracy, economy, and involvement in U.S.-China relations.

The Basic Law, enacted by China's National People's Congress (NPC) in 1990, took effect after the British handover. As the foundation of the "One Country, Two Systems" ideology, it remains Hong Kong's most important government document. Article 27 states, "Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of speech, of the press and of publication; freedom of association, of assembly, of procession and of demonstration; and the right and freedom to form and join trade unions, and to strike." The Basic Law also ensured Hong Kong aligned with both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), two benchmark international standards. The PRC implemented the ICESCR but infamously never ratified the ICCPR, reaffirming its divide with Hong Kong in matters of individual rights.

To complement the Basic Law's emphasis on free speech and press, Britain introduced the Hong Kong Bill of Rights in 1989. Article 16 states "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice." With the frameworks of these two documents, Hong Kong boasted one of the least restrictive media landscapes for many years, placing 18th in the 2002 Reporters Without Borders World Ranking. While the industry remained primarily local, Hong Kong embraced the globalization of its press, collaborating with foreign outlets like *The New York Times*. Signaling an openness to foreign exchange without compromising economic access to China, such developments enhanced the city's international economic status and deepened U.S. engagement in the region

Historical Importance of Hong Kong's Free Press for U.S.-China Relations

Amongst the most powerful impacts of Hong Kong's ability to maintain its democracy post-handover was its key relationship with the United States. In the groundbreaking U.S.-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, the United States pledged its support to Hong Kong's democratic freedom and economic prosperity and agreed to treat it as a distinct, albeit non-sovereign, entity to China. According to a U.S. Department of State report on the policy, a key consideration in this decision was that "the Hong Kong press remained free and continued to comment critically on issues." The report specifically noted the media's role in critically evaluating the proposed Article 23 of the Basic Law, which sought to vaguely criminalize government criticism. Though the law did not pass at the time, it has since resurfaced as a contentious issue in U.S.-China relations. This history demonstrates how safeguarding Hong Kong's press freedom directly influenced U.S. engagement with the region.

Furthermore, these policy changes significantly affected international economic exchange in Hong Kong, as well as U.S.-China relations. Hong Kong's free economy, historically cosmopolitan culture, advantageous location, and newly reaffirmed U.S. support made it an ideal location for American business exchange. Although its global economic development took root in the 1980s and 1990s, the city began to emerge as one of the world's leading finance centers at the turn of the millennium, and its two largest trading partners as a Special Administrative Region were the United States and China. In this way, Hong Kong earned its lucrative status as a bridge between the East and West. American companies and politics massively benefited from its direct access to the mainland while simultaneously finding protection in its democracy and relative autonomy from the PRC. Hong Kong's media freedom, though sometimes overlooked, helped secure American commitment to the city, ushering in extensive private and public sector exchange with China.

The Downfall of the Hong Kong Media Industry

After a brief golden age, weaknesses in Hong Kong's free media appeared in the 2010s. Media outlets faced increasingly severe crackdowns from their own editorial boards and owners, creating a climate of self-censorship. This was rooted in the 1990s when the PRC began co-opting rich international tycoons to buy into the Hong Kong media industry and exert pro-CCP influence. By 2011, over 39% of the city's surveyed journalists viewed self-censorship as present and serious, compared to only 13.3% in 2001. Accompanying this concerning trend was the 2014 Umbrella Movement, in which Hong Kong residents demonstrated against Chinese restrictions on their elections, using social media to promote their cause to the international community. The PRC deployed extensive cybersecurity and surveillance to identify, censor, and imprison these peaceful protestors and journalists. These developments demonstrated the CCP's growing desire to manipulate Hong Kong's media, and its rapidly increasing capacity to do so.

However, no event has been more destructive to Hong Kong's media landscape than China's response to Hong Kong's 2019 protests. This movement opposed a bill that would have permitted extraditions of Hong Kong residents to mainland China and inspired millions to protest throughout the city. Protests mainly took the form of peaceful marches, but vandalism and conflict with law enforcement also occurred. In retaliation, the PRC harshly suppressed protestors and introduced the National Security Law (NSL) in 2020. As powerful as it is vague, the NSL expanded and harshened penalties against Hong Kong residents who advocated for secession from China, subversion of the central government, terrorism, use of violence against others, or collusion with external forces. This document signified the demise of Hong Kong's historically free press. In the months that followed, the CCP orchestrated an outright attack against several of the city's remaining independent outlets and public figures, including

AppleDaily founder Jimmy Lai, whose trial for “conspiracy to collude with foreign forces” garnered international attention.

China continues to weaken Hong Kong’s press, protestors, and journalists, most recently with the Basic Law Article 23, passed in March 2024. This measure applies mainland China’s definitions of “state secrets” and “national security” to Hong Kong, strengthening the NSL and providing even more room to harshly persecute dissenters. The article was initially proposed over two decades prior, as noted earlier, but local media proved successful in portraying its downsides, a journalistic effort that even impressed the United States government from afar. Thus, its dramatic passing this year clearly displays the stark contrast between the media industry’s near-complete freedom at that time and its submission to authoritarianism today. Although this development may seem isolated and localized, it has already begun to impact U.S. economic opportunities and strain diplomatic relations with both Hong Kong and China.

Impact on U.S. Economic Involvement

The U.S.’ scorning of China and divestment from Hong Kong can be felt in the private sector as much as in government. Over the past decade, as the CCP’s authoritarian shadow over Hong Kong grew ever more present, American companies and prominent business leaders expressed waning confidence in the city’s lasting potential as an economic hub. Stephen Roach, former chair of Asia operations at the powerful investment bank Morgan Stanley, summarized this sentiment in his *Financial Times* article titled, “It pains me to say Hong Kong is over.” Roach explains that the city’s prized Hang Seng stock index has fallen by over 45% since 2019 as a result of deterioration in U.S.-China relations and Beijing’s harsh legal crackdown on democratic protests. Consequently, the city’s business sector has lost its “extraordinary energy” and promise as “perfectly positioned as the major beneficiary [of China’s enormous 21st century

development].” Roach’s pessimistic outlook carries significant influence as a leading expert on the field which largely fueled Hong Kong’s rise to stardom. Furthermore, he certainly does not stand alone in predicting an adverse future for the city.

In addition to the finance industry, American corporations in various sectors have been reducing their physical and economic presence in Hong Kong. For example, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal* have all changed their regional centers to other cities in China. This unfortunate outcome is a somewhat predictable result of the NSL’s grave endangerment of foreign journalists in the city, yet still symbolic of the decline in Hong Kong’s internal democracy and openness to the world. Many other American companies have abandoned Hong Kong as well. Between 2020 and 2023, 168 U.S. firms moved their regional headquarters out of the city in response to recent security concerns and the rise of other locations, especially Singapore, as safer alternatives. China’s authoritarian takeover of Hong Kong, spearheaded by its multifaceted attack on the media, has severed an economic bridge with the U.S. and further worsened the prospects of future relations.

U.S. Policy Response

Just as U.S.-China relations benefited from the legal protection of Hong Kong’s democratic media, relations suffered from these recent democratic backslides. In direct response to the NSL, the United States introduced punitive new policies toward Hong Kong and harsh crackdowns on China. President Trump issued Executive Order 13936 in July 2020, which declared that the U.S. can no longer justifiably view the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) as different from the rest of China and that American policy exemptions for the region would be eliminated as a matter of national security. In its leading statement, the order stresses that the NSL is “potentially making it harder for journalists, human rights organizations,

and other outside groups to hold the PRC accountable for its treatment of the people of Hong Kong.” Clearly, media freedom was a core part of the foundation that allowed Hong Kong to connect two great foreign powers and maintain a distinct status from the mainland. A decline of this freedom contributes to the overall deterioration of U.S.-China relations. To counteract this trajectory, the U.S. should revise its approach by restoring key trade and economic privileges for Hong Kong on a conditional basis, tying them directly to measurable improvements in press freedom and civil liberties.

The Hong Kong Autonomy Act, which closely accompanied Executive Order 13936, directly imposed U.S. sanctions on “foreign individuals and entities that materially contribute to China’s failure to preserve Hong Kong’s autonomy.” The act also emphasizes the importance of Hong Kong’s domestic civil rights protections, specifically regarding freedom of speech. Thus, it can safely be assumed that the NSL’s targeting and censorship of media influenced American responses. These two policies not only promote divestment from the region and impose sanctions on prominent CCP-backed figures and institutions, but they also send a clear message. The U.S. is willing to further strain its already tense relationship with China to defend Hong Kong’s free press, economy, and democratic status. Instead of maintaining a rigid sanctions framework that further isolates China, the U.S. should adopt a more dynamic approach, offering the gradual removal of economic restrictions in direct exchange for concrete steps toward media freedom, rather than allowing sanctions to function as indefinite punitive measures.

Ultimately, the U.S. must shift from a strategy of unilateral pressure to one of strategic cooperation. While it is crucial to take a firm stance in support of Hong Kong’s democratic institutions, doing so in a manner that invites dialogue rather than confrontation will produce more effective results. To achieve this, the U.S. should prioritize diplomatic engagement through

multilateral forums such as ASEAN and the G7, leveraging international pressure to push for Hong Kong's autonomy without resorting to inflammatory rhetoric or zero-sum policymaking. As part of this approach, the U.S. could introduce a policy linking economic incentives to press freedom, offering subsidies or tax breaks to American firms seeking to reinvest in Hong Kong if China lifts restrictions on independent media, such as reinstating Apple Daily, removing NSL-based constraints on journalists, and allowing foreign media to operate without censorship. By offering both pathways for progress in diplomacy and business, the U.S. can more effectively uphold democratic values in Hong Kong while maintaining stability in its relationship with China.

Beyond Policy: U.S. Rhetoric Toward China

In addition to its policy responses, the U.S. has condemned China for its implementation of the NSL through derogatory public statements on the international stage. One such statement in 2023, signed by the U.S. and twenty-three other countries, specifically criticizes the rise in self-censorship and prosecution of journalists, calling these shifts the antithesis of Hong Kong's long-standing prosperity and reputation. Another U.S.-led coalition in 2022 declared broader concern for "the deterioration of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong," and subsequently urged China to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These documents reiterate that the U.S. views Hong Kong's media status as important enough to warrant hostility in dealings with China altogether, and grounds to bring up broader talking points, such as general neglect for global human rights standards. Moreover, when this rhetoric on Hong Kong is contrasted with that of the U.S.-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, the impact of declining press freedom on U.S.-China relations is remarkably clear.

The consequences of China's enactment of the Basic Law Article 23 are still unfolding, but it has already provoked further spite from the United States. In March 2024, U.S. State Department Spokesperson Vedant Patel argued that Article 23 could potentially "accelerate the closing of Hong Kong's once open society," and that Washington will not hesitate to use "the other actions the U.S. has at its disposal." In response, the Chinese embassy in Washington publicly voiced its dissatisfaction with constant American smearing of the CCP and attempted tampering in its affairs.

Regardless of its ideological basis, this pattern of inflammatory rhetoric has primarily been counterproductive, deepening hostilities without offering a path forward. While standing up for democracy in Hong Kong is crucial, U.S. public statements should take care to frame their advocacy as a means of restoring Hong Kong's previous economic openness—a status that has historically benefited all parties—rather than as an attack on the legitimacy of China's governance. Publicly shifting from reactionary criticism to constructive diplomacy would signal a genuine commitment to addressing the crisis rather than escalating tensions.

Conclusion and Future Outlook

Critics may argue that these recommendations signify a concession to China rather than a firm stance in support of Hong Kong's democracy. However, this perspective is misguided. A diplomatic approach does not represent a departure from the United States' commitment to Hong Kong's democratic principles. Instead it reinforces the strategic rationale for preserving Hong Kong's openness. By emphasizing the economic and geopolitical benefits of maintaining Hong Kong as a hub for exchange with the West, this strategy highlights the mutual advantages of a more open and autonomous Hong Kong to China's government. In contrast, a purely adversarial

approach exacerbates political tensions, while disengagement altogether forfeits significant economic and strategic opportunities.

Hong Kong's fall from democracy has been well-documented in news, social media, and popular culture. However, the true global significance of this event cannot be fully understood without a historical review of the city's place in U.S.-China relations. American economic and political interests in Hong Kong predate even the 1997 handover from the British Empire, but it was the city's commitment to civil rights—namely, freedom of the press—that secured official and large-scale U.S. support. However, since 2002, the city has fallen from 18th to 135th in Reporters Without Borders World Ranking, U.S. political support and economic involvement in Hong Kong have stagnated, and U.S.-China relations have deteriorated. As this paper's historical analysis has shown, that is no random coincidence. Hong Kong's media freedom is a critical component of U.S. investment in and backing of the city, and its dealings toward China as a whole.

Looking ahead, it is difficult to be optimistic about the prospects of Hong Kong's return to freedom and prosperity. The CCP has consistently prioritized its own authority and security above all else, and its recent actions have strongly defied the "Two Systems" promise of the 1997 handover. Likewise, the U.S.' support and preferential treatment for the city remains contingent upon the very freedoms China restricted in recent years. Thus, the National Security Law and the Basic Law Article 23 have made Hong Kong the center of a bitter stalemate between two international powers. With neither side willing to budge, the city may never reclaim its status as a center of international exchange. However, China is not ignorant of the political, relational, and economic benefits that Hong Kong offers. Perhaps Beijing will eventually be

willing to compromise its authoritarian ambitions for these purposes, and if so, ending its displacement of the city's free media would be an excellent place to start.

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The Myth of Lei Feng: Martyrdom and Forced Narratives in the Cultural Revolution

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The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) sought to uplift the working class and create a new culture emphasizing socialism and the proletariat. To instill this ideology, there was the formation of narratives regarding model workers, in which their existences are meant to emulate the ideal working-class figure. There was an ideological development and distortion to the lives of these figures to fit the mold of a “model worker.” They were controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) not only in their actions and livelihood but in death as well. The most prominent model worker in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was Lei Feng, who represented the nation’s ideals in his emphasis on altruism and commitment to civic duty. Lei Feng’s narrative has outlived the Cultural Revolution, and he continues to be an exemplary model used to fit the government’s narrative. The “martyrdom” of model workers is derived from the control the CCP gains in influencing their narratives after their deaths, where they become stagnant figures rather than human beings with complexity and depth, and this is no better represented than in Lei Feng.

Model workers played an important role in creating the foundation for and influencing the new proletariat culture of the Cultural Revolution. This new culture was built around Mao Zedong, whose influence was akin to a sacred messiah figure. While this image resulted in devout loyalty among the people to Mao, the abstract deification of Mao created an ambiguity

regarding the expectations of the new working class. Thus, model workers became concrete examples of what the public should emulate, i.e., the actions and values at the forefront of Mao's China. Additionally, beginning in 1950, people were awarded "Model Worker Awards" if they exemplified the characteristics of an ideal worker. The award became a medium for Mao to communicate to the people what he expected from the working class. Through "epideictic discourse," the CCP created explicit definitions of their expectations to counteract the ambiguity of the official government language. Epideictic discourse serves to display in the speaker and promote in the audience "definition/understanding, display/entertainment, and shaping/sharing of community." The awards worked to define the speaker, Mao's, expectations and promote understanding in the audience, the people of China; create a spectacle that draws the attention of the working class; and cultivate a culture that becomes a foundational part of the people's lifestyle. This is elevated to another level through the use of "myth" and "icon". The iconic quality of the award allows for the universal recognition of the model worker, while the mythic narrative surrounding this status creates reverence and lasting impact; in other words, "myth" makes depth, and "icon" makes scale.

While the role of the model worker and exemplifying them was utilized as a tool to bring forward a shift from traditional culture, there is a sense of irony in the praise of model workers embodying the traditional "cultural modeling" stemming from Confucianism. Despite the emphasis on "Destroying the 4 Olds" and moving away from Confucianism, the CCP "adapted (rather than rejected) this inherited tradition which had often heroised emperors, generals, poets and other exceptional people," which was accomplished "by the State taking ideological control over the presentation of heroes and implementing nationwide popularising campaigns" (Funari and Mees). There is a clear hypocrisy in the actions of the CCP and its values, where these

exceptions that contest the new CCP culture are permitted if they ultimately work to serve the greater narrative of the CCP and increase its popularity and devotion. By having these celebrity figures and their existence—from their actions to who they were as people—be this exemplary model of whom the people of China should strive to become, the CCP was able to control the masses. Beyond this, these figures were not only models of labor but martyrs for the cause, having dedicated their lives to China's cultural and industrial development; in doing so, their narratives were also overtaken by the CCP.

In trying to gain more influence, it came at the cost of reducing complex human beings into static images of heroes. While the CCP sought to advance an “outdated China” from traditional Confucianist values into socialist ones, progressing industry and society, in the name of a better future for China and the next generation, gaining power and maintaining influence was ultimately a fundamental priority. They required the people's faith, which required religious figures to devote their lives in the forms of martyrs, where the CCP curated these narratives that held lasting influence among the people. In doing so, however, they distorted the people that stand from which these figures are derived—there is a divide between the real lived experiences of these people and the simplified one-dimensional figure that is presented to the people; the CCP “surrogate[d] martyrs' bodies and minds to speak for them, and conceal[ed] martyrs' marginalized position as the sacrificial object and martyrs' dead body as disposable abject” (Gu 3). There is a culture of “necropolitics” in which the CCP has an ideological ownership over the martyr's position and narrative, and they believe they are justified in their distortion of these figures' identity and legacy. Due to the stagnant legacy of someone dead, it becomes a moldable medium to convey whatever is desired as they are no longer living and cannot contest or contradict the formulated narrative. An exemplary worker would hold influence during their

lives, which could inspire confidence in the CCP and motivation to help uplift it, but their influence ends when they die. However, they are able to still be influential and useful to the CCP posthumously due to their continued participation in the necropolitical system and are rather able to be “even more powerful than those from the living beings to expand the revolution indefinitely. Therefore, Mao requires the mourning of the martyrs to be set as the ‘rule’” (146–147). The deaths of these model workers, often compelled by the dangerous precedents set forward by the CCP—the development of the nation at the cost of individuality and the reverence of the CCP at the cost of self-worth—are distorted and curated into a sacrifice that is dedicated to the nation. Even in death, their identity does not belong to themselves but eternally belongs to the CCP.

The most iconic model worker is Lei Feng, who encompasses the qualities of a typical working-class hero, his narrative being overtaken by the CCP to serve political influence, and the lasting control over his identity even in death. Even today, his narrative still belongs to the government and cannot be put to rest, where “he has been revived as a model for emulation several times” and his “diary was used as an instrument with which to mould a new generation of China’s youth into ideal socialist citizens to carry on Mao’s Communist revolution” (Roberts 25–7). He was a PLA soldier, and his life was filled with tragedy at the hands of the enemies of the CCP: his father was killed by the Japanese defending China, his mother now had to provide for three children on her own, his younger and older brothers died, and his mother committed suicide due to harassment she faced from her landlord; he had been alone and destitute, but after the formation of the CCP, he was able to receive welfare and education, as well as a community to rely on. His story epitomizes the mission of the CCP—eradicating the old, harmful aspects of society like the landlord of Feng’s mother and promoting socialist policies like welfare, allowing

for there to be an overall emphasis on the people. He had been used as a model worker before his death, having gone on a tour and gaining celebrity status while he was alive, but upon his death in 1962 and the subsequent posthumous national emulation campaign of 1963, he surpassed his celebrity status to become a legend immortalized in media. His image was used to promote the virtues of selflessness and devotion to the CCP, where his diary entries showed him doing these altruistic good deeds unprompted and without judgment, which prompted the people of China to follow in this virtuous image. This model of propaganda was so successful in immortalizing the mythical image of Lei Feng that he continues to be used today, and his popularity in the media in “2012 was greater than at any other point in the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)... between 1960 and 2013” (Jeffreys and Su 2). The peaks in his popularity were in 1966, 1977, 1981, 1990, and then 2012; each year, 1966, 1977, 1981, and 1990, correlated to a major event in the Cultural Revolution—the start of the Cultural Revolution, the campaign against the Gang of Four, the trial of the Gang of Four, the launch of youth education campaigns—and yet the peak was in 2012, fifty years after his death (2–3). He is regarded as a hero and his influence is compelling, but this status was gained only upon his death, and the Lei Feng recognized today is an image wholly created and controlled by the CCP. There is controversy over the genuineness of his narrative, where excerpts of his diary seemed to have been circulating amongst the CCP before his death, and every candid photograph of him seems to be highly manufactured; upon his death, his “diary was widely reproduced and installed under glass in local museums beside facsimiles of his toothbrush, sandals, and tin cup” (Osnos). There was such an emphasis on making a spectacle out of Feng and his narrative—the “relic-ing” of his personal belongings was prompted by the CCP, and it shows how truly curated by the CCP every aspect of his life was. It is hard to tell if there is any aspect of the real Lei Feng left in the legacy of his image that

circulates today. His existence was able to perfectly encapsulate the image of the new working class, and it is due to this that it is not only his life but his legacy that was martyred for the preservation of the CCP.

The martyrdom of the model workers was in reality just a fabricated narrative to serve a political purpose, promoting devotion to the CCP and its ideals. The very idea of a “model worker” and their deification only serves the purpose of promoting and enforcing the ideas of Mao and the CCP. Promoting figures who dedicate their lives to exemplifying the values of the CCP only works to create greater loyalty among the people, and the purpose of these model workers is to create an eternal role model to which the people can refer. The eternalization of the model workers is completed by their deification, but that is only possible upon their death, in which their narrative can be curated into this exemplary model that does not waver or contradict itself and can truly be used to wholly serve the CCP. The utilization of Lei Feng’s narrative created a lasting impact that persisted beyond its source, outliving the Cultural Revolution, and continues to be used as a model of the core values of government. His legacy is used as a political medium to convey the expectations of the government, and it is not his life that he sacrificed for the nation but rather his image, which has outlived him and his genuine likeness.

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The Maritime Silk Road and Port Investments: China's Strategic Pursuits in the Indian Ocean Region under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — consisting of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) — launched under President Xi Jinping in 2013 has overseen increased Chinese foreign investments in Global South transportation and logistics infrastructure. Now, across more than 150 countries, China builds economic corridors that connect back to China as a hub for regional trade, manufacturing, and, more recently, high-value high-tech investments. Infrastructure projects such as railway lines and ports especially help achieve China's goal of securing regional economic integration and connectivity. BRI offers China expedited access to key energy and mineral resources from Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Specifically, the MSR is a key pillar in securing Chinese access to sea lines of communication (SLOCs) — maritime routes between global ports that can be used for trade, military/naval, and a variety of other purposes. Control of overseas ports through infrastructure projects, investments, and loans guards China's access to critical

trade routes. Under this context, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) becomes a central strategic target for Chinese maritime investments due to its proximity to multiple strategically important seaway chokepoints (most notably, the Malacca Strait), particularly for maritime energy shipping.

However, amidst the Chinese economic slowdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, criticisms against China's development model, and heightened global great power competitions, BRI and MSR face a need to reassert their global relevance. While many scholars disagree on the extent and nature of BRI's impact on economic and security factors in recipient countries, there is nonetheless a consensus that Xi intends to see BRI through to the target completion date of 2049, the centennial of the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s founding. Thus, BRI, and by extension the MSR, will continue to be a mechanism through which China ensures its continued, if not expanded, hegemony in the region.

In this essay, I explore China's strategic approach to MSR in order to fulfill Chinese regional goals of 1. Maintaining regional economic trade routes and access to key energy resources, and 2. Hedging against possible disturbances by establishing security architecture. I argue that China attempts to achieve its national priorities by maintaining a strategic presence in the IOR through port infrastructure investments framed under the BRI. I will further analyze how effective foreign Chinese port investments are in achieving these goals amidst domestic and international challenges. I argue that, despite China's continued investments in IOR port infrastructure, ultimately, the MSR vision is significantly hindered by the unsustainability of Chinese loaning practices, political instability in the region, and actions from other regional stakeholders who seek to curtail Chinese influence. However, it is still early to conclude that these setbacks accumulate into a defeat for China's BRI and MSR ambitions. China has recognized the ineffectiveness of projects in the IOR and is actively seeking to remedy the lack

of progress by novelizing approaches in the region and finding alternative regions in which to expand investments.

I will first begin by identifying the traits of China's BRI and MSR before analyzing its goals and strategies, with a focus on port investments and the maintenance of SLOCs in the IOR. Secondly, I will analyze the effectiveness of China's MSR strategy in achieving its goals through case studies of the ports of Kyaukphyu in Myanmar and Gwadar in Pakistan. Lastly, I will identify recent trends in the Chinese approach to MSR to remedy a lack of results from its past MSR endeavors. Through this research, I aim to project the future of the MSR's strategic involvement in not only the IOR but also global seaways. As the global appetite for energy enlarges and risks of trade route disruptions increase as a result of regional conflicts, this research will inform how China, as the largest actor in the region, will act to ensure stability in its own maritime trade routes while risking to upset the interests of other regional actors.

Defining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Chinese President Xi Jinping first officially announced his flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a speech during his visit to Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University in Astana on September 7, 2013. Evoking the ancient history of exchanges China and Central Asia had shared along the Silk Road, Xi proposed China and Eurasian countries join hands in building a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREC)¹⁰. The "Belt" looked to reinvigorate overland trading routes and infrastructure connecting Europe and Asia through Central Asia. Joined with the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the "Road," inaugurated during Xi's speech at the

¹⁰ Jinping Xi, "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at Nazarbayev University," Database of Japanese Politics and International Relations, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/BR/20130907.O1E.html>.

Indonesian Parliament in October 2013 to promote maritime cooperation¹¹, the Belt and Road Initiative — directly translated as “One Belt, One Road” (一帶一路) — was created. A decade after 2013, cumulative BRI engagement reached \$1.053 trillion, consisting of \$634tn in construction contracts, and \$419tn in non-financial investments¹². From 2021 to 2024, the Chinese-founded Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and other sources continue to commit nearly \$2tn of funding for the BRI¹³. Undoubtedly, China continues its BRI commitments to achieve greater regional connectivity, development, and influence.

The BRI boasts win-win cooperation and a principle of domestic non-interference, guaranteeing mutual economic benefits with partners from the Global South. Popularly referred to as the Chinese “Marshall Plan” due to its large scale and ambitions, the BRI now spans more than 140 countries, is estimated to cost up to US\$8 trillion, and impacts more than 65% of the world's population¹⁴. Officially defined, the BRI is guided by five major areas of cooperation¹⁵ and six economic corridors¹⁶.

¹¹ Jinping Xi, “Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament,” ASEAN-China Centre, http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.

¹² Christoph NEDOPIL WANG, “China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023 – Green Finance & Development Center,” Green Finance & Development Center, February 5, 2024, <https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2023/>.

¹³ Hercules Haralambides and Olaf Merk, “The Belt and Road Initiative,” Discussion Papers, June 16, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2281f06f-en>.

¹⁴ Elia Apostolopoulou, “A Novel Geographical Research Agenda on Silk Road Urbanisation,” *The Geographical Journal* 187, no. 4 (September 17, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12412>.

¹⁵ Policy Coordination, Facilities Connectivity, Facilitate Unimpeded Trade, Financial Integration, and People-to-people Bonds.

¹⁶ The New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor, The China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor.



Figure 1. China's Vision of the BRI Economic Corridors. Source: CSIS¹⁷

Recent scholarship on the BRI, and especially its infrastructure projects, has highlighted its transformative impact on the urbanization and development of recipient countries. Elia Apostolopoulou introduces the framework of “Silk Road urbanization” to understand the BRI’s power in transforming urban spaces in the Global South¹⁸. Simon Curtis and Ian Klaus’ book *The Belt and Road City* (2024) further argues that China “explicitly link[s] infrastructure building and urbanization to a new and evolving type of international order (...) while also subtly shaping their economies and societies via the construction of these urban spaces.”¹⁹ These transformations are not limited to land-based urban environments. The not-so-physical “road” of the MSR extends BRI

¹⁷ Jonathan Hillman, “China’s Belt and Road Is Full of Holes,” CSIS | Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 4, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-belt-and-road-full-holes>.

¹⁸ Apostolopoulou, “Silk Road Urbanisation.”

¹⁹ Simon Curtis and Ian Klaus, *The Belt and Road City: Geopolitics, Urbanization, and China’s Search for a New International Order* (Yale University Press, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.11589102>.

influence into the seaways. The extent to which BRI can influence global infrastructure, trade, and environments causes many to see President Xi's Chinese foreign policy vision of a "community of common destiny" (人类命运共同体) and the Confucian concept of *tianxia* (天下) as a method of Chinese global governance bleeding into an ultimately political agenda for the BRI.

Indeed, the problem of characterizing BRI infrastructure's economic and political impact has been incredibly contentious. To begin with, the BRI has always been an ambiguously open vision and centralizing slogan to guide and publicize Chinese development aid abroad, which reality may not fully align with Beijing's idealized directives. The opacity and unique structure of China's foreign aid system, which diverges from the norms set by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), further complicates efforts to analyze its full scope and impact.

Major criticisms surrounding BRI projects believe China offers aid in a way not only economically inviable for Global South recipient countries due to ballooning unsustainable debt (i.e. debt-trap diplomacy), but also politically manipulative of decision-making in those countries. The BRI has been called out to be a march of "white elephant" projects — large infrastructure projects that are expensive but do not provide value or utility — that do not offer the promised quality of results due to irresponsible implementation. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) increased military presence as well as China's spy and surveillance capabilities amidst great power rivalries across the Indo-Pacific

is also seen as facilitated by BRI's access to the region through infrastructure and construction projects. Both economic and security concerns cloud the BRI's international reputation.

Despite mounting criticism, BRI's overall vision, coupled with China's "Made in China 2025" ambitions, reflects China's pursuit of economic hegemony. Achieving this vision necessitates securing global supply chains and the MSR and maritime infrastructure emerge as the leading strategy to realize these goals.

Defining the Maritime Silk Road

Despite the imagery of the "New Silk Road" as a land-based initiative, most economic actions are conducted in the seas. Maritime trade and access to deep water passages are critical for a country's economic success as over 80% of world trade volume is carried by sea²⁰. Increasingly so, maritime dependency is directly related to a country's economic prosperity and GDP growth²¹. Given that China's trade is at least 90% seaborne¹³, maritime infrastructure such as ports are vital nodes for its international trade and transport networks. The IOR, especially, is the major target for China's ambitions in global commerce and maritime control, as of 2023, hosting 80% of China's imported oil and 95% of China's trade with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe²². In the 21st century, maritime infrastructure is key to promoting trade; China finds its answers in expanding its MSR by building, gaining access to, and running international

²⁰ UNCTAD, "Review of Maritime Transport 2024," October 22, 2024, <https://unctad.org/publication/review-maritime-transport-2024>.

²¹ Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert, "Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports," *International Security* 46, no. 4 (2022): 9–47, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00433. ¹³ *ibid*.

²² Darshana Baruah, Nitya Labh, and Jessica Greely, "Mapping the Indian Ocean Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region?lang=en>.

ports. In 2017, in addition to the BRI land corridors, three “blue economic passages” were outlined in a document published by the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), namely the China–India Ocean–Africa–Mediterranean Sea, China–Oceania–South Pacific, and the China–Arctic Ocean–Europe Blue Economic Passage. However, similar to the general BRI imagery, the “blue passage” concept seeks to be all-inclusive while remaining intentionally vague to give an ideal illusion of structured Chinese maritime activities. A study of Chinese influence in overseas ports and the maritime supply chain gives a more concrete idea of what constitutes the MSR. At the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in October 2023, China boasts the expansion of its maritime connectivity, claiming the MSR to have reached 117 ports in 43 countries, with more than 300 Chinese and international shipping companies, port enterprises, and think tanks having joined the Maritime Silk Road Society (海上丝绸之路协会)²³. This expansion has continued. Currently, according to CFR’s China overseas port tracker, Chinese port projects total 129 (port projects outside China

²³ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future--the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,” The Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, October 2023, <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1010/c124-895.html>.

with Chinese investment), with 17 port projects with majority Chinese ownership, and, of those ports, 14 with potential for naval use²⁴.

These ports notably include Colombo and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Doraleh in Djibouti, Gwadar in Pakistan, Kuantan in Malaysia, Kyaukphyu in Myanmar, and Piraeus in Greece.

In terms of the maritime supply chain, China dominates in maritime products and services. China has the world's largest shipping lenders, ship builder, shipping fleet (by number of vessels), seafarer workforce, port construction firms, and container port operator.²⁵ China's share of container volumes at the biggest 100 seaports globally rose to 41.3% in 2023, from 40.2% a year earlier, when ten years ago the figure only stood at 36.6%.¹⁸

China's increasing maritime dominance has unsettled international actors, especially the United States. Newly on January 16, 2025, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) issued findings in an investigation of China's targeting of maritime, logistics, and shipbuilding sectors for dominance, before concluding that China's "targeted dominance in these sectors is unreasonable and burdens or restricts U.S. commerce, and is therefore "actionable" under Section 301"¹⁹ of the Trade Act of 1974, designed to address unfair foreign practices affecting U.S. commerce. The report finds that China controls 95% of global shipping container production and 86% percent of the world's supply of intermodal chassis. Fear of China's

²⁴ Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports," Council on Foreign Relations, August 24, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/tracker/china-overseas-ports>.

²⁵ Jonathan Hillman, "Statement before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation 'China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative: Implications for the Global Maritime Supply Chain,'" 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/109805/witnesses/HHRG-116-PW07-Wstate-HillmanJ-20191017.pdf>. ¹⁸ Brendan Murray, "Supply Chain Latest: China's Maritime Trade Dominance," Bloomberg, August 21, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2024-08-21/supply-chain-latest-china-s-maritime-trade-dominance>. ¹⁹ "Report on China's Targeting of the Maritime, Logistics, and Shipbuilding Sectors for Dominance," United States Trade Representative (Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, January 16, 2025), <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2025/january/ustr-finds-chinas-targeting-maritime-logistics-and-shipbuilding-sectors-dominance-actionable-under>.

“String of Pearls” strategy — a theory proposed in the early 2000s by U.S. researchers in response to Chinese investment in ports along the Indian Ocean, arguing that China’s tactics of developing infrastructure in the IOR will support its extended naval deployments²⁶ — is still fresh in the minds of all regional stakeholders.

State subsidies and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) remain the backbone of China’s maritime dominance. According to CSIS’s China Power Project, from 2010 to 2019, Chinese companies invested an estimated \$11 billion into overseas ports.²⁷ Major Chinese SOEs involved in port infrastructure include the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO), the world’s largest shipping company and port terminal operator operating a fleet of 1535 vessels with a total capacity of 130 million DWT,²⁸ the China Merchants Ports (CMP), a leading global port developer and terminal operator, and the China Communications Construction Company Limited (CCCC), the world’s largest port design and construction company. CSIS estimated state support to Chinese shipping companies as roughly \$132 billion from 2010 to 2018.²⁹ No doubt, Chinese policymakers grip the steering wheel in directing the foreign maritime investment of SOEs. China’s maritime expansion positions the country as a dominant force in shaping global shipping patterns, port infrastructure, and maritime supply chains. As China continues to consolidate its presence in the seas through the MSR, its goals and strategies become increasingly central to understanding the economic and geopolitical implications of this

²⁶ Virginia Marantidou, “Revisiting China’s ‘String of Pearls’ Strategy: Places ‘with Chinese Characteristics’ and Their Security Implications,” *Pacific Forum CSIS Issues & Insights* 14, no. 7 (June 2014), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140624_issuesinsights_vol14_no7.pdf.

²⁷ “How Is China Influencing Global Maritime Connectivity?,” *ChinaPower Project*, April 30, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-ports-connectivity/>.

²⁸ “Group Profile,” *China COSCO Shipping Cooperation Limited*, https://en.coscoshipping.com/col6918/art/2016/art_6918_45339.html.

²⁹ Jude Blanchette et al., “Hidden Harbors: China’s State-Backed Shipping Industry,” *CSIS | Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/hidden-harbors-chinas-state-backed-shipping-industry>.

initiative. The next section will examine these objectives and dissect the mechanisms China employs to advance its vision for the MSR.

Goals and Strategies of the MSR

It is relatively straightforward to outline the economic motives of China's MSR involvements: China seeks resource and energy security through stable supply chains, commercial expansion through developed trade routes, supply chain resilience through regional financial integration, competitiveness of Chinese exports through optimized transport chains, revitalized Chinese inland economy through integrated corridors, to list a few.³⁰ However, China's *true* intentions in the MSR have been long debated, whether its primary goal is purely economic or somewhat geopolitical, if port infrastructures are indeed a “string of pearls” of de facto military bases, or if China indeed intentionally forces countries into debt situations for more political leverage.

Whichever it may be, after China formally opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti³¹ on the coast of the Horn of Africa, it became clear that China's economic and security ambitions are not clear-cut black or white. Djibouti is situated at the strategic entrance to the Red Sea, a vital transit point for maritime trade between Europe and Asia. It has long been the site of international security efforts to combat piracy and protect the key SLOC through the Suez Canal. China's military presence (the base capable of accommodating aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines³²) at this maritime chokepoint reveals China's need to integrate

³⁰ For details, see the 2017 “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative”: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm

³¹ Reuters Staff, “China Formally Opens First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti,” Reuters, August 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-formally-opens-first-overseas-military-base-in-djibouti-idUSKBN1AH3E1/>.

³² Michaël Tanchum, “China's New Military Base in Africa: What It Means for Europe and America – European

security measures to protect its regional development of commercial ports, leaving the potential for facilities to host military patrols or for investments to generate political goodwill and leverage for coercive power.²⁷ China's pursuit of the MSR is thus strategic, optimizing its regional goals of promoting economic development through integrating a security framework in the Indo-Pacific. In this context, port investments in the IOR are dual-use; they fulfill both mandates.

The central logic behind Chinese port investments can be theoretically understood through the so-called "Malacca Dilemma (马六甲困局)." This term was first coined by President Hu Jintao at a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) economic work conference in November 2003, when he commented on the problem of energy security amidst China's increasing dependence on oil imports from the Middle East.³³ The Malacca Strait is a critical entry point for countries like China in the east to access oil-producing countries in the west through the IOR. Hu urged China to remain vigilant against foreign encroachment on the vulnerability of the Malacca Strait chokepoint, making clear the risks of overdependence on this geographic chokepoint for the Chinese economy and security.³⁴ In times of conflict, critical energy imports to China could be easily cut off, raising the dilemma of how China could avoid such a scenario.

Council on Foreign Relations," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 14, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/chinas-new-military-base-in-africa-what-it-means-for-europe-and-america/>.²⁷

Devin Thorne and Ben Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions: How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific," *C4ADS*, April 17, 2018, <https://c4ads.org/reports/harbored-ambitions/>.

³³ Lanteigne, Marc. 2008. "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma.'" *Asian Security* 4 (2): 143–61. doi:10.1080/14799850802006555.

³⁴ Lanteigne, Marc. 2008. "China's Maritime Security and the 'Malacca Dilemma.'" *Asian Security* 4 (2): 143–61. doi:10.1080/14799850802006555.

I suggest the Malacca Dilemma mainly as a theoretical entry point since Malacca is far from the only maritime chokepoint impacting the IOR. Both the Strait of Hormuz (which connects to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East via the Indian Ocean) and the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb (between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, connecting the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Red Sea and the Suez Canal) are equally critical access points to energy and oil for China. Beyond the region, the Suez and Panama Canal are also integral for global maritime trade. As highlighted in the 2024 UNCTAD Review on Maritime Transport, disruptions to key chokepoints have been “increasingly vulnerable to geopolitical tensions, conflicts, and climate change”³⁵ (see Figure 2). Susceptible to disruptions in major chokepoints are freight rates, which are rapidly surging — with the Shanghai Containerized Freight Index (SCFI) more than doubling from 2023 to 2024 — due to higher distance traveled, fuel consumption, and insurance premiums as a direct result of rerouting and port congestion from Panama Canal and Red Sea disruptions.³⁶ This surge in freight rates will push global consumer prices up in 2025 and may prove especially harmful for China as it largely depends on maritime trade infrastructures.

³⁵ UNCTAD, “Review of Maritime Transport 2024.”

³⁶ *ibid.*

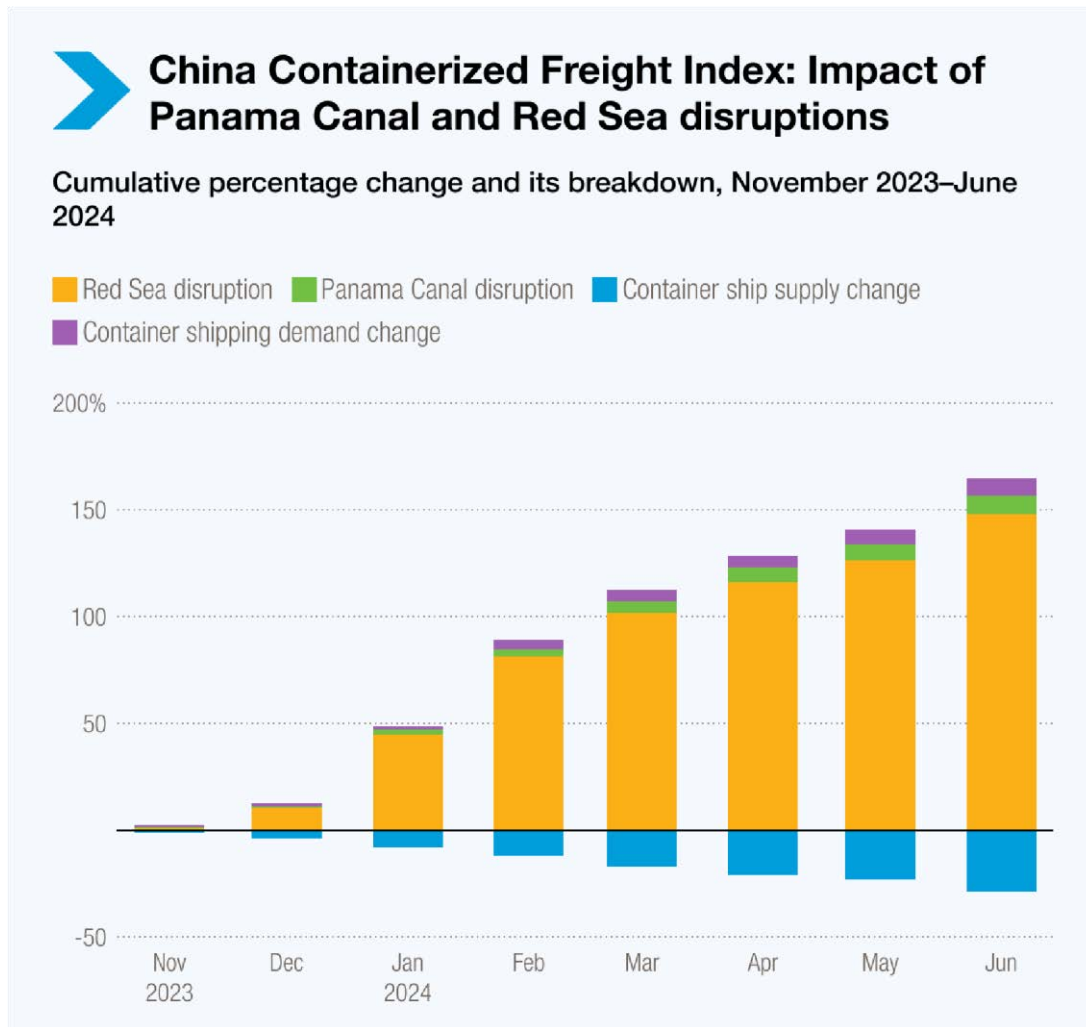


Figure 2. Impact of Panama Canal and Red Sea Disruptions on China Containerized Freight Index. Source: UNCTAD³⁷

Clear from this analysis is China's critical economic stakes in protecting access to maritime chokepoints in the IOR. China's strategic solution in the past has been to promote port investments near these chokepoints while also seeking alternative land routes that circumvent maritime routes in order to secure SLOC access and long-term stability (see Figure 3). China's pursuits in port investments as a part of both the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) are prime examples of this strategy.

³⁷ *ibid.*

Both the CPEC and CMEC use deep water ports to connect landlocked regions of China with maritime routes that avoid vulnerable chokepoints. The \$62bn project of CPEC, since its signage in 2015, and the Port of Gwadar is hugely advantageous for China as it provides landlocked regions access to a deep sea port through the Xinjiang province and, if disturbances were to occur in the Indian Ocean or eastwards, China would maintain unhindered trade routes with Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.³⁸ Similarly, through the CMEC,³⁹ using the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and its deep-sea port (currently under construction), China seeks to reroute the Indian Ocean oil and natural gas trade through the Bay of Bengal and to the landlocked Yunnan Province.³⁵

³⁸ Hali, Shafei Moiz, Tan Shukui, and Sumera Iqbal. "One Belt and One Road: Impact on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor." *Strategic Studies* 34/35 (2014): 147–64. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48527479>.

³⁹ Originally a part of China's BRI Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), CMEC was rebranded as an exclusive economic corridor between China and Myanmar after Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Naypyitaw in November 2017. The CMEC was formalised with the signing of a 15-point Memorandum of Understanding on September 9, 2018. Kyi Sin, "Securing the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor: Navigating Conflicts and Public Scepticism" (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, October 2024), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2024_79.pdf. ³⁵ Curtis and Klaus, *The Belt and Road City*.



Figure 3. Chinese Port Projects in Relation to Indo-Pacific SLOCs, Maritime Chokepoints, and Other Features. Source: C4ADS⁴⁰

To summarize, China attempts to maintain regional SLOCs and access to key resources by establishing potential dual-use deep water ports that ensure Chinese presence at vital chokepoints in the IOR, as well as explore alternative land routes through these ports. Port infrastructure investments in Gwadar and Kyaukphyu of the CPEC and CMEC projects have largely followed this logic. Now, it is vital to evaluate the effectiveness of this MSR strategy.

Case Study 1: CPEC & Gwadar

The Port of Gwadar, including 2,280 acres of land, was transferred from the Port of Singapore Authority to the China Overseas Ports Holding Company Limited (COPHC) in 2013

⁴⁰ Thorne and Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions."

for a 43-year lease, financed with support from the China Development Bank. The initial price tag was \$248 million, with the total estimated cost to be \$840 million.⁴¹ It is modeled to be an urban industrial powerhouse consisting of manufacturing facilities, a free trade zone, and an LNG terminal.⁴² The port's strong strategic location sits roughly 400 km east of the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint through which 40% of China's imported oil transits. Globally, over one-sixth of oil and one-third of liquefied natural gas passes through the 155 km long and 34 km wide strait.⁴³

Strategically, the port is strong and sound: it is high utility, positioned within 480 nautical miles of a maritime chokepoint, proximate to SLOC, has China as its sole owner and operator, and holds the physical potential to support PLAN vessels.⁴⁴ However, more than a decade later, evidence shows that the port remains underdeveloped and underused. Satellite imagery data analyzed by C4ADS reports that “the port relies primarily on transshipments rather than import or export routes, with only an estimated 200 ships calling on the port between 2008 and 2017 — just 1.5 ships per month.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Gwadar can only operate at a very limited capacity: the port's three berths can handle 137,000 20-foot shipping containers per year. In contrast, the Port of Karachi can handle 4.2 million per year.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Captain K. Raffat Zaheer, “Development and Operations of the Port of Gwadar” (International Federation of Shipmasters’ Associations, November 15, 2013), <https://www.ifsma.org/tempannounce/aga33/Gwadar.pdf>.

⁴² Thorne and Spevack, “Harbored Ambitions.”

⁴³ Abdullah Baabood, “Why China Is Emerging as a Main Promoter of Stability in the Strait of Hormuz,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 24, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/05/why-china-is-emerging-as-a-main-promoter-of-stability-in-the-strait-of-hormuz?lang=en&er=middle-east>.

⁴⁴ Kardon and Leutert, “Pier Competitor.”

⁴⁵ Thorne and Spevack, “Harbored Ambitions.”

⁴⁶ Kira Schacht, “Pakistan’s Gwadar Port Shows China’s Belt and Road Can Fail – DW – 05/13/2024,” DW, May 13, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-gwadar-port-shows-chinas-belt-and-road-can-fail/a-68992914>.

Furthermore, a lack of progress in the land infrastructures of CPEC caused by Pakistan's political instability, increasing debt unsustainability, and surge in terrorism make the Gwadar port simply impractical to use.⁴⁷ There have been rising frustrations from both Pakistani and Chinese officials concerning CPEC. Pakistan voices have feared the CPEC as a neo-colonial project designed to use debt to force Pakistan into a client state. China's significant role in Pakistan's debt problem fuels these rebukes. As of 2024, with \$29bn in loans, China has become Pakistan's largest bilateral creditor (Pakistan's total external debt at \$130.85bn in 2023).⁴⁸

Growing insurgency in Balochistan further exacerbates halts to CPEC progress. Chinese citizens residing in Pakistan and CPEC infrastructure often become targets of attacks by the regional separatist militant group, Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). The BLA accuses China of exploiting the area's resources. In October 2024, the BLA attacked near Karachi airport killing two Chinese nationals.⁴⁹ Previous suicide bombings and shootings have also targeted Chinese civilians.

Strained China-Pakistan relations have put the CPEC into limbo. Despite the good underlying strategy, it is certainly hard to characterize the CPEC and Port of Gwadar projects as effective.

⁴⁷ Joaquin Matamis, "Ten Years of CPEC: A Decade of Disappointments • Stimson Center," Stimson Center, August 18, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/ten-years-of-cpec-a-decade-of-disappointments/>.

⁴⁸ "International Debt Report 2024" (World Bank, December 3, 2024), <https://hdl.handle.net/10986/42444>.

⁴⁹ Shah Meer Baloch and Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "What Went Wrong with 'Pakistan's Dubai'? – inside the Chinese Initiative That Is Prompting Terror Attacks," The Guardian, January 26, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/26/what-went-wrong-with-pakistans-dubai-inside-the-chinese-initiative-that-is-prompting-terror-attacks>.

Case Study 2: CMEC & Kyaukphyu

The \$9bn Kyaukphyu deep water port, located in a small fishing town on a natural harbor, answers to the “Malacca Dilemma.” The Kyaukpyu Port was first announced in 2013 and the project was awarded to the Chinese SOE CITIC Group in December 2015.⁵⁰ Kyaukphyu offers an expedited way to access the offshore oil and gas fields of the Bay of Bengal, cutting almost 7,500 miles from the journey. It also links the Sino-Myanmar oil and gas pipeline, connecting into the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM).⁵¹ This provides China with direct access to the Indian Ocean, reducing its reliance on the strategically vulnerable Malacca Strait.

Despite this ambitious plan, prior to the 2021 military coup, Myanmar's officials have expressed reluctance on the project due to apprehensions about snowballing debt and the ongoing civil war. The initial cost estimate for the project was \$7.3bn for the port and \$2.7bn for an adjacent SEZ⁵² — an irregularly high price tag considering Gwadar’s cost estimate of \$248 million. Myanmar has been extremely cautious, fearing that such big-ticket investments could topple its already high debt levels, thus compromising its sovereignty. In 2018, Myanmar decided to scale back plans for Kyaukphyu to avoid debt. Deputy Finance Minister Set Aung led project negotiations in May with the revised cost being around \$1.3bn in the initial phase.⁵³

During the closure of the China-Myanmar border due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the

⁵⁰ Zachary Fillingham, “Backgrounder: Myanmar’s Kyaukpyu Port,” Geopolitical Monitor, October 27, 2023, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/backgrounder-myanmars-kyaukpyu-port/>.

⁵¹ Curtis and Klaus, *The Belt and Road City*.

⁵² Shaun Cameron, “Why Is Myanmar’s New Deep- Sea Port Such Hot Property?,” theinterpreter (Lowy Institute, November 22, 2023), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/why-myanmar-s-new-deep-sea-port-such-hot-property>.

⁵³ Kanupriya Kapoor and Aye Min Thant, “Exclusive: Myanmar Scales Back Chinese-Backed Port Project due to Debt Fears - Official,” Reuters, August 2, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/exclusive-myanmar-scales-back-chinese-backed-port-project-due-to-debt-fears-o-idUSKBN1KN105/>.

2021 Myanmar military coup, the Kyaukphyu project was halted. Only in the final weeks of 2023 did Kyaukphyu begin to move ahead again, but at a severely compromised pace. The Myanmar State Administration Council and CITIC Group signed a supplementary agreement to the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port deal, approving the resumption of construction.⁵⁴ In May of 2024, China reportedly sent more than 300 technicians and workers to Kyaukphyu.⁵⁵ As reported in November of the same year, a significant number of Chinese workers are rapidly departing the region due to the Arakan Army's attacks on neighboring towns.⁵⁶ The civil war in Myanmar, compromising the safety of construction work, has left the Kyaukphyu port undeveloped.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the Kyaukphyu port project was first undermined by financial and security issues, leading to delays and a scaling back of the project's scope. Rising domestic conflicts further upended attempts to resume work on the port. As a result, CMEC and Kyaukphyu have yet to realize any potential, remaining a largely ineffective endeavor.

Conclusion: The Future of the BRI and MSR

Through this research, I have demonstrated the MSR strategy's limited effectiveness in securing Chinese access to SLOCs through port investments along the CPEC and CMEC. MSR's past strategy smartly sought to avoid the vulnerable IOR chokepoints of the Malacca Strait, Strait of Hormuz, and Bab-el-Mandeb. However, port projects have ultimately failed to

⁵⁴ Nyein Chan Aye, "Myanmar OKs Resumption of Construction at Beijing-Backed Indian Ocean Port," Voice of America, January 29, 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/myanmar-oks-resumption-of-construction-at-beijing-backed-indian-ocean-port-/7462062.html>.

⁵⁵ RFA Burmese, "China Sends 300 Workers to Deep Sea Port Project in Myanmar's Rakhine State," Radio Free Asia, May 3, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/china-workers-deep-sea-port-project-rakhine-05032024161325.html>.

⁵⁶ Narinjara, "Chinese Workers Abandon Kyaukphyu Project over Concerns of Conflict," Burma News International, November 14, 2024, <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/chinese-workers-abandon-kyaukphyu-project-over-concerns-conflict>.

live up to their potential and large budget due to an inability to step up cooperation with the partner governments, especially as they struggle with debt sustainability and domestic political instability. The diligent watch of the international community also prevents China from pressuring partner countries through obvious economic or military means. Unfortunately, the most advanced Chinese port projects remain the ones based on well-established maritime routes (such as Piraeus and Djibouti) rather than new alternative corridors created by the MSR.⁵⁷

While the future of MSR is dim, these setbacks do not accumulate into a total defeat for China's BRI and MSR ambitions. China recognizes the ineffectiveness of its large port projects in the IOR. In response, China has changed its BRI strategy to what scholars refer to as the "BRI 2.0," where Beijing claims it will focus on "small but beautiful" projects.⁵⁸ Furthermore, as an alternative to the IOR, in the past few years, China has increasingly cast its vision into Latin America and the Middle East.

In November 2024, President Xi inaugurated China's new port at Chancay on which COSCO has spent \$1.3bn.⁵⁹ Although Chancay is far from "small but beautiful," it demonstrates the pivot in the BRI 2.0 strategy well. Instead of full-recourse sovereign debt transactions, China is switching to limited-recourse project finance transactions. According to AidData, "to finance the construction of the port, an independent legal entity (also known as a special purpose vehicle or SPV) was established as the borrowing institution of record (...) The SPV (in this case, CSP Chancay) is majority-owned by a Chinese state-owned enterprise

⁵⁷ Thorne and Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions."

⁵⁸ Bradley C. Parks et al., "Belt and Road Reboot: Beijing's Bid to De-Risk Its Global Infrastructure Initiative," November 6, 2023, https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/belt-and-road-reboot/Belt_and_Road_Reboot_Full_Report.pdf.

⁵⁹ "China's Presence in Latin America Has Expanded Dramatically," *The Economist*, July 4, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2024/07/04/chinas-presence-in-latin-america-has-expanded-dramatically>.

⁵⁶ Lea Thome, "Chancay Port Opens as China's Gateway to South America," AidData, November 14, 2024, <https://www.aiddata.org/blog/chancay-port-opens-as-chinas-gateway-to-south-america>.

(COSCO) and minority-owned by an entity in the host country (Volcan).”⁵⁶ Through a new strategy of development finance arrangements, China mitigates domestic debt risks in the recipient country. For the future of the BRI, it is clear that China will steer away from the image of “debt-trap diplomacy” and emphasize its pursuit of sustainable lending practices to not upset its public image.

In this essay, I have argued that China’s MSR is a strategic instrument through which Beijing seeks to secure trade routes, access key energy resources, and establish a security architecture to hedge against disruptions in the IOR. Through port infrastructure investments, China has strengthened its regional presence, particularly near strategic chokepoints such as Malacca Strait. However, despite sustained investments, the effectiveness of MSR is severely limited. As seen in the examples of CPEC and CMEC, challenges such as unsustainable lending practices, political instability in recipient countries, and counteractions from regional stakeholders have constrained China’s ambitions. While these setbacks continue to hinder progress, China remains committed to adapting its approach by exploring alternative regions and financing strategies for its maritime investments. BRI is not over: China will pursue the BRI slowly but surely while finding new ways across the oceans. Global powers will need to keep an ever-watchful eye over China’s expanding maritime ambitions if they seek to curb Chinese influence.

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Dead Authors in My TV: Masks, Memory, and Murder in *Bungo Stray Dogs*

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Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is a pretty anime boy. At least, in the hit anime series *Bungo Stray Dogs* (文豪ストレイドッグス) (2016-present), he is. The series, originally a manga written by Asagiri Kafka (朝霧カフカ) and illustrated by Harukawa Sango (春河さんご), follows the story of super-powered individuals working at a crime-solving institute named the Armed Detective Agency (ADA for short). The kicker? All of the characters are explicitly modeled and named after real authors active in the modern era. “Bungo” (文豪) itself means “literary master,” highlighting that the basis for each character in the show is a prolific author. This use of modern authors reframes the history and imagination of contemporary literary history in a new way. “Stray Dogs” refers directly to the characters who are lost in society and struggle to find their life’s purpose. Together, *Bungo Stray Dogs* refers to the lost, outcast literary masters represented in the series.

Bungo Stray Dogs, like many other popular anime, intertextually crafts its narrative and characters. Intertextuality is the very basis of the series’ narrative construction. The show uses authors’ works and their histories and draws from all the anime preceding it to craft its complex narratives. The characters not only refer to prolific modern authors but also have superpowers

(called their “gift”) crafted via the authors’ famous works. For example, Dazai Osamu’s (太宰治) (1909-1944) gift is named “No Longer Human” (人間失格) after his renowned novel, and Edgar Allan Poe’s combines “Black Cat” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” to form the ability “Black Cat in the Rue Morgue.” These references are one of many interrelationships between texts shaping the show's narrative. Rather than the anime being an intertextual period drama, the focus is on modern-day crime-solving. Viewers are taken on a wild ride riddled with detectives, drama, action, and the supernatural made possible by the series’ incorporation of various texts.

The series is set in modern-day Yokohama, with the port city’s notable landmarks like Yokohama Chinatown and Red Brick Warehouse included in the animation. Superpowers set the real Yokohama apart from its show counterpart. In the *Bungo Stray Dogs* universe, superpowered individuals hide their abilities to live a normal life, with two exceptions: Armed Detective Agency and Port Mafia members. The Armed Detective Agency hires superpowered individuals to solve supernatural crimes that are too dangerous to the average human. Their natural enemy is the Port Mafia, an organized crime institute with individuals who use their powers to achieve their illegal goals. The tension between the rival organizations sparks many supernatural battles between them, but as the show progresses, the once clear lines separating them become vague.

In season two, larger enemies than the Port Mafia are introduced, creating a complex narrative featuring foreign authors like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Francis Scott Fitzgerald. The morals of each organization become a blur, with some characters, like Dazai Osamu and Nakahara Chuya (中原中也), working together despite being in different organizations. The moral ambiguity, plethora of characters, and rival organizations make *Bungo Stray Dogs* a

complex, confusing anime. The plot's complexity and character relationships demonstrate the limits of imposing coherence on Japanese literary history. Rather than proposing an “ultimate meaning,” *Bungo Stray Dogs* engages in layer upon layer of interpretation.

Millions of fans love *Bungo Stray Dogs*, narrative complexity and all. At the NewType Anime Awards in 2016-2017, the series took home second in the “Best Television Series” category, and again in 2019. The release of the first three seasons was followed by a four-year break, with two more seasons being released in 2023. After their release, season five was rated the top anime of the year by Anime Corner, which draws from fan polls for its results. At the time of writing, season six has not yet been confirmed, but merchandise of the anime continues to be released at stores like Animate (アニメイト), and die-hard fans dress up as their favorite characters and engage in discourse.

By analyzing the intertextuality of *Bungo Stray Dogs* as it relates to the modern authors it references, I show that the anime celebrates the authors of the modern era in a multitude of intriguing ways. Embedding aspects of authors’ genre inventiveness into the narrative, such as implementing Dazai’s take on the I-novel genre into the character’s portrayal using masks, explores their literary ingenuity. Additionally, I highlight how *Bungo Stray Dogs* pens writing as “superpowers” within the show, emphasizing the cultural impacts, influences, and importance of the authors represented via the supernatural abilities of Yosano Akiko (与謝野 晶子) (1878-1942). Finally, the show inputs Edgar Allan Poe and Edogawa Rampo’s (江戸川 乱歩) (1894-1965) inclinations towards cultural borrowing from crime fiction into the show's narrative through the characters’ interactions and diverse crime-solving methods. The series runs contrary to the authors’ historical readings, thereby re-imagining how they are interpreted celebratedly

and non-exhaustively. Their legacy is not reduced to dominant views surrounding them and their works, but rather regarded as diverse, exemplary, and powerful.

Intertextuality is defined as any factor or characteristic that links one creative work to another, and is the very basis of narrative construction. Literary works are almost always connected to some prior work, but finding explicit intertexts can be more difficult to identify than extratexts. Intertextuality in East Asia has been both passive and dynamic: passive, as in “the continuing relevance of artistic conventions,” and dynamic as a proactive means of engaging with and interpreting previous works. Dynamic intertextuality has elicited far more study because it goes more in-depth with relationships between different authors and the societies they are part of. The dynamic aspect of intertextuality not only reacts to the cultural products of Imperial power, in this case, Japan, but also constructs and deconstructs identities.

Though detectives were present in fiction long before the invention of the cohesive crime fiction genre, notably at the time when Rampo and Poe were active writers, it became an explicit genre featuring detectives and detection, crime and investigation, documents and documentation, the genre narrativization of the power of reason, the inclusion of disorder, class puzzles, and reader participation. This pattern has been, according to Sarah Link, “textually coherent across a period of 160 years,” and is thus the genre definition I will use when analyzing Rampo and Poe. Rampo was himself inspired by Poe, going so far as to make his pen name a slightly distorted Japanese version of Poe’s.

When crime fiction became popular in Japan in the early twentieth century, Japan was experiencing both growth and turbulence as citizens struggled to acclimate to the new world order. Crime fiction served as a relief from this suffering by incorporating “backward” concepts like superstition and imagination to “erode the dominance of ‘modern reason.’” Western crime

fiction, such as Poe's, hence gained popularity, with Japanese authors like Rampo drawing from the genre that was already established in the West and Japanizing it. Rampo's engagement with and borrowing from Poe's works is referred to as "cultural borrowing." I will use Mark Silver's definition in *Purloined Letters: Cultural Borrowing and Japanese Crime Literature* when discussing cultural borrowing. Silver argues cultural borrowing is "the understanding [of] the modes and meanings of cultural imitation." Cultural borrowing is thus taking ideas, in this case, ideas and conventions in crime literature, from a different culture and incorporating them into your own.

Basing anime on previous works of fiction is relatively common, as seen through Sherlock Holmes' influence in the *Detective Conan* series (名探偵コナン) (1996) and Holmes' explicit portrayal in *Moriarty the Patriot* (憂国のモリアーティ)(2020). Including the authors themselves, though, has been less common in the history of anime. The only other mainstream anime in recent years in which the main characters are real authors is *Bungo and Alchemist: Gears of Judgment* (文豪とアルケミスト ～審判ノ歯車～) (2020), which was first a video game and was later adapted into an anime. *Bungo and Alchemist*, though, keeps the authors' namesakes attached to their real personas, as the story follows the authors being reincarnated in a giant library and having to fight to figure out why.

The anime medium features an abundance of genres, ranging from the robotic mecha to historical. Just as prominent is genre mixing, which allows for genres to be mutated and combined to create ever-expanding meta-genres. This inclination towards genre-mixing forms a diverse medium and popular media ecology. *Bungo Stray Dogs*' creative use of modern authors in an entirely fictitious narrative sets it apart from other literary anime.

Celebration of Genre, Inventiveness and Adaptations

Bungo Stray Dogs uses a variety of narrative techniques to invoke the authors' writing creativity throughout the series. Dazai Osamu's contributions to the I-novel rejected the idea of works within the genre being an auto-biographical confession and instead wore various "masks" when writing. His disingenuous masks are included in *Bungo Stray Dogs* through Dazai's characterization, where he presents different facades to different people rather than showing his true self.

The I-novel, referred to as *shishousetsu* (私小説) in Japanese, originated in Japan in the early twentieth century, taking inspiration from diary memoirs and Western naturalism. Largely viewed as encompassing confessional novels, the I-novel, through a fictitious writing style, allows the reader to peek into the author's psychology, focusing on their individual experiences. Dazai Osamu, born in 1909, was active during the I-novel's most fertile period, along with authors such as Natsume Soseki (夏目 漱石) (1867-1916) known for *Kokoro* (こころ) (1914) and Akutagawa Ryunosuke (芥川 龍之介) (1892-1927), for whom the prestigious Akutagawa Literature Prize is named. Critics, like Terada Toru (寺田徹) and Morikawa Tatsuya (森川達也), pen the I-novel as "the typical genre (of the twentieth century) which, more than any other, represents Japanese literature." People largely see the I-novel genre as factual due to its focus on the author's life and confessional nature. That is, works in the genre show how the narrator perceives reality, creating "self-revealing narration, with the author usually as the main character." Dazai Osamu, however, re-imagined the I-novel, namely through his refusal to offer readers an honest look into his life and perceptions in his last two works, *The Setting Sun* (斜陽) (1947) and *No Longer Human* (1948). Since *No Longer Human* is the namesake of Dazai's

ability in *Bungo Stray Dogs*, I focus specifically on his genre inventiveness and adaptations in that novel.

In *No Longer Human*, the narrator of the piece does not concretely connect with Dazai himself. *No Longer Human* is narrated by Yozo Oba (大庭葉蔵) who, in a series of three journal entries, discusses his inability to show his true self to humanity. Published one month after Dazai Osamu's death, it is easy to see this dark, depressing work as a confessional written by Dazai himself. This reading gets debunked, though, when looking at Yozo's background and the unique inclusion of falsified quotes from the series of poems entitled *Rubaiyat* by twelfth-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam. George T. Sippos' article *Masks of the Author in Dazai Osamu's Fiction* notes that the inclusion of the poems follows no known Japanese or English order and that, upon further inspection, the poems are actually of doubtful authenticity. While using the I-novel confessional writing style, Dazai hides the truth by creating a piece of fiction independent of himself. The narrator and the author are seen as two different people, departing from and re-imagining the constraints of the genre.

Dazai Osamu's portrayal in *Bungo Stray Dogs* implements the "masks" of Dazai's later fiction through multiple personas. In the story, Dazai starts as a member of the Port Mafia, having been recruited by the mafia medic Mori Ogai following a suicide attempt in his teens. Becoming Mori's protege, Dazai allows himself to be molded in his image, becoming a carefree, cold-hearted killer, as seen when he shoots a corpse repeatedly with an unhinged smile, laughs bubbling from his lips. After Mori orders the killing of his fellow mafia member Odasaku (nicknamed Oda), Dazai's best friend, he abandons his dark and deranged facade. Uncharacteristically, Dazai screams as he runs over to his dying friend. He attempts to keep up the farce by calling Oda an idiot, but his mask quickly cracks, and he struggles to hold back tears

when Oda leaves him a dying wish. Prior to this interaction, viewers see Port Mafia Dazai as nothing but a merciless murderer, but the scene with his dying friend shows his malevolent nature is only part of his true self.

Another persona Dazai employs while working for the Armed Detective Agency is his unserious, jokester self. Oda's dying wish is for Dazai to join the side of good, and he does so by betraying the Port Mafia and joining the detective agency, which serves as a private crime-solving institute. While working for them, he completely disregards the way he acted as a member of the Port Mafia and instead is a teasing buffoon who goes to great lengths to annoy people and get a laugh out of them. For example, in "The Azure Messenger," Dazai consumes a hallucinogenic mushroom at the office and disrupts everyone's workday, going so far as to mummify his apprentice with bandages and aggressively pinch the cheeks of his stoic partner. When he organizes a meet-up between the Port Mafia and the Armed Detective Agency, though, he reverts to his Port Mafia persona. Rather than approaching the situation with light-hearted jokes, he switches back to his dark, unfeeling mannerisms, going so far as to describe in brutal detail how he would have killed Mori if he stayed in the mafia.

These two personas highlight the fact that throughout the series, Dazai's characterization questions the presence of a true self. Instead, he uses carefully crafted masks that only show part of the picture, harkening back to the real Dazai's re-imagining of the I-novel genre as creative fiction rather than autobiographical confessional. Including masks throughout the anime paints Dazai's narrative creativity in a new light, using it as a device that makes his fictional counterpart intriguingly complicated, adaptable, and strong. Using his different masks, Dazai can thrive in a variety of scenarios, ranging from the overly joyous trickster to the cold-hearted killer.

This character diversity celebrates Dazai Osamu's I-novel masks, which granted him great auctorial power that re-defined the genre.

Dazai's portrayal in the show also redefines the dominating legacy of the historical Dazai. In spite of his reimagining of the I-Novel, Dazai is most remembered for his suicidal desire. Critics work to understand Dazai's mental illness through his works, going so far as to study them as a means of understanding why his suicide was inexorable. As a result, he is remembered more for his mental illness than anything else. *Bungo Stray Dogs*, however, counters the primary reading of Dazai by belittling his suicidal nature. Rather than Dazai's mental illness being the main facet of his character, in the series it is an afterthought at the butt of jokes. For example, in "Yokohama Gangster Paradise," when fellow ADA members are attempting to learn about a woman's investigation query, Dazai suddenly takes her by the hand, caressing it while he passionately asks her to commit double suicide with him. His co-worker then punches him across the room and begins beating him in the background, his yells humorously interrupting the serious questioning the rest of the agency is conducting.

The show's amusing portrayal of Dazai's suicidal ideation de-emphasizes its importance, instead marking it as an unimportant afterthought. Consequently, Dazai's other traits, like his masks, cunningness, and character complexity are given more weight and recognition in the series. *Bungo Stray Dogs* acknowledges Dazai's troublesome life and mentality by toying with it, thereby downplaying its importance in the historical Dazai's legacy. This creative approach reveals Dazai's more intriguing aspects, rather than centering on his darker moments over-emphasized by the literary world.

Celebration of Impacts/Influence [Through Writing as "Superpowers"]

During Japan's rapid expansion and growth in the early twentieth century, female writers began receiving more recognition. One such woman who wrote during this time was Yosano Akiko, a Japanese poet and social critic. Yosano was born into a very strict family life where she was rarely allowed to leave home, but, like a host of other women, she left her family obligations to pursue her career. Bolstered by the support of her husband Yosano Tekkan (与謝野 鉄幹) (1873-1935), also a Japanese poet, she wrote about feminism and the lives of women.

Through her abundance of tanka-style poems, where she blended the traditional style with modern and provocative themes of love and sexuality, Yosano is "regarded as one of Japan's greatest woman poets and is known for her mastery of the classical tanka form and the eroticism of her verses." Her work caught the attention of other feminist authors, and she became a frequent contributor to the magazine *Seito* (青鞥) (Bluestockings) (1911-1916), a Japanese women's literary magazine. In the issues, she wrote about important women's issues, and was also acknowledged in a gender-neutral setting through her inclusion in the New Poetry Association (Tokyo *Shinshisha*) (新詩社) (1900-1908), which took notice of the estimated 500 poems she wrote throughout her life in the modern style.

Yosano's range of provocative works forged a life-long career that also sustained her political activity, as seen through her vehement advocacy for women's rights in education and criticism of big trading companies. After a cerebral hemorrhage in 1940 left her permanently disabled, she died of a stroke at the age of 63 in 1942. Throughout her life, many female writers in Japan looked up to her, specifically for her bravery in expressing feelings in her writing that others feared to share. Her death, however, was largely overlooked by Japanese society due to the raging war in the Pacific. After the war ended, her work went unacknowledged until it was introduced into Japan's secondary school curriculum in the 1950s. Yosano's legacy, despite her

fame being so prominent while she was alive, had to be re-ignited posthumously. *Bungo Stray Dogs* is re-writing that legacy and re-igniting her memory.

In the series, Yosano's ability is called "Thou Shalt Not Die" (君死にたもうこと勿れ), a reference to her poem of the same name (sometimes also translated as "You Must Not Die"). Her ability allows her to heal anyone, including Dazai Osamu, whose ability "No Longer Human" is supposed to cancel out all other abilities. This ability makes her one of the most important members of the agency. With it in their arsenal, any member of the Armed Detective Agency does not need to fear death. In the world of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Yosano's power never wavers. She remains a steadfast, dominant member who saves the lives of her co-workers time and time again. She's the member they cannot live without, proven when Yosano is framed for murder and captured by the Japanese government. She is sentenced to death, and rather than try to prove her innocence, Rampo, the world-renowned detective, plants an explosion to free her from the government. She is so important to him that he decides to act first and think later, abandoning his moral codes.

Yosano's prevailing importance and strength make the name of her ability "Thou Shalt Not Die" twofold: First, it is a reference to one of her most famous poems, which grants her the ability to save anyone from death, and second, it is a manifesto cementing to viewers that her power and impact will not be forgotten. The series thus re-works Yosano's legacy and memory as an influential and formidable woman, rather than one overlooked and forgotten. Not only does her power acknowledge her importance as a feminist poet in the early twentieth century, but it also creates a new story to remember the historical Yosano by. Viewers see her as an all-powerful woman who the Armed Detective Agency cannot live without, thus providing the same legacy to the real Yosano.

Celebration of Imagination and Literary Prowess

Much like Dazai and Yosano, Edogawa Rampo and Edgar Allan Poe are each renowned in their primary genre, crime fiction. Poe's mysteries, notably his short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," are considered the catalyst of the modern crime fiction story, and Rampo was the most distinguished crime fiction writer of his generation in Japan. While Poe's contributions cemented his legacy posthumously, Rampo wrote in the early 1900s forty years after Poe's death. Writing in Poe's shadow meant Rampo had to prove that his work did not merely imitate Poe's. Rampo engaged in cultural borrowing, with his borrowing of Poe's name and notion of the grotesque.

Academics such as Mark Silver and Seth Jacobowitz have analyzed the unique ways Rampo made a name for himself and modernized Poe's name by adapting his writing characteristics. Using Poe's crime fiction as a guide, Rampo created his own "horrifying hybrids" that celebrate both his and Poe's inventive contributions to the crime fiction genre. The "grotesque" in Poe's writing encompasses "the distortion of all ingredients, the fusion of different realms, the coexistence of beautiful, bizarre, ghastly, and repulsive elements, the merger of the parts into a turbulent whole, the withdrawal into a phantasmagoric and nocturnal world." Drawing from his own experiences, Poe found the grotesque in the backdrop of Europe, such as in Paris in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," to highlight the alienating conditions of modern life through terrifying criminal acts and behaviors. Choosing Western backdrops offered a unique, European perspective on the grotesque; one that, should a Japanese author like Rampo have directly mirrored, would be a direct imitation of the Western prose.

Instead, Rampo borrowed Poe's ideas of the grotesque and placed them into the context of early twentieth-century Japanese society. He chose similarly urban, crowded areas teeming with "carnal energy," but complements Japan's changing society with the inclusion of the industrial. The grotesque in Rampo's fiction thus has the added struggle of a society undergoing rapid expansion, with a newfound emphasis on consumerism and individualism due to industrialization. In "The Pomegranate," the first-person narrator tells a seemingly random passerby about a case he could never solve. The twists and turns common in both Poe and Rampo's works are evident, but in the end, the listener provides an alternative solution to the case. To prove his hypothesis, he removes a set of false teeth and asks the detective to imagine him in a different light. He tells the detective, "Imagine that my eyelids are not creased. Imagine the eyelashes much thicker. Think of the nose as being a bit flatter. Now get rid of the beard, and in its place grow thick, short-cropped hair on my head. . . Well? You don't see? Is there no such face anywhere in your memory?" Following his speech, the listener admits that he is the murderer of the narrator's unsolved case, and he wants to admit to his crimes before taking his own life. Particularly poignant is Rampo's method of concealing the listener's identity: complete facial alteration. As the murderer begins painting the picture of who he was before, he outlines that he re-constructed his face to appear Western. In a Poe piece, a foreign disguise would be of no use, but in Japan, it fits with the time Rampo was writing. The Meiji Period ended Japan's isolation, allowing for the rapid influx of Western products and ideals. Rampo's use of a Japanese man turned Western reflects Japan's changing society in an unsettling manner, thus effectively adapting and re-imagining the grotesque to fit into the context of society at that time. Moreover, his borrowing from Poe serves to re-modernize the grotesque, since it preserves Poe's

narrative memory while simultaneously adapting it to a time outside of Poe's geography and culture.

Throughout *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Asagiri incorporates the unique cultural connection between Poe and Rampo in the crime fiction genre through making them partners and having them team up to solve crimes. The real Poe and Rampo did not live at the same time, so this choice allows for a direct connection between the two authors to be formed. Rampo takes on the "all-knowing detective" persona often represented in his works, while Poe possesses the reclusive, unstable personality of many of his main characters. Poe and Rampo first meet as enemies in the episode "Poe and Rampo" in an abandoned building after the detective agency receives a tip about the new enemy organization from America known as "The Guild." Poe is upset at Rampo and has been for years, ever since Rampo beat him at an investigation competition years prior. As a result, he secluded himself from society to devote himself to writing a mystery novel that even Rampo cannot solve. Angry at Rampo for beating him, and joking about not remembering him upon their reuniting, he uses his superpower, "Black Cat in the Rue Morgue" to trap Rampo in the novel until he solves the crime.

While in *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Poe is not a "man out of time" as he was when the author Rampo was writing, he is a first-time visitor to the foreign country of Japan. Poe visiting Japan highlights the travel of his works to the country, and the novel he traps Rampo in denotes the subtle changes made to his crime genre works. For example, the side characters in the novel are a mix of Westerners and Japanese people, as is the clothing they wear. Moreover, a key part of Rampo's character is the fact that he can only use his detective genius while wearing his glasses. In Poe's novel world, Rampo is without his glasses and struggles with feelings of being an imposter. His imposter syndrome harkens back to issues the historical Rampo experienced with

writing in the Western-dominated crime fiction genre, notably with how to translate the genre for Japan.

After Rambo's friend dies in the novel, he takes her glasses and puts them on, using them to solve the mystery and return to Poe in the real world. He is unable to solve the mystery without the glasses, which allow him to see the situation in a different light. This action underlines the idea that Rambo is not an imposter as Poe thought, but rather sees the world through a different lens. Poe wrote his short stories using his American experiences and stylistic preferences, which are foreign to the Japanese. The use of the glasses confirms this, emphasizing the need for the crime fiction genre to become culturally Japanese for it to succeed in the country.

Rambo's success in the novel sparks a friendly rivalry between Rambo and Poe throughout the series. Rambo retells how he solved the murder to an angry Poe, going into over-analyzing and seemingly impossible detail to show how much thought he put into the workings of Poe's writing. From this, Poe realizes he has much to learn before he can make a novel to best Rambo, but he also discovers that Rambo views them as equals. In the English subtitled version, he states that their knowledge competition "was the only time another detective gave me chills. The first and the last." After leaving Poe, though, Rambo vehemently undermines his success, claiming he just "got lucky" with solving his mystery that time. Thus, even after besting Poe and leaving him speechless, he still does not see himself as above him.

In the series, Rambo refers to Poe as an equal, igniting a friendship where the two find themselves solving crimes together, while Poe works on his next mystery novel to challenge Rambo with. Poe is typically caught in the web of Rambo's investigations unaware, such as in "A Perfect Murder and Murderer, Part One." In this episode, Poe is dragged along by Rambo to

solve a supposedly unsolvable mystery after unknowingly purchasing a mysterious manuscript linked to Rambo's investigation. Their continuing relationship emphasizes the idea that Rambo and Poe fit together well in a world where they exist simultaneously.

Rambo begins solving what has become a "perfect crime" due to the perpetrator's ability with ease in "A Perfect Murder and Murderer," but Poe struggles to keep up. While Rambo runs about searching for the culprit, Poe remains sitting with the police officers they met at the scene of the original crime. Poe sees how Rambo so easily imagines the crime, leaving him feeling out of his depth and at a loss for words. The show reverses their assumed historical hierarchy since Poe is represented as behind or secondary, much like how the historical Rambo is viewed as someone always trying to catch up to Poe. Rambo, though, slyly acknowledges the assumption that his historical counterpart is a derivative of Poe by degrading himself and equating his success with luck. This nods to the fact that without Poe, Rambo would not be where he is today, since his historical counterpart borrowed from Poe's crime fiction to re-invent and re-imagine the genre in rapidly modernizing industrial Japan.

Conclusion

Bungo Stray Dogs re-imagines real authors to create a compelling, fantastical plot meant to captivate viewers, but these choices also alter how these authors and their works are remembered. The series re-frames the history and imagination of the authors in a new way through their portrayals and character arcs. While the show looks like nothing more than an indulgent crime-fighting anime with flashy supernatural abilities, the inclusion of actual, modern authors in the narrative is a key, intentional aspect meant to shape how we see them.

Dazai Osamu is most commonly remembered for his depressing prose and penchant for suicide. There is a desire to break down Dazai's psyche to unlock "the real Dazai Osamu" outside of his writing. Consequently, rather than his influence in the world of literature being the primary focus of his legacy, his troubling personal life becomes the forefront of his memory. *Bungo Stray Dogs*, though, re-works this narrative to remind viewers of Dazai's great literary success. His ingenious ability to craft and explore different personas in I-novels is reflected through his use of masks in the show. His masked personas serve as the key to his character in the series, rather than his disturbing private life and suicidal desire. The masks are a source of strength for Dazai that enable him to thrive in a variety of different situations, thus re-imagining the real Dazai's legacy as significant and inventive.

Moreover, Yosano's ability "Thou Shalt Not Die" serves as a reminder of her memory itself. In lieu of being forgotten, her powerful ability demands attention and remembrance. She is pivotal to the survival of the Armed Detective Agency, and to the entire narrative of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, not as a background character or a cast-aside woman. Instead, her greatness is constant, securing the real Yosano's legacy in an assertive, unwavering manner.

Finally, the portrayal of Rampo and Poe as equals in the show counters the notion that the real Rampo, writing in a foreign genre, merely imitated Poe's crime fiction. By solving Poe's mystery personally designed to stump him, Rampo proves himself to be on par with Poe in the realm of deductive reasoning. His following self-degradation reminds readers of the tension between Poe and Rampo in terms of cultural borrowing, but the innovative methods he uses to solve the crime in Poe's novel cement him as on par with Poe. This portrayal choice re-writes the idea that Rampo was an imposter writing in a borrowed genre, instead evoking the memory of inventiveness and mastery of crime fiction.

All the characters in *Bungo Stray Dogs* are explicitly based on real authors active in the modern era. While fictional, their actions in the show tie back to their real-life counterparts. This choice evokes a celebrative memory, notably through incorporating their narrative greatness into the series' narrative. Through a wild, mystery-solving adventure with twists and turns and the supernatural, *Bungo Stray Dogs* remembers authors for their literary greatness, perseverance, and inventiveness.

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